

Strategic Directions Document

AS APPROVED
BY CONVENTION
OCTOBER 2003

PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS

INTRODUCTION

- 1 CUPE members continue to be under enormous pressure at work and in their communities. This is a direct result of the relentless push by governments, employers and the corporate sector to shrink the size, scope and strength of Canada's public sector. As well, CUPE members in the private communications and airline sectors are being dramatically impacted by job cuts and a fierce attack on collective agreement rights. This corporate restructuring has been facilitated by government moves to deregulate key parts of Canada's economy.
- 2 Our members experience the pressure in many ways: job and service cuts as a result of contracting out and privatization; forced collective agreement concessions, particularly in the area of benefits; work burnout and stress as a result of being forced to do double and sometimes triple duty because staffing levels have not kept pace with the demands of the public for increased service.
- 3 As our members suffer, so too does the quality of life for all Canadians. Our union is also under considerable pressure. Winning real material gains for our members is more difficult. The number of grievances that we must file to protect our negotiated rights is on the rise. Our members sometime expect more than we can deliver and this leads to frustration at all levels of the union.
- 4 In the last decade, we have won significant victories at the bargaining table, in our workplaces, in our communities, in the courts, and in the legislatures. We have done an excellent job of defending our members given the economic, social and political context. We have had success because our union has taken important steps to resist contract concessions and to build membership power from the bottom up.



- 5 However, we are up against powerful forces when it comes to advancing the interests of working people. We are getting stronger each day with every fightback campaign and every round of bargaining, but so too are the forces working against us. We have to accept that the fight for good collective agreements, for justice and for equality is going to be a long one and we have to be very strategic in how we keep fighting so that we continue to get stronger, not weaker.

- 6 Our union is already pointed in the right direction. We have passed excellent policies and action plans that call on our union to take militant action on a number of different fronts. Our union will continue to carry out these plans that include fighting for equality, working with community coalitions, strengthening our health and safety work, and carrying out effective political campaigns.

- 7 But over the next two years it is critical that we give special attention to three specific challenges facing us at this particular point in time:
 - (1) strengthening our bargaining power;
 - (2) increasing the day-to-day effectiveness of our union, particularly at the base; and
 - (3) intensifying our fight against contracting out and privatization, particularly by moving from a defensive to an offensive strategy.

- 8 The point of this document is not to restate all our existing union policies and everything that we have agreed to do at previous conventions. This document assumes that we will continue to be guided by past decisions and concentrates on the specific strategic initiatives that CUPE will undertake in the coming two years so that we can better focus on the three challenges identified above.

The following document will direct the work of all parts of CUPE over the next two years, and will guide the budget and spending decisions of the National Executive Board.

First Strategic Objective:

Strengthening Our Bargaining Power

BACKGROUND

- 9 Collective bargaining continues to be the most important and central function of our union. It is through collective bargaining that we advance the interests of our members and of all working people. It is during the bargaining process that our members are most engaged in union activity. Collective agreement rights are what most members care about most.

- 10 Increasing our bargaining power must be our strategic priority over the coming two years so that we can effectively counter the measures that governments and employers are taking (spurred on by the corporate sector) to diminish our collective bargaining power. These aggressive anti-union and anti-worker measures are numerous and include:
 - legislating away our right to strike;
 - stripping our contracts;
 - cutting back funding for services and then pitting the rights and working conditions of workers against those who need the services we deliver;
 - forcing us into long, protracted strikes;
 - putting in place, through legislation and other means, fragmented, decentralized systems of collective bargaining in the public sector; and
 - eroding the size, strength and solidarity of our bargaining units through contracting out, privatization, and job cuts through attrition.

- 11 None of these measures is new. Throughout our history, we have often been the targets of such attacks.
- 12 What is new and different, is that the attacks are more targeted – governments, employers and the corporate sector are going after one group of members at a time. They are going after specific services and job classifications, like public service support workers such as maintenance workers, security personnel, cleaners, food service staff, laundry workers, assistants in hospitals, homes, schools, municipalities, universities and virtually everywhere CUPE members are employed. They say that our members perform “ancillary” services rather than “core” services and that it doesn’t matter if our work is handed over to the private and for-profit sector – despite the fact that our members do work that is critically important to maintaining the quality of public services.
- 13 Employers and corporations are also determined to take over every aspect of public services, including public information systems. Private corporations are turning information systems and records into a source of profit for private call centre operators and other privately owned businesses specializing in information technology putting the privacy of personal information at risk. Universities and colleges are being targeted for massive privatization turning them into U.S.-style centres of commerce instead of education. And, increasingly, we are experiencing the handing over and downloading of municipal services to non-profit, private or charitable organizations that pay inferior wages and benefits.
- 14 Employers and the corporate sector are also going after specific collective agreement protections, such as our job security rights or any other obstacles to contracting out and privatization of support services. They are doing their very best to isolate groups of CUPE members in their attacks: to divide and conquer.
- 15 But what we are experiencing most of all is a fundamental shift in collective bargaining and labour relations. The employers we face at the bargaining table more often than not refuse to engage in real, meaningful negotiations. Employers aren’t bargaining with us because they know that the right-wing governments of this country are only too happy to help them out when we start exercising our bargaining power. The past few years we have had our bargaining rights and power legislated away through numerous laws – laws that make it more difficult for us to organize workers; laws that restrict what it is that we can bargain; laws that take away our right to strike; and laws that force us back to work and impose collective agreements when we do take strike action.

- 16 Collective bargaining and labour relations have changed dramatically and it's critical that we review our traditional bargaining approaches and change them, where necessary, in the face of this new reality so that we can once again win major advances.

TWO-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

- 17 ■ We recognize that winning at the bargaining table, and that defending our collective bargaining rights, will take a massive mobilization of members and a massive show of strength and power.
- 18 ■ To that end, each CUPE sector in every province will develop a strategic plan that has as its goal regaining worker and union power and the consolidation and/or effective coordination of collective bargaining. The strategic plans will include specific initiatives required to win membership support for consolidation and/or coordination of bargaining. As well, the plans will identify the internal union structures required to make measurable progress towards the goal of consolidation and/or coordination. The National Executive Board will monitor the progress in developing these strategic action plans and report back to the membership on a regular basis.
- 19 ■ Coordinating and consolidated bargaining structures will be put in place in such a way as to ensure that the diverse needs and priorities of local unions will be reflected in our bargaining strategies and demands. We will work to ensure that our coordinated and consolidated bargaining structures are truly democratic with the membership of local unions having control over the bargaining progress because CUPE's strength at the bargaining table is greatest when members are fully engaged in, and supportive of, the bargaining process. We will also ensure that coordinated and consolidated bargaining structures are sufficiently resourced to ensure that they can work effectively (and that there are no communication breakdowns, for example). Most importantly, we must develop and put in place coordinated and consolidated bargaining strategies that allow all of our local unions to negotiate from a position of strength: where bargaining breakthroughs are made for others to follow. We reject coordinated bargaining strategies that allow employers to impose the lowest common denominator on local unions. Our coordinated approach to bargaining must be disciplined so that we can set the bar high and raise the bottom line.

- 20 ■ Over the next two years, CUPE will provide tools and assistance so that local unions can win rank-and-file membership support for a CUPE Solidarity Pact. Such a pact will commit CUPE local unions to take action in direct support of any other CUPE local union under attack. In particular, we will win support for a pact, similar to that of CUPE New Brunswick, that commits every local union to win support for strike action in the event that any other local union in a province has its bargaining rights legislated away and a collective agreement imposed by law.
- 21 ■ Over the next two years, CUPE will expand our efforts to coordinate activities with other unions representing workers in our sectors, as is deemed appropriate for each sector. Coordinating our bargaining, as well as bargaining-related initiatives (such as surveys and bargaining conferences) can strengthen CUPE's bargaining power and help us maintain good sector-wide collective agreement standards.
- 22 ■ We will also put in place a new internet-based computer system (currently being developed) that will allow all local unions to access the collective agreements of other local unions, as well as collective agreement settlement information, so that every local union can build from the successes of others.
- 23 ■ Over the next two years, CUPE will strengthen the capacity of our union to mobilize strike support for any group of workers (in and outside of CUPE) that finds itself in a difficult bargaining situation or that is on strike. CUPE district councils will be called upon to play a leadership role in coordinating strike support at the community level and provincial divisions will continue to do the same at a provincial level.
- 24 ■ Over the next two years, CUPE will embark on a program, along with CUPE provincial divisions, to increase the number of local unions affiliated to CLC labour councils and provincial federations of labour. Through these affiliates, CUPE will help build a more militant and activist labour movement that is solid in its support for public services and the collective bargaining rights of public sector workers.

- 25 ■ CUPE will carry out strategic organizing campaigns to expand our bargaining power and strengthen our bargaining positions by organizing any unorganized workers in CUPE sectors and jurisdictions. This will include developing new and innovative approaches to organizing casual and part-time workers, and employees of contracted-out services. It will also include targeted and resourced organizing campaigns in the post-secondary sector. CUPE's National Executive Board, with input from all regions of our union, will develop a comprehensive organizing strategy and allocate the maximum funds possible to carry out the strategy over the next two years.
- 26 ■ CUPE will also develop new and innovative approaches to organizing workers in small, public service agencies that are inadequately funded by government, such as child care centres and social service agencies. These new and innovative approaches to organizing will be developed hand-in-hand with new strategies to consolidate and coordinate collective bargaining for these workers. (We will not be able to effectively organize and keep representation rights for these "difficult-to-organize" groups of workers if they end up having to bargain in a fragmented way. These workers are in particular need of effective, coordinated or central bargaining structures in order to win good collective agreements.)
- 27 ■ In order to go on the offensive and make some bargaining breakthroughs in key areas, CUPE will identify some union-wide bargaining objectives and priorities. We will carry out a national random survey of our members to help determine issues of primary concern. (This survey and how it is carried out will be designed in such a way as to take into account the full diversity of our members' concerns and literacy levels, and so that the voices of our members are heard and reflected in the results.) We will carry out an internal campaign to encourage every bargaining unit and/or bargaining council to put these key priorities on the bargaining agenda. This campaign will include convening bargaining conferences to decide CUPE's key bargaining objectives and priorities. (CUPE has advanced national bargaining strategies in the past to win key advances. For example, in the 1990s we made major gains in paid maternity benefits as a result of a concerted national effort. By taking on the issue of workload and stress at a national level we have made significant gains through collective bargaining in recent years. As well, our national *Up With Women's Wages!* campaign has led to major pay and benefit gains for low-paid women members.)

- 28 ■ We recognize that our collective bargaining does not happen in a vacuum. Our bargaining rights and our ability to make gains at the bargaining table are increasingly dictated by the legislatures. It is essential that our bargaining strategies be supported and supplemented by political action locally, provincially and at the federal level. This political action must take place 365 days a year. Our political action must include building allies with other organizations including other unions, civil society groups, community advocate groups, and non-profit organizations. Our political action must include working with the NDP and other labour-friendly elected politicians. Our political action program must include a comprehensive program at the local and community level so that we elect progressive, pro-union, democratically minded municipal councils and school boards. CUPE district councils can play a critical role to make such a program successful. Finally, our political action program must be supported by effective media and public relations strategies to help change public perceptions about public services and public sector workers. These strategies can be wide-ranging from providing media training to local activists to taking a more organized approach to getting our message out through media events.
- 29 ■ The strategic plan set out above and in the next two sections of this document calls upon CUPE district councils to play an active role in organizing strike support, in supporting coordinated bargaining, and in community and political campaigns. To carry out this mandate, the National Executive Board will develop a plan, in consultation with all CUPE district councils (recognizing that they are not all the same) to strengthen the financial base of CUPE district councils so that they have the resources to build union solidarity at the community level and to carry out their educational work. As well, CUPE National will assist district councils in carrying out a vigorous campaign to increase affiliations by local unions.

Second Strategic Objective:

Increasing Our Day-to-day Effectiveness

BACKGROUND

- 30 The fact that CUPE is Canada's fastest-growing union means we are doing a lot of things very well. However, this fast growth combined with all the right-wing external pressures that we are under have also exposed weaknesses in our union that we must address in a serious and concerted way. Many of our rank and file members are not engaged in every day union life thus diminishing the power that a union our size should have. Too many of our local unions are not able – for a whole variety of reasons – to represent members effectively day in and day out at the workplace level.
- 31 In the last decade our union has recognized these weaknesses and begun to address them through a series of initiatives and campaigns aimed at connecting union members to the union and getting them actively involved. But it is critical that we heed the warning signs and accelerate our efforts to get all parts of our union functioning at top form. While we have won a great majority of the representation votes we have been involved in, the fact is we have also lost some significant votes with members choosing to be represented by other unions.
- 32 An increasing number of local unions are requesting voluntary administration because they can't function for one reason or another.
- 33 Our local unions are under tremendous financial pressure because members are often not willing to finance union activity through increased union dues.
- 34 CUPE staff continues to be stretched to the limit and works under an intolerable level of stress.
- 35 These are all signs of cracks in the union's foundation that we have to fix before we incur greater damage.

TWO-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

- 36 ■ Over the next twelve months, CUPE will carry out an extensive examination of the difficulties facing local unions and bargaining councils in carrying out effective day-to-day representation of members. This study will include consultations with local unions and bargaining councils, as well as consultations with staff, particularly servicing staff. As well it will involve consulting with elected leadership at the national, provincial and sectoral levels of the union. The National Executive Board will review this assessment and develop a concrete program for change to be carried out over the next five years. The National Executive Board will make budget allocations for this program as appropriate.
- 37 ■ CUPE will hire, train and deploy staff to provide specialist assistance to local unions and bargaining councils that are in particular need of internal rebuilding and strengthening. We need to take pro-active servicing measures to build strength at the base before difficult local situations turn into a crisis. The CUPE National Executive Board will undertake an evaluation of staff and servicing assignments to local unions taking into account staff workload, the size of different locals, and the complexity of bargaining and servicing needs.
- 38 ■ We recognize that more staff alone cannot address the problems facing our local unions and bargaining councils and that we must also take other measures to increase our effectiveness on the ground. We must find ways to build on the skills and leadership of CUPE activists at the local level and support the work of these activists in their local unions. We must negotiate paid time off for these union activists and also encourage more local unions to finance full-time or part-time local union officers. We must also continue to provide financial support on a cost-share basis to local unions, bargaining councils, and CUPE divisions to assist them in their campaigns, including organizing and political action and community-based campaigns. The national union must also continue to finance, to the greatest extent possible, our national union campaigns for public services and social justice, including our national health care campaign and our campaign for respect for social service workers.

- 39 ■ While we recognize that local unions have very skilled leaders, we must also help develop strong and militant unionists throughout our union. To that end, CUPE's educational program will be focused almost exclusively on developing effective leadership skills at all levels of the union. Emphasis will be placed on skills required to undertake such tasks as:
- effectively representing members in the workplace by taking a more activist and organized approach to dealing with workplace grievances, improving internal union communications systems, ensuring that our members see us as a powerful, membership-driven force;
 - reaching out and involving members in all union activity, especially young members and members from equality-seeking groups whose numbers are growing each year and whose active involvement will strengthen our union;
 - advancing and promoting CUPE's equality agenda;
 - involving members in our union through health and safety activism; and
 - engaging in activist, social unionism in the community and the labour movement.
- 40 ■ We recognize that advancing and promoting CUPE's equality agenda requires a specific program to increase the participation at all levels of our union of women and members of other equality-seeking groups. The National Executive Board will work with CUPE's equality committees at every level of the union, and with our Equality staff, to develop such a program and to allocate resources through the National Executive Board's budgetary process.
- 41 ■ CUPE will take action to encourage and assist all local unions to maintain current membership contact lists in such a way that provincial privacy laws are respected. Local unions need to be in a position to maintain regular contact with members, as well as to contact members quickly in times of crisis or other unusual situations, such as during representation votes. Building a membership list is a political activity when it involves the union going out to speak to members, one by one, and persuading them to provide contact information. Technological changes have made it possible to produce information quickly and send it electronically but to take advantage of these changes we must have e-mail addresses. Contact lists are essential if CUPE is to start connecting more directly with rank and file members and to mobilize the full power and potential of our half a million CUPE members.

Third Strategic Objective:

Intensifying Our Campaign to Stop Contracting Out and Privatization

BACKGROUND

- 42 There is no question that those pushing contracting out and privatization are getting more aggressive and more determined to turn all public services into a source of profit. There is no question that the services that CUPE members provide to the public – particularly support services such as cleaning, maintenance, sanitation, food services, laundry, clerical work – are being targeted. Yet, there is also no question that our own aggressive campaigning over the last decade to stop the plunder has set back the privatizers in significant ways.
- 43 In the last few years, we have had major victories. We stopped the privatization of the Seymour water filtration plant in Vancouver; we stopped the sell-off of Ontario Hydro; and the deal to privatize the new sewage treatment plants in Halifax collapsed after years of campaigning. We have also had countless victories at the local level in communities from coast to coast.
- 44 Privatization has failed miserably time and time again in Canada and in other countries. In the last few years Canadians have lived through some major crises including the great ice storm in Eastern Canada, the fierce forest fires in Western Canada this past summer, the SARS crisis centred in Toronto, and the recent power outage that blacked out all of Ontario. These public crises have reminded Canadians of the value of strong, reliable public services. These crises have also demonstrated the important and excellent work done by public service workers. Public ownership and control of public services has emerged as a major issue in elections across the country in recent months. An increasing number of experts are speaking out and warning against the dangers of privatization. All of this has created new opportunities for CUPE and our allies to defeat privatization. We must take full advantage of these opportunities in our campaigns over the next two years.

TWO-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

- 45 ■ CUPE will actively encourage and assist local unions/provincial divisions/sectors/district councils to organize against every specific privatization or contracting out initiative in CUPE's jurisdiction. This will include providing funding for strategic anti-privatization campaigns through the National Defence Fund in accordance with the regulations governing the Fund.
- 46 ■ CUPE will coordinate nationally all local/provincial/sectoral/district council campaigns against privatization and contracting out to ensure that strategic battles are given staff support and national visibility, and to ensure that the materials used in any one campaign, along with the lessons learned, are shared throughout the union.
- 47 ■ CUPE will fight for successor representation rights whenever our members' jobs are contracted out or whenever a service is privatized. If successor rights cannot be secured, we will organize the contract workers and/or privatized service and engage in effective campaigns to win the strongest possible collective agreement rights for these workers. In line with this, CUPE will continue to develop our capacity to represent workers in the privatized public service sector.
- 48 ■ CUPE will continue to organize support in the broader labour movement for a labour movement-wide strategy to stop privatization that will include supporting our efforts to continue to represent members after services have been contracted out or privatized. We will call on the CLC to carry out an active campaign against public-private partnerships in accordance with CLC convention decisions.
- 49 ■ CUPE will carry out a focused and strategic initiative aimed at stopping pension fund investment in public sector privatization schemes.
- 50 ■ CUPE will defend our members' jobs from privatization and contracting out by negotiating improved job security provisions. CUPE will resist any and all attempts by employers and governments to take away or undermine our job protection by taking all forms of action up to and including a general strike regionally, provincially or nationally if that is what is required.

- 51 ■ CUPE will continue to carry out extensive internal union education about privatization and contracting out. This will include ensuring that the CUPE “Ways of Winning” course is offered regularly in every region as part of our week-long union schools.

- 52 ■ CUPE will mobilize effective opposition to free trade agreements that strengthen the rights of corporations to take over public services in Canada and that risk making privatization irreversible. CUPE will work in coalitions with other organizations to educate our members and other Canadian citizens about the dangers of such free trade agreements, and to build effective community-based activist networks. CUPE will take action against free trade agreements as we do against attacks on our collective agreements.

- 53 ■ CUPE will strengthen our links to unions around the world to help stop privatization globally. All chartered organizations of CUPE will be actively encouraged to contribute financially to CUPE’s Global Justice Fund (formerly called the Union Aid Fund) so that we can continue to sponsor international solidarity projects that help build a global people’s movement against privatization of public services.

- 54 ■ CUPE will identify specific areas of work or key parts of the public sector operations and services that are being privatized, or that are already predominantly private, and that should be back in the public sector. Examples of such operations and services include information technology services, food and cleaning services in public institutions, long-term health care, and waste management services. We will develop long-term strategic action plans to bring these services back under public ownership, management and control.

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