



Convention Capsule 3



50th Annual CUPE Ontario Convention - Toronto Sheraton Centre. June 1, 2013

Rally to defend collective bargaining rights

A thousand CUPE Ontario members marched up University Avenue to the Ministry of Finance on Friday, where they rallied to defend collective bargaining rights.

“Our first struggles were for the right to organize and bargain collectively,” said CUPE Ontario President Fred Hahn. Attacks on those rights from all levels of government threaten the ability of unions to advocate for their members and will increase an already huge gap between the wealthy and the rest of us. “The principle of free collective bargaining is a basic right, an absolute right that no party can cross.”



CUPE Ontario Secretary-Treasurer Candace Rennick led the amassed crowd in many lively cheers and recognized the striking elevator workers and Porter airline workers who marched with us in Solidarity.

Michael Hurley, president of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU), provided a passionate defence of the arbitration system that exists for workers in essential services who are denied the right to strike. Provincial Conservatives and some municipal leaders are calling for changes that would end the delicate balance that makes the system fair and allows it to work.

“The government’s intrusion into a stable, neutral process like arbitration threatens the public services that Ontarians rely on,” he said.

Anita Khanna, a community organizer, reminded us that attacks on bargaining rights and the budget cuts made in the name of austerity are already increasing poverty.

“Positive change happens when unions and community groups work together. The attack on bargaining rights is an attack on all our communities because the race to the bottom is already hurting us all,” she said. “Strong policies and union activism can lift children and families out of poverty.”

Sister Victoria Warner, a young school board worker, painted a clear picture of the challenge faced by young workers. After more than four years with the Toronto District School Board, she is still a casual worker without benefits. “And I consider myself one of the lucky ones, because I have a union,” she said.



Change that can make a real difference in Ontario



After riding a wave of booming and inspiring music into the convention hall, Ontario NDP Leader Andrea Horwath remarked, “Of course there’s a lot of energy—it’s CUPE.”

The NDP Leader then thanked all CUPE members for the work we do to make the lives of Ontarians better in more ways than people even realize.

“I also want to recognize you for what you can do together,” said Horwath, congratulating CUPE on marking our 50th anniversary. “The NDP also recently celebrated our 50th anniversary, and I want to quote the late MPP Peter Kormos, a good friend of CUPE, who liked to say: “The possible I do immediately; the impossible just takes a little longer.” “We must remember that people are the economy,” she said. “People worrying about how to make ends meet, won’t be buying a home, and won’t be investing in the economy. Ontario needs change. Not just the old recycled ideas of the Liberals and Conservatives that brought us a decade of corporate tax giveaways, service cuts and privatization.”

We can put a stop to the drift towards economic polarization, and build a healthier and fairer society. We need to build prosperity that everyone in Ontario can share in, she said. “Take that path with me, to build that shared prosperity for Ontario.”

The importance of being politically active through the years

A founding member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, created through the merger of NUPSE and NUPE in 1963, Brother Kealey Cummings reminded delegates of the importance of political action during his remarks to Convention. He highlighted the history of his activism since joining his union as a Ontario Hydro employee in 1947.

“The first thing I did was join the union, and I took part in 1963 in the founding of CUPE,” he said. “We took steps to protect public employees across the province, including difficult strikes, even going to jail, like Sister Grace Hartman and others did.”

Brother Cummings’ address was part of our 50th anniversary celebration, which included a video of our history and performance by spoken-word artist Ritallin.

“We activated rank-and-file members, and made sure our voice was strong by attending all conferences and political meetings, wherever they were held, including the international stage,” said Brother Cummings. “The bottom line is we went from 63,000 in 1963 to 700,000 members today, becoming Canada’s largest union by far.”



From South to North – austerity and the corporate agenda



On Thursday evening, the International Solidarity forum hosted a discussion of corporate exploitation and austerity policies on the lives of working people in Canada and around the world.

The evening's theme "From Global South to Global North: The impact of the austerity and corporate

agenda on working people", featured Zimbabwean journalist Diana Mavunduse, political science professor David McNally and singer-songwriter Ruben (Benny) Esguerra, who involved all participants in an interactive and entertaining fusion of African, European and indigenous musical forms and instruments.

Election results

On Friday, delegates elected Brother Marlon Picken in the first election for a Diversity Vice-President for LGBTQ workers. The new executive position was created at our May 2012 Convention in Windsor, with an amendment to Article 8 of the CUPE Ontario Constitution. Brother Picken is a hospital worker in Hamilton and a member of Local 7800.

Also elected on Friday were Sister Tracey Newman from Local 5200, Halton Catholic District School Board to the position of Member at Large, replacing out-going board member Sister Denise Hammond, and Brother Paul Clulow, from Local 241, Guelph Civic Employees, to the position of 3-year Trustee.



Lessons from Chicago



As school board workers across Ontario faced down the McGuinty government over Bill 115, teachers in Chicago went on a historic strike—their first in two decades.

At the height of the austerity era, nearly 30,000 members of the Chicago Teachers Union, who educate more than 400,000 students, walked out. Michael Harrington, chief strategist for the union during the strike, told Convention. And the teachers won.

The workers faced years of changes in school management including legislation in 1995 that granted mayoral control over schools, including giving the mayor the ability to appoint a school board without any public oversight. The union's hard-won rights to bargain classroom issues were erased. Management shifted from educational superintendents to CEOs, and there were increasing moves to privatize components of the school system operations.

“The CTU strike was a game changer,” said Brother Harrington. “Not only in Chicago, but also in the United States and around the world. Our school board and our mayor's policies—instead of caring for children and respecting the people closest to them actually supported a national privatization agenda and was also racist, particularly in the unequal distribution of resources, school closings in Chicago's Black and Latino communities, and the firing of Black teachers.”

The union made it a priority to be seen not only as a credible authority, but as the city's primary advocate for children. Today, people turn to them not only on

school issues, but also on mayoral closings of mental health clinics and cuts to public libraries, police, fire and other public services.

Members wear red at work and around the city to identify themselves and improve public communications. The union created a research department to publish authoritative work on school issues. They created an organizing department that works not only with members, but also local organizations and church groups in their communities.

“We evaluate every policy and action proposal in terms of these three goals: Does it unite us? Does it make us stronger? Does it build our power?” Brother Harrington said. “We believe that union work is public work.”

Awards and recognitions

Sister Betty Jean Rayner, Local 7575, received the inaugural Health and Safety award for actively advocating for a safer workplace at the Thames Valley School Board.

Brother Keith Allen, a past member of Local 122, City of North Bay, received the Injured Workers Award. Sister Janice Folk-Dawson received this year's Sisters in Solidarity award.

Convention also recognized the hard work and dedication of five retiring CUPE National staff members—Julia Ardiel, Brian Atkinson, Wendy Forbes, Shalom Schachter and Donna Wright—and two CUPE Ontario staff who retired—Antoni Shelton and Maureen Giuliani.

A moment of silence was also held for the two paramedics and two pilots killed yesterday in an Ornge Air Ambulance helicopter disaster.

