

Metroland, editorial staff avoid a strike

By BEN DUMMETT
the Herald

The editorial staff at the Georgetown Independent and the Acton Free Press won't be hitting the picket line.

The staff's union - the Metroland unit of the Southern Ontario Newspapers Guild - and the management for Metroland settled on a two-year contract, retroactive to Dec. 3, 1989, Sunday after intense negotiations went on until late last Friday afternoon - about 17 hours after a strike or lockout could have been called.

The union had been without a contract since Dec. 3 until 71 per cent of the 103 union members at the Sunday meeting supported the agreement in which senior staff will get the highest pay hike. There are 150 union members in the 17 Metroland newspapers.

Reporters and photographers entering into their fifth year as of Dec. 3 will receive a weekly salary of \$575 in the first year of the contract, a 13.9 per cent pay increase. The salary will increase by 7.2 per cent to \$615 a week in the second year.

An editor with two years experience will receive a weekly salary increase of about eight per cent from \$615 to \$660 in the first year. A similar percentage increase will kick in the second year raising the weekly salary to \$700.

The union was within 15 minutes of calling a strike, said union spokesman and former Independent reporter Mark Holmes. "At 11:45 p.m. (Thursday, 16 minutes before the union was in a legal strike position), we finally got an offer from the company that was close to being acceptable," he said.

"We made sure everybody got a raise," Mr. Holmes added.

Brenda Biller, Metroland's director of human resources, said she was pleased the contract dispute was settled. "We worked very hard and I think the (union) got a very good contract."

The union was originally asking for a three-year contract calling for a 35 per cent increase in a senior reporter's salary and a 24

per cent increase in a senior editor's salary.

Management was offering a three-year contract with salary increases of 5.5 per cent in the first two years and six per cent in the third year.

"Heated" was the word Dan Ralph, the union steward for the Independent and the Free Press used to describe the debate leading up to the vote on the proposed contract.

"Some people with two or three years experience were not happy with their raise. They felt the union could have bargained for more money," said Mr. Ralph.

Mr. Holmes agreed, saying some argued, "Metroland is a rich company and some people thought there was more money."

Salary increases for those just starting and those with up to three years experience varied between six and seven per cent a year, said Mr. Ralph.

But he argued the union negotiating team was concentrating its efforts on getting the senior people the highest raises. Mr. Ralph pointed out when the union management signed their first agreement in 1987 junior reporters received the highest pay hikes.

In bargaining a contract "unfortunately, you have to give up something" and that was the less than desired salary increases for junior reporters, he said.

But a 71.8 per cent show of support for the contract "shows most

people are happy with the contract. It's not perfect but we could have got a lot worse."

If the union didn't accept the contract all of the company's concessions would have been revoked, he said. And for an extra two per cent it wouldn't have been financially worth it to go on strike for a month or two, Mr. Ralph said.

The union had to give up its demand that the company stop filling reporting positions with freelancers or students - the other major contract issue. The union is concerned about the company whittling away reporters' positions with freelancers, but Mr. Ralph said it seems as if Metroland is using less freelancers now than it did two years ago.

Mr. Holmes said the union is still looking at the issue of freelancers and he indicated it might be an issue during the next round of negotiations.


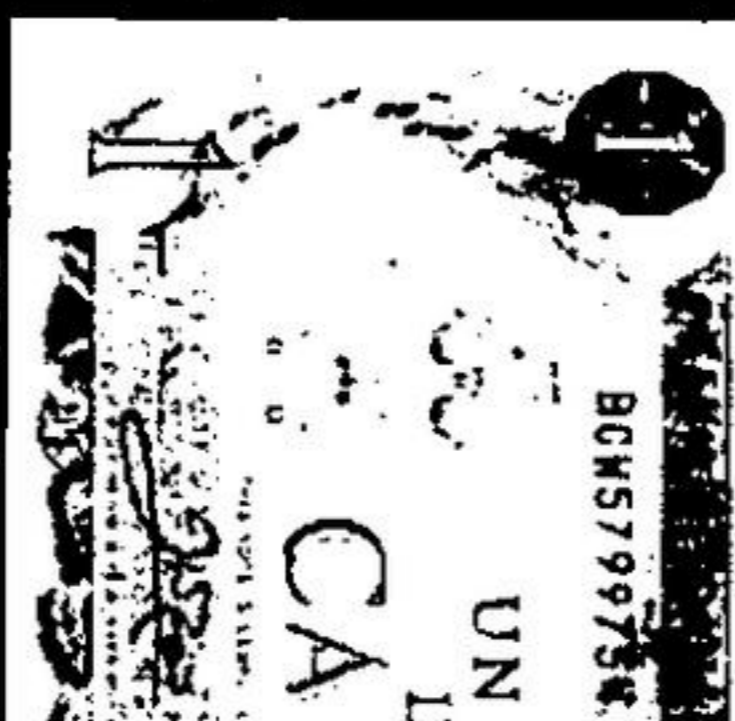
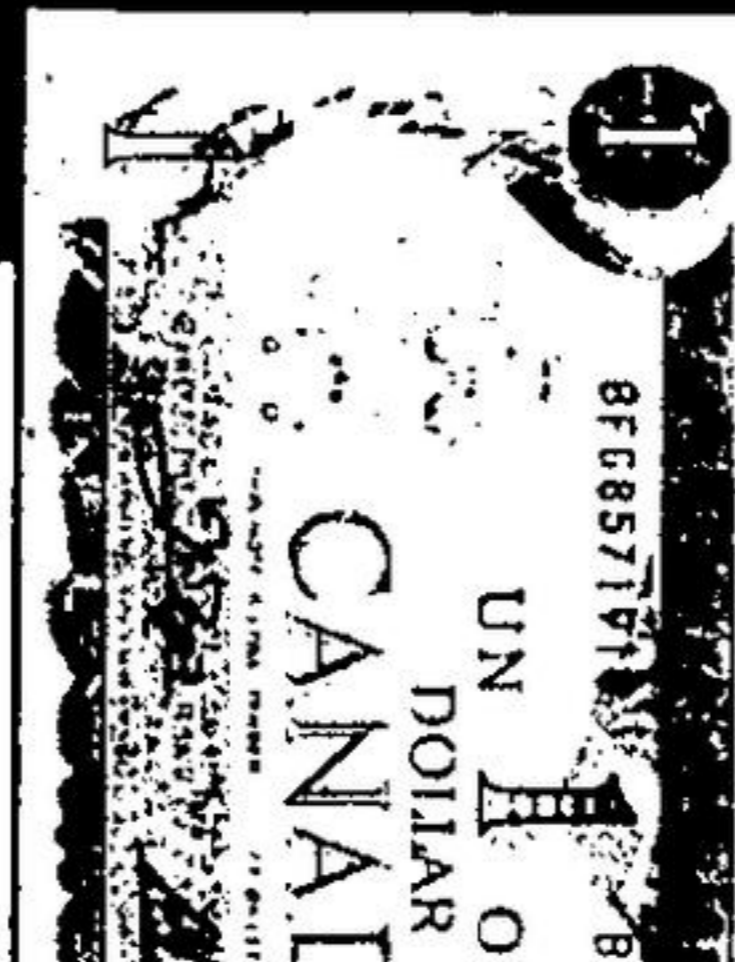
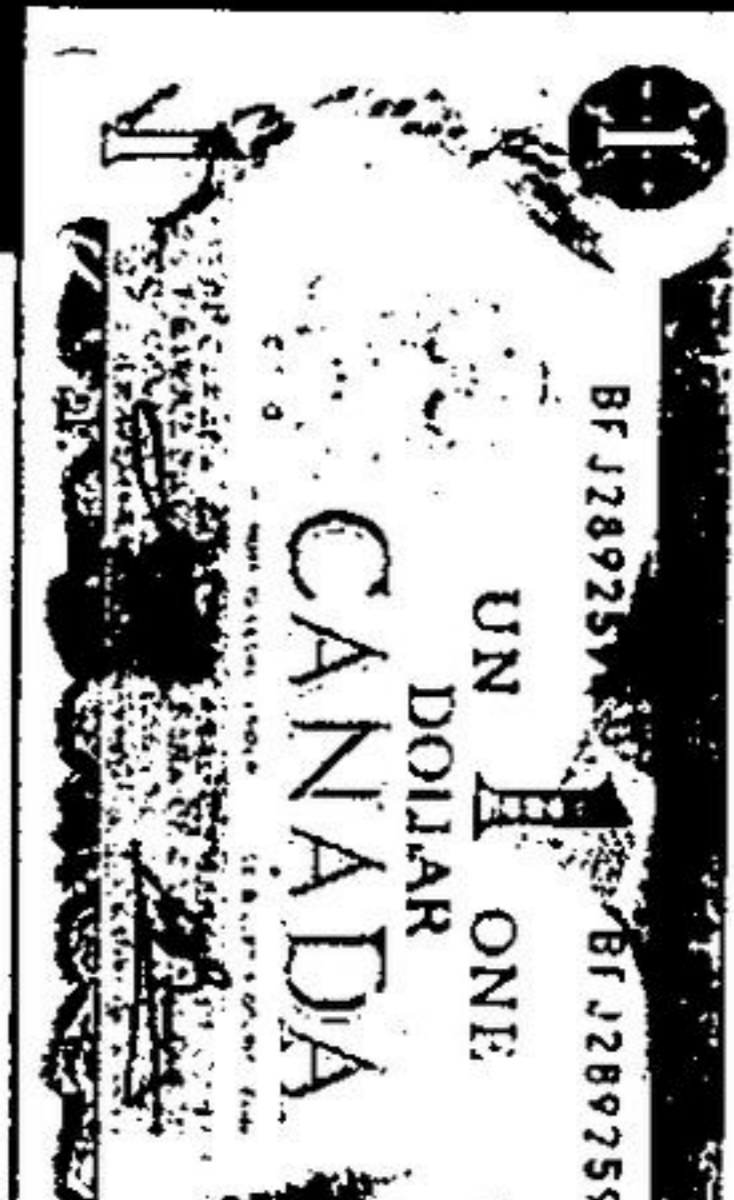
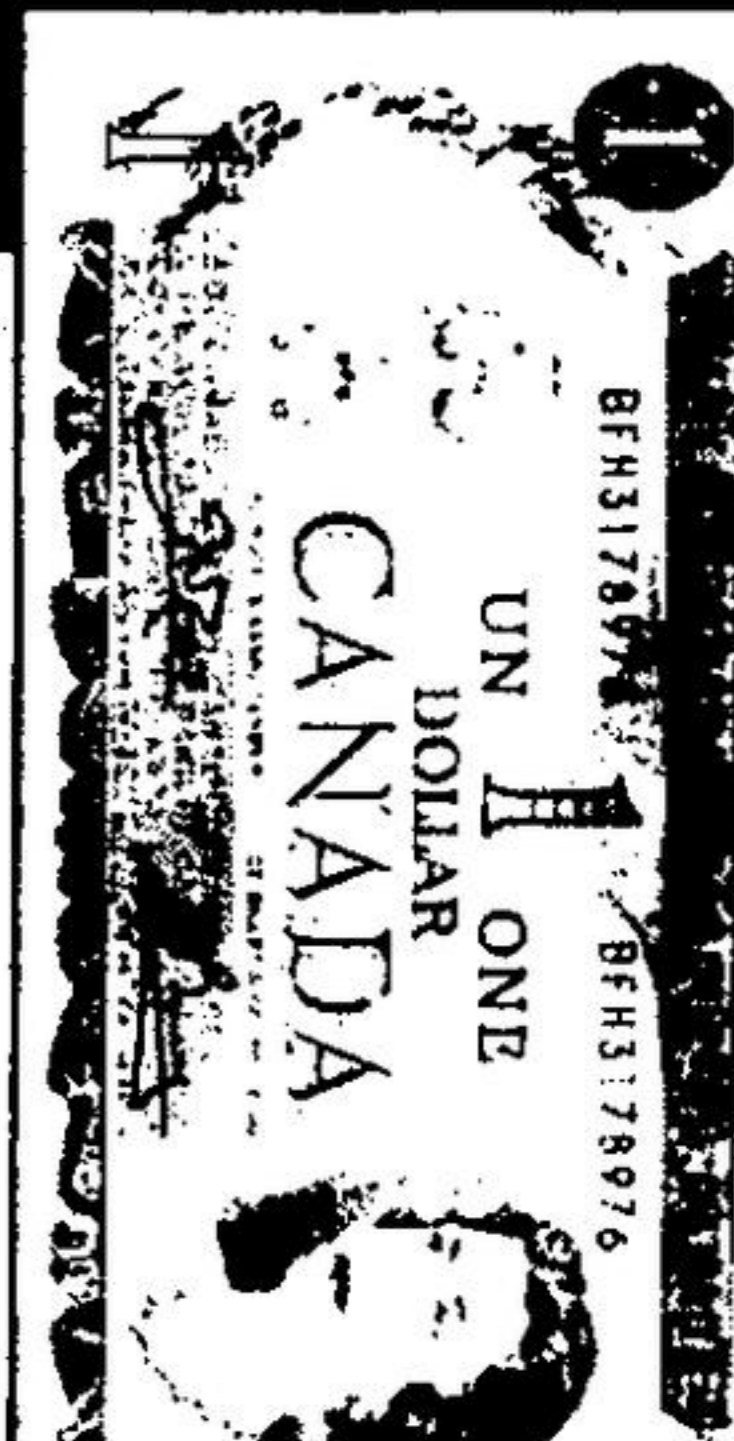
Freelancers aren't entitled to benefits, and students work for free, the union says.

The company showed no willingness to budge on the freelance issue because "(it is) an integral part of a community newspaper," said Ms. Biller.

The contract includes several other provisions including an unchanged grievance procedure, which Mr. Holmes calls important for the union, a new vision care plan, improved life insurance benefits and an extended health care plan.

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