



CUPE Ontario **Bargaining Conference**

BUILDING ON OUR COLLECTIVE KNOW-HOW

Introduction

CUPE Ontario's historic Coordinated Bargaining Conference kicked off on Thursday March 12, 2009 at the DoubleTree Hotel in Toronto. The two day conference, designed to bring together CUPE Ontario's sectoral activists and National Staff with private and public sector leaders, was aimed at empowering sectors, arming them with the best know-how on coordinated bargaining, and coming up with an action plan to move forward.

CUPE Ontario President Sid Ryan:

- Welcomed all participants to the conference and noted its historic nature in bringing together knowledge from the private sector and the public sector, and in bringing together CUPE staff from across the country.
- Noted CUPE's successes in coordinating bargaining across Ontario.
- Stressed the wage gains made for school board workers through

demonstrate that the McGuinty Liberals were not keeping their campaign promise to increase public education funding.

- Underlined CUPE's move toward a structure similar to the one used by school boards with discussion underway regarding centralized bargaining in the University sector.
- Urged all conference participants to look for ways to cooperate and coordinate in their own sectors, given these difficult economic times.

Day One

The speakers at the opening Plenary – CUPE Ontario President Sid Ryan, Ontario Regional Director Brian Atkinson, Ontario Federation of Labour President Wayne Samuelson, Ken Lewenza from the Canadian Auto Workers and Wayne Fraser from the United Steelworkers – joined together to call for the labour movement to unite in the face of the economic crisis that we are all enduring.



the use of a provincial discussion table that was patterned after a central bargaining structure.

- Spoke about the connection between politics and collective bargaining. For example, taking striking Durham Region School Board workers to Queen's Park to

Brother Brian Atkinson, Director of Ontario Regional Services :

➤ Reminded the assembly that CUPE has bargained through recessions before, noting that when times are tough, we do come up with innovative ways to bargain.

- Suggested that while we should not give up our focus on financial issues, we should also negotiate non-monetary gains such as

improvements in collective agreement language.

- Noted that the public sector and the private sector depend on each other. In this climate, coordinating bargaining and sharing knowledge become more important than ever before.
- Argued that coordination happens in many forms. Some locals may believe that coordination does not happen in CUPE. In fact, there are different structures and degrees of formality but coordination does happen.
- Called on CUPE members to start thinking outside the box. Coordination requires everyone to find innovative ways of working together locally and sectorally.

Brother Wayne Samuelson from the Ontario Federation of Labour :



➤ Introduced Brothers Ken Lewenza and Wayne Fraser as leaders from the private sector who

both understand the pressing need for labour to unite as a *movement*.

Brother Wayne Fraser from the United Steelworkers of America :

- Called on everyone present to take action to stop the international blame-game of using



workers and their unions as scapegoats for the economic crisis. He called on union activists to remind governments and the public that this fiasco was brought on by deregulation and the free market economy.

- Noted that it is important for Steelworkers and for CUPE members to say to CAW members that your fight is our fight because these fights are coming to us.

➤ Said that building real power takes a real strategy. In Steel, all bargaining is coordinated bargaining depending on the sector, the employer and so on.

- Described variations of coordinated bargaining used in Steel, including:

1. Sectoral bargaining for certain sectors such as Forestry. Pattern bargaining is in use in areas like Steel's University sector where "patterns" are established based on the negotiations of big locals such as Guelph or Toronto.
2. Chain bargaining – a strategy where a central board negotiates central issues, then locals bargain local issues and the combined results of these negotiations are presented to Local members to ratify.

3. Single employer bargaining – where bargaining starts with all locals talking to the employer over common issues and each local moves on to its specific issues.

- Acknowledged the increasing globalization of the workforce, and suggested that global alliances are key to ensuring that we still have power with employers.

Brother Ken Lewenza from the Canadian Auto Workers :

- Reminded the gathering that the labour movement's strength is based on numbers so the loss of union density in the private sector hurts us all, since the public sector is weakened when there aren't strong private sector unions.

➤ Noted that the strength of the industrial unions in the mid-20th century meant that the standard of living rose for all members of North American society. And that the opposite is also true – if the auto sector/industrial unions are weak, the public sector loses some of its bargaining power.

- Suggested that Canada consider models of work-sharing and compensation top-up that various

European governments are implementing, in order to make sure that the faltering economy is not permanently damaged.

- Unequivocally supported the public sector. His union opposes any privatization of the public sector because his members understand that the public services their families need are best provided by unionized public sector workers.
- Concluded with a simple message regarding coordination. It doesn't matter where you work or what you do. Pattern bargaining, which means selecting the strongest employer in the sector, negotiating a contract with that employer and then applying that pattern to other employers, is how the CAW approaches coordination.
- Encouraged coordination as the best way to build solidarity across union locals: "If you can do coordinated bargaining, you should do it, and if you can do central bargaining, you should do that."

There was general agreement with the sentiments expressed at the front of the room and that CUPE activists were eager to start their work of making coordination happen.

Day Two

Brother Paul Moist, President of the National Union :

- Brought greetings from across Canada to the conference participants and provided some

nation-wide trends. For example, three and four year contracts were the norm last year for CUPE, as were wage gains of about 3%.

- Noted the economic recession was already starting to bite last year in the industrial belt. In places like Windsor, for instance, CUPE will face challenges because of mass job losses.
- Praised education sector workers for success with centralized bargaining: in NFLD, PEI, Quebec, and now in Ontario, school boards have all seen successful rounds of bargaining in the last few years.
- Committed our national union to start bringing the national sectors together on a regular basis . He cited the National University Workers meeting held in Montreal in 2006 as a good example.
- Suggested that privatization is our biggest concern in the foreseeable future. He added that there is concern over wage gains and that job security has become a major issue in the last few months as employers threaten to cut jobs across the country.
- Urged all participants at the conference to work together to make sure that we stay committed to the hard struggles we will face in the future.

Brother Michael Hurley from the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions :

- Gave a detailed presentation on the workings of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU), which



is CUPE's long standing example of centralized bargaining in Ontario. OCHU bargains for 15,000 members with the Ontario Hospitals Association, and another 7000 members reap the benefits of OCHU's bargaining gains by following the pattern of bargaining set between OCHU and the OHA.

- Noted that bargaining in OCHU begins with surveys from members in locals so there is input from the membership at the ground level.
- Commented that without the synergy that exists between local staff and local leadership and the membership, their way of bargaining would not work, since cooperation is an essential ingredient in the creation of solidarity within an employee group that does not have the legal right to strike.

- Spoke about their current round of bargaining where OCHU started off with wages as a top priority, but where job security has now become the key issue.
- Noted the downward pressure on wages and suggested that as workers, we must be looking to combine our power.
- Shared concerns over concession-bargaining with other CUPE members in the room.
- Commented that he will not engage in concession bargaining but acknowledged that this is the most difficult bargaining climate in recent memory.

Immediately following the presentations by the National President and OCHU, conference participants had a chance to hear from CUPE staff members across Canada who have come up with innovative and successful models in their own sectors and regions.

Brother Bill Pegler, from the School Board Sector in BC:

- Began by walking the participants through the model of coordination developed with and for the school board sector.
- Stressed the importance of involving all levels in the process of coordination (local leadership, regional leadership, members from different occupational categories).
- Introduced a communications strategy that included a standard website, standard bargaining bulletins and an information tour

that incorporated long-term leadership from locals.

- Emphasized the need to “be out there talking constantly.”
- Spoke about the importance of the local leadership taking the lead on coordination, because staff alone cannot make coordination happen, though of course staff need to be fully committed to the process for it to go forward.

Brother Kelly Murray from the Health Care Sector in Nova Scotia :

- Noted that the only highway to salvation is the coordination highway in the long term care sector.
- Said that the question of coordination vs. local autonomy has been resolved because his members have come to recognize the benefits of coordinating their bargaining.
- Named three things that you need to make coordination work: the power of persuasion, lots of time to get the message across to the members and membership buy-in.
- Stressed the initial time commitment, saying that he had gone into every workplace to convince every single member that they would do better with coordination than without.
- Underlined that the decision to target the “funding source” during bargaining is key to coordination. He explained that when local employers said that “they’d give us the money if they had it” he used

this sentiment as part of a communication and mobilization strategy to make the provincial government find the money for his workers.

Sister Bonnie Pearson from HEU (Health Employees Union) in BC :

- Highlighted the role of the provincial government in mandating central bargaining in British Columbia.
- Provided a detailed history of provincial NDP governments legislating central bargaining in an attempt to raise standards in entire sectors rather than unevenly rewarding only the strongest locals in bargaining.
- Noted that what is done legislatively can also be undone legislatively. For example, the forced restructuring of the health sector in BC that took place under the Campbell Liberals.
- Said that HEU is now working on models of voluntary coordination with those workers who have been legislated out of the central tables.
- Argued that while it is more difficult to achieve voluntary coordination, it was extremely important to take on this task in the context of the economic circumstances.

After a break for lunch the sector committee members had the chance to apply the analyses they had heard to their own sectors. The bargaining conference was designed around these key workshop sessions.

Eight workshops were organized for Friday afternoon: CUPE Ontario's five sectors all met individually but the opportunity to meet was also offered to the three occupational jurisdictions in CUPE Ontario: CUPE Ambulance Committee Ontario (CACO), Association for Community Living Bargaining Committee (ACLBC) and Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU). The intent of the workshop was for sectors to talk through "Guiding Principles" and come up with "Next Steps" in coordination, no matter where they are now on the path to coordination. Sector Chairs and Staff Coordinators, who were facilitating in their own sector workshops, were asked to "harvest" all the documents produced in the 3-step workshop process so there would be a complete record of sectoral discussions.

Day Three

On the Saturday morning, the conference participants had a chance to hear a different perspective on coordination from Professor Alan Hall and also had a chance to discuss an Action Plan regarding coordinated bargaining.

Professor Alan Hall, Director of Labour Studies at the University of Windsor :

- Began the proceedings by presenting a paper on coordinated bargaining, commissioned by CUPE Ontario.

- Provided an academic perspective on coordinated and centralized bargaining.
- Spoke about the need for solidarity in making coordination work – both in the negotiation stage and also during job actions.
- Noted some evidence that coordination and centralization can help slow down the negative effects of globalization and deregulation in the public sector.
- Demonstrated models of vertical and horizontal coordination (within locals and between locals) and discussed ways to achieve both.

The Coordinated Bargaining conference ended after debating and approving an action plan regarding supporting coordination and moving it forward. This began with a draft action plan that picked up on common elements from all the sectoral workshops. After nearly an hour of debate, a slightly revised version was adopted by the membership. The action plan as adopted includes a list of guiding principles that were articulated in practically all of the sectoral workshops and a list of directives for CUPE Ontario to act upon. It is included in full below:



ACTION PLAN 2010

To Strengthen and Build Support for Coordinated Bargaining

**CUPE Ontario Bargaining
Conference
Double Tree Hotel, Toronto
March 12-14 2009**

WE HEARD FROM EVERY GROUP A SERIES OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED:

- Communication
- Resources
- Address the issue of local autonomy
- Common language
- Establish a common political strategy
- Build solidarity
- Respect sector specific process

COMMUNICATION

CUPE Ontario will work with sectors, activists, assigned staff (coordinators & researchers) and communication reps to strengthen communication to locals and members.

CUPE Ontario will work with sectors, activists, assigned staff (coordinators & researchers) and communication reps to standardize strategic messaging for public campaigns on coordinated issues.

CUPE Ontario will work with sectors, activists, and assigned staff (coordinators & researchers) and communication reps to assist in developing communication tools to support coordination which will include the development of web pages, e-mail blasts, newsletters and list serves.

CUPE Ontario will hold a multi sector conference open to the membership in 2010 to enable sectors and locals to participate in furthering the goal of coordinated/centralized bargaining in advance of the 2011 provincial election.

CUPE Ontario will develop a communications model and a process that is consistent with coordination.

RESOURCES

CUPE Ontario will provide and build resources to increase membership support for coordinated bargaining with activist book-offs, advocating for staff assignments that are sectorally aligned, and advocating for additional staff resources to support centralised bargaining, coordination and research.

CUPE Ontario will support an activist orientation for sectoral and occupational committees to enable engagement with locals, to ensure buy-in around coordination, and to address fears around local autonomy.

COMMON LANGUAGE

CUPE Ontario, through its committees and assigned staff (coordinators & researchers), will provide common language about priority bargaining issues, stories of successes and strategies from different sectors to share with each sector and locals across the province.

CUPE Ontario will support sectoral chairs and coordinators to use the joint jurisdictional committees, including occupational group committees, as a space for regular and detailed report back and updates on coordinated bargaining.

CAMPAIGNS

Work to develop campaigns that support sectoral issues, outside of bargaining rounds to build public support and put pressure on the provincial government.

Develop an outreach campaign to engage members and locals about coordinated bargaining, the what and the how.

Organize sectoral campaigns to apply public pressure and mobilise the membership for the 2011 provincial election.

Support a strategy that moves the union towards centralised bargaining tables, where sectors decide it is appropriate.

Conclusions

This was CUPE Ontario's first Coordinated Bargaining Conference. The action plan that was adopted made it clear that the sectoral leadership who attended the conference is interested in moving forward on coordination and centralization, in whatever ways are possible. The feedback CUPE Ontario has received so far was that participants liked the conference and felt that they had learned a lot by attending. A number of participants expressed the desire to meet again, and soon, and some noted that they would have liked to meet in workshops outside their sectors. Over the next few months and years, we will continue to work together to come up with models of internal and external communication and coordination that will work for our members.