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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**Graduate Student Workers at Queen’s University Vote Overwhelmingly in Favour of Strike —
Achieve Strongest Mandate in Union’s History**

Kingston, ON – February 14th – The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) Local 901 Unit 1, representing over 2,000 Graduate Student Workers at Queen’s University, has successfully secured both the highest turnout and strongest Strike mandate in the union’s history. The potential job action directly impacts Teaching Assistants, Research Assistants, and Teaching Fellow, raising significant concerns about potential disruptions to tutorials, research activities, and teaching at Queen’s University if members’ demands are not met.

The Union identifies members’ top priorities as fair wages and funding, tuition minimization, increased access to affordable housing, paid time to learn course content, and an equitable funding and labour balance.

“Our members voted YES in a strike vote. It is time for the employer to say YES to our members’ demands. Our strike captains are ready,” said Milka Njoroge and Justyna Szewczyk El-Jassem, members of PSAC 901 Unit 1 Bargaining Team. Bargaining Team members have expressed frustration over what they perceive as continuous disrespect from Queen’s administration at the bargaining table. Despite the involvement of a Ministry of Labour-appointed conciliator, the university has repeatedly disregarded critical issues such as poverty wages, funding packages that have remained stagnant for decades, and rampant food and housing insecurity faced by graduate workers.

PSAC 901 is part of the Unity Council of labour groups at Queen’s University, which includes members from United Steelworkers Local 2010 (USW) and various CUPE locals. USW 2010 is engaged in negotiations with the university, while five CUPE units secured tentative agreements hours ahead of a potential strike earlier this month. Notably, USW 2010 held a strike mandate vote concurrently with PSAC 901 Unit 1, the first in that union’s history.

If both unions fail to reach satisfactory agreements with the university over the coming weeks, over 3,500 workers—including Academic Assistants and Support Staff, Teaching Assistants, Research Assistants, and Teaching Fellows—could strike simultaneously. This situation would significantly impact the educational quality of approximately 26,000 undergraduate students.

“Graduate student workers urgently need better funding to cover tuition, housing, healthcare, and basic living expenses.” said Elliot Goodell Ugalde, the Ontario NDP candidate for Kingston, Frontenac and the Islands. Goodell Ugalde is also a PhD student, teaching assistant, and PSAC 901 member. “The financial strain caused by historically low wages and funding relative to the cost of living is unsustainable. By voting

to strike, we are standing together to demand fair compensation and the respect we deserve.” This statement highlights the responsibility of Queen’s University, one of the largest employers and landlords in Kingston, to address the issue of graduate workers living below the poverty line. Queen’s holds significant financial control over its graduate workers.

Queen’s Alumni Dave Thompson, and former PSAC 901 member had this to say, “It’s well past time the university made movement on tuition minimization and an equitable funding/labour ratio. I was a PhD candidate in 2007. My funding was \$20,000 per year. Inflation has gone up, tuition has gone up. Rents gone up. I don’t know how people can afford to live if they work at Queen’s”

According to the Graduate Funding Guide from the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs at Queen’s University, a full-time PhD candidate receives a guaranteed minimum funding package of only \$23,000 per year, which is available for up to four years. For comparison, a full-time minimum wage earner in Ontario makes approximately \$36,000 annually. There is no minimum funding support for Master’s students at Queen’s and each student worker must pay back tuition to Queen’s, which starts at \$7,308.73 per year, depending on the program and immigration status. Most graduate workers do not take any coursework beyond the first year of a program. Typically, a funding package includes an employment requirement as a teaching assistant, research assistant or teaching fellow, requiring approximately 10 hours of work per week.

The PSAC 901 Unit 1 Collective Agreement expired on April 30, 2024. Following this, the union formally notified the university of their intention to bargain for a new contract on April 9, 2024. However, Queen’s administration did not engage in any negotiation until November 2024. When finally at the table, the administration’s representatives appeared underprepared and slow to respond, despite having significantly higher salaries than the graduate workers they were negotiating with.

In January 2025, the union filed for conciliation in hopes of reaching a tentative agreement. Unfortunately, Queen’s representatives have rejected all monetary proposals put forth by the union’s team.

Given the prolonged hardships faced by graduate workers, the union called for a strike mandate vote, which took place from February 11 to 14, 2025. The outcome of this vote determines the next steps of bargaining in favor of securing a tentative agreement addressing the needs and challenges of graduate student workers at Queen’s University.

“We know Queen’s admin is listening, but we hope they’re taking this seriously,” said Jake Morrow, PSAC 901 President. “The members have made it clear that they stand behind the bargaining team, and the community has made it clear that they stand behind our members in their fight for dignity, respect and fair wages. If we do not receive a fair contract, our members are prepared for a strike. It’s still unclear if Queen’s is as prepared as our folks are.”