

## **Report on the National Sector Council – Education Sector Meetings**

*Sheraton Centre, Toronto, October 6-9, 2014*

In October 2014, 300 education sector workers were among more than 1,000 CUPE members at the Sheraton Centre conference centre in Toronto participating in our union’s first ever National Sector Council (NSC) meeting.

Originating in a resolution passed at the 2013 CUPE National Convention, the NSC meeting promised CUPE members opportunities to “Share Ideas, Get Results.” The meeting format allowed members from eleven sectors to divide their time between sector meetings and plenary sessions. Plenary events included remarks by the national officers, an address by ASFME President Lee Saunders, a presentation on the Fairness model, a presentation by American media expert Betsy Hoover, and panel presentations on protecting pensions and “raising the floor”.

What made the NSC meeting unique was the chance it gave members to have in-depth meetings as sectors. If the turnout from the education sector (aka school boards, k-12) is any indication, there is an enormous appetite for such opportunities. And comments made at the end of the education sector meeting confirm that members are looking to make the most of the opportunities that the National Sector Council provides.

The education sector meetings were organized by the sector co-chairs, Sister Terri Preston, Local 4400 in Ontario, and Brother Brien Watson, Local 1253 in New Brunswick, Brother Paul O’Donnell, NSC staff advisor from the research branch, and Sister Cathy Remus from the union development branch. The planning group quickly agreed that the meeting needed to provide as much time as possible for members to get to know their colleagues from other provinces and share experiences and insights. The centerpiece of this plan was an “open space” session facilitated by Sister Remus and her colleague Sister Louise Firlotte.

The opening session, Tuesday morning, was designed to give attendees an overview of the sector as well as a sense of the diversity in the room. Members were split up and assigned tables as they entered the room, and given several minutes to get to know their new CUPE friends in the education sector. Brother O’Donnell then gave a brief overview of the education sector, touching on the demographic makeup of our membership, its size in each province, and enrolment and population data. He stressed that the education sector is an important segment of CUPE (representing about one in six CUPE members), a predominantly female sector, and one in which good pensions are important—not least because more than half of members in the sector are over 50 years of age! It is a sector that has been challenged by declining enrolment in recent years, but projections suggest the worst of the enrolment declines are behind in most provinces.

Next, the co-chairs, Brien and Terri, facilitated a panel discussion with a participant from each province (who was in most cases the chair of the provincial sector committee). Participants answered questions about the bargaining structure in their province, about the challenges they faced locally, solutions they have tried, local priorities, allies and relations with other unions, and were given a chance to tout recent bargaining achievements.

Many thanks to the panel participants:

Newfoundland: Derrick Barrett

Nova Scotia: Wilfridine Crowdis

PEI: Deb Wervers

New Brunswick: Brien Watson and Sharon Thompson

Quebec: Marie-Josée Alvarez

Ontario: Terri Preston

Manitoba: Barb Gribben

Saskatchewan: Jackie Christianson

Alberta: Leanne Larocque

British Columbia: Marcel Marsolais

Following the panel discussion, floor mics were opened up for questions and comments from delegates, and, characteristically, education sector members made the most of the opportunity! There was clearly a strong desire among delegates to learn about the education sector in other jurisdictions, about local priorities and challenges. We will pick up on that theme later in this report.

Tuesday afternoon Sisters Remus and Firlotte went over the ground rules for the Open Space session taking place the following morning. Despite the fact that those who proposed topics were asked to complete a brief report on the discussion, dozens of participants offered suggestions.

That evening staff reviewed the suggested topics, combining a few where it seemed logical, and Wednesday morning members participated in the discussion groups as follows. The report back forms from the Open Space session have been transcribed and are attached as an appendix to this report. Many thanks to Sister Heather Farrow of the Research Branch for her work on this section of this report.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Please bear in mind that the reports don't often capture the fullness of the discussions that occurred since participants concentrated on sharing experiences more than recording them on paper. In some cases, the actual reports were augmented by notes taken by staff during the report-back session. In other cases, discussions from groups covering the same topic were combined.

<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>MEMBER COUNT</u>
Health and Safety (including dealing with violent students)	45
Respect	15
Member engagement	14
Custodial staffing cleaning formula	14
Supporting local executives	14
Other duties as required	13
Getting info to new members	13
Attendance “support” program	11
Precarious work	10
Sick days, pension plans, vacation for teachers aides, salaries (French group)	10
Contracting in/out	10
Labour history	less than 10
Unpaid work	less than 10
Funding formula	less than 10
Pensions	less than 10
Work days eliminated	less than 10
Procedures regarding bumping and layoffs	less than 10
Dedicated funding	less than 10
EAs doing health care	less than 10
Employment Insurance	less than 10
Central bargaining language	less than 10
Threats to our jobs/volunteering	less than 10
Consortiums	less than 10
Professional development days and training	less than 10

The issue of violence in the workplace was such a dominant topic that we want to summarize some of the oral reports on the issue here.

Violence committed by students against staff occurs in schools, school yards, and school buses. Training to deal with violence, for EAs especially but also for other staff is sorely lacking. Approaches to deal with the issue are inconsistent: some locals have developed “violent incident forms”. Some have reported incidents to the Workers’ Safety and Insurance (or Workers’ Compensation) Board in their province. Health and safety committees, while useful, do not exist in every local. Some members say that nothing has been done to address the issue.

Some suggested strategies to pursue at the bargaining table:

- Get agreement to report incidents through clear language reports;
- Bargain a statement that violence will not be tolerated;
- Bargain language on investigations and follow-up, on-line reporting, and behaviour safety plans;
- Track the issue in order to submit statistics as evidence;
- A “focus group” be negotiated to include unions, health and safety committees and senior board staff.

Better education is clearly needed: member education, education for the public and parents, trustees, and health & safety committees. Suggested ways to raise the profile of the issue included information pickets, workplace actions, work refusals, campaigns, lobbying the government, presentations to WCIB in each province, and videos.

On a national scale, there was a plea for more health and safety reps from CUPE National and a suggestion that CUPE National’s Health and Safety committee deal with this issue. CUPE should also lobby the federal and provincial governments for better legislation and regulations.

These are far ranging suggestions, some achievable in the short term, others which will require more long-term approaches. Clearly, violence in their workplace is a critical issue for CUPE education workers and they want information, action and resources to deal with it.

The Wednesday afternoon session covered ongoing communications in the sector, an evaluation of these first ever NSC education-sector meetings, and what future meetings might cover.

In planning the meeting the co-chairs were confident that the topic of communications would resonate with members in this sector, and during a brief “open mic” session some clear themes emerged. Members would like more assistance and training designing bulletins, newsletters, etc. to get best results. One member suggested that union materials have to grab the recipients’ attention—they “need to be in your face.”

There was lively debate over what media formats work best. Some leaned towards modern technology, particularly social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Others liked the idea of a webpage forum where debates would occur and information could be exchanged. A webpage could also be used to host webinars to deliver more training and information.

Other members cautioned that the internet still doesn't reach all members, and many rural residents don't have high speed internet. Some suggested that good old Canada Post is still the best way to reach members—and has the added feature of preserving mail delivery jobs! Another suggested using the telephone to reach members, and reminded attendees of the effectiveness of phone trees. Another mentioned the services Union Calling offers in that respect.

Somewhere in between modern and traditional technology, a few people advocated listserves, and it was pointed out that there are two existing CUPE listserves for the education sector, ont-schoolboards and canada-schoolboards<sup>2</sup>.

The methods that will be used to communicate with and between members in this sector will be worked on by the co-chairs in consultation with members and assisted by staff. What is certain now is that there will be at least one and probably two "Town Hall" calls a year between the co-chairs and activists in the sector. It was also suggested that these Town Hall calls be recorded and "podcasted," or posted to a website.

There was no shortage of suggestions for upcoming topics. In point form, here are the main ones we noted:

- more strategies and information is needed on health & safety issues, especially violence against workers;
- education & training is needed on legal liability issues around medical interventions by support staff, and a debate is needed on what interventions if any are appropriate;
- sharing information on bargaining victories, e.g. increasing EA hours (CUPE 2745, B.C. and Ontario central tables);
- an update on pensions: what has happened coast to coast, both good news stories and bad; the progress regarding moving toward defined benefit plans;
- more emphasis needs to be placed on labour history;
- strategies on how to strengthen the union via negotiating more union leave days, new member orientation language, workplace actions up to and including strike votes;
- we need more strategies to ensure funding lines are spent properly, for instance, library funding spent on libraries, supplies for supplies, etc;
- more strategies to combat part time work, low wages and other aspects of precarious work;
- how to better promote the work CUPE members do in public schools: e.g. promote the documentary Paul O'Donnell made (viewable [here](#)) circulate the CUPE activity book developed in Ontario;
- strategies that will raise our profile among trustees and the public?;
- make CUPE research and CUPE education more accessible.

At the end of the day Wednesday members had a chance to provide feedback on this first ever National Sector Council meeting. It was overwhelmingly positive. The NSC meeting is clearly meeting needs of members in this sector, and they would like more opportunities to share and learn about the

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<sup>2</sup> Contact Brother O'Donnell at [podonnell@cupe.ca](mailto:podonnell@cupe.ca) to subscribe to either.

experiences of their colleagues in the sector. The NSC has opened up a path for members in the education sector to jointly work on issues that affect them all, and delegates at this first meeting have proven they are anxious to begin the journey!

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