

New ways of
WINNING
FIGHTING PRIVATIZATION AND CONTRACTING OUT

WORKSHOP 2
STRATEGY CASE STUDIES

CUPE's National Privatization Conference, Toronto - March 27-30, 2003



Stopping the Contracting Out of Laundry Services at the Lucille Teasdale Centre in Montreal

The Lucille Teasdale Centre is an amalgamated hospital in Montreal. One of the merged facilities was formerly called Charbonneau Hospital and for years, it has been threatening its employees with contracting out its laundry services.

In the late 1990s, these threats turned into a plan by the Lucille Teasdale Centre to shut down the laundry services. Armed with a study by the Regional Health Authority, the laundry services were slated for closure in September 1998. The Health Authority was arguing that the facility was too small for laundry services to be efficient.

Confronted with this closure, Local 2884's first step was to inform the members of what was happening and mobilize them to show the hospital administration that any efforts to shut down the laundry service would be met with a fight.

The next step was to lobby the hospital administrative council, with some success. Having discovered mistakes in the Health Authority's study, the Local and the board chair pressured the Regional Health Authority to keep the laundry open, but were unsuccessful.

The local then went before the newly merged hospital board armed with support from the residents' committee and evidence on the superior quality of in-house services when compared against the services offered by the contractor, Buanderie central de Montréal Inc. (BCM).

The hospital board unanimously agreed to support in-house provision of laundry services, but the Regional Health Authority refused to budge on the slated closure.

The local stepped up its campaign with the employer to improve the case for in-house laundry services and reached out to the broader labour movement for support. As part of the labour mobilization, the local received help from CUPE National to launch a campaign entitled "My home is here, my work is here, and our laundry stays here".

Thanks to the campaign, the local succeeded in getting assurances that the laundry would remain open until construction of the new buildings is complete. While the battle isn't yet over, laundry facilities at the Lucille Teasdale Centre are still provided in-house despite the Regional Health Authority's plan to have contracted out the services in 1998.

Bringing Security Guards In-house at B.C. Hospitals:

Security guards at B.C. hospitals in the 1980s were unorganized. They were hired to guard the property but over time, as male orderlies were eliminated, they began to do work of orderlies. The Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) argued that these security guards had become a functional and operational part of the bargaining unit workforce itself, regardless of who issued their paycheque and provided their uniform. In 1998, HEU launched work-of-the-bargaining-unit grievances at a number of B.C. hospitals in an attempt to contract in security guards at these facilities.

The union gathered evidence. Luckily, a lot of paperwork is generated in security and there were literally thousands of documents available as evidence. The most effective evidence however, came from the guards themselves and from other staff that worked with them. During interviews with the guards and other hospital personnel, it was clear that the security guards were part of the health team and taking direction from hospital personnel.

The union also began to try to organize the security guards. The locals also made presentations to regional health boards and at the workplace. The members who worked with security guards overcame their dislike of these contractors as a threat to the work of the bargaining unit and began to invite them to attend local meetings. By the time the hearing was approaching, the guards were seen as union members.

Union locals in the Simon Fraser Health Region coordinated their actions by simultaneously launching their grievances from four separate hospitals. This created solidarity and cooperation among the executives of those locals who developed a strategy of making joint presentations to the health board on the need to bring security staff in-house. There was a communication strategy with media coverage in the local papers about the kind of work that guards did and how underpaid they were.

In Nanaimo, the union was able to get the guards themselves to come forward and give evidence. They did this because the local invited them to local meetings and advocated for them even before they "officially" became union members.

As well, the local union approached other unions on site, including the nurses' union and the Health Sciences Association. included them in the grievance process to show the employer and the guards how security was an important part of the health care team. In the end, the grievances were successful and the work of security guards became work of the bargaining unit.

Organizing to Protect Custodial Services in Edmonton Schools:

In the early 1990s, the Public School Board in Edmonton began to seriously consider contracting out its custodial services. While CUPE Local 474 was unable to prevent this, it did convince the School Board to limit contracting-out to five schools and to have independent monitoring of the project for a seventeen-month trial period. These schools were then compared against five similar schools that used in-house custodial services.

The independent evaluators concluded at the end of their study that staff turnover was dramatically higher in the contracted-out grouping (34 contractor employees compared with 2 in-house employees). They also concluded that principals in the contracted-out facilities used more of their time dealing with custodial issues. Overall, the evaluators concluded that the performance of the contracted-out group was inferior to that of the in-house custodians.

CUPE Local 474 then submitted a brief to the Edmonton Public School Board highlighting the custodial pilot project's key findings. Soon afterward, CUPE Local 474 managed to get strong contracting-out language in its collective agreement which applies until August 31, 2003. It states that no one will lose their job due to contracting out and all future facilities are to be contracted in and all custodial duties stay in-house.

Since this time, CUPE Local 474 has remained vigilant on this issue. For example, the Local was actively involved in the 1998 school board elections through fielding and endorsing candidates.



Community Organizing to Stop P3 Hospital in P.E.I.

In April 1998, Prince Edward Island's Conservative government announced that it was going to build a new hospital to replace the Prince County Hospital in Summerside and that the new facility was to become PEI's first acute care facility.

In early 1999, the provincial government suggested that it would use a public private partnership to fund the facility which would be leased from a private consortium. The management of the facility would remain public. The physical structure would be financed and owned by one of the five consortiums that was bidding to become the private sector partner for the project.

CUPE members fought back against this P3 proposal by launching a "Public Works Best for Our Hospital" campaign. The first stage of the campaign involved developing a broad coalition of unions and community organizations: it included the PEI Nurses Union, PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (NUPGE), International Union of Electrical Engineers, the PEI Health Coalition, the NDP and the Liberal Party. CUPE also set up a steering committee that included health care, municipal and school board workers from the Prince County area.

The campaign was publicly launched in a meeting room packed with CUPE members and opposition politicians. CUPE Local 1779 (representing health workers in East Prince) and their coalition partners announced that they intended to make life very difficult for the government if the P3 plan carried ahead.

CUPE initiated a number of tactics. Members began to disrupt the P3 planning process by coming out in force at a Prince County Hospital Foundation annual meeting. CUPE demanded a meeting with Premier Binns and research was conducted on the firms that were involved in the consortiums. The Leader of the Opposition also seized on this issue and began to ask tough questions of the premier in the provincial legislature and in the press.

CUPE also engaged in a media campaign that, among other things, stressed Premier Binns' refusal to meet with CUPE about the P3 plan and its pitfalls. The media campaign was accompanied by a creative, grassroots campaign that included a "Public Works Best" float at all the local parades and distributing an anti-P3 message along with candy.

CUPE members and coalition partners also wrote numerous letters to the editor, did press releases on P3s, set up a toll free hot line for people to express their opposition to the proposed P3, and ran public service ads on the issue.

The end result was an announcement by the Binns government that they would abandon P3 financing of the East Prince Hospital and would use public financing instead.



Mobilizing to Keep Toronto Water Public

In the fall of 2001, Mayor Mel Lastman proposed a new arm's-length water management board to operate the City of Toronto's water and wastewater systems. He was surprised to meet a suspicious and angry audience ready to argue with him at a committee meeting less than 24 hours later.

CUPE, the Labour Council and several environmental groups had heeded small warning signs earlier in the year that some Councillors and the Mayor's office were going to start pushing for privatization of the water and wastewater systems. They had already initiated a Water Watch Coalition. By the time the Mayor advanced his proposal to have City staff design a new water corporation or a water commission, environmentalists, citizen groups and labour groups were able to band together, literally overnight, to respond with a coherent and consistent message.

Bowing to public pressure at the very first meeting, the Mayor agreed to keep the current, City-run system on the table as an option for future water management. His proposal that staff report back with recommendations in 6 months sailed through the Council meeting a week later by a vote of 26-16. But public pressure caused the Council to announce in that meeting that they would not privatize the assets of the water and wastewater systems.

The Water Watch Coalition set out a very strategic action plan. Most of the downtown City Councillors already supported them, and most of the Coalition's support came from downtown. Support had to be built in the suburbs in order to put pressure on Councillors from those areas and turn the Council around. Water Watch focused its energies outside the city core, particularly on Scarborough and Etobicoke.

Water Watch spent months dropping flyers, phoning residents' groups, giving out literature at subway stations and building its network through regular bulletins on e-mail list servers. The coalition held public meetings in every corner of the City with particular focus on suburban voters.

The Coalition won the support of the City's Water Advocate, a councillor charged with being the City's champion on issues relating to water for a public sector solution. Water Watch members also visited other councillors as often as possible. One by one, Councillors who had voted to initiate the review began switching sides.

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Water Watch regularly engaged the media, including small suburban papers. The Coalition won editorial support from a major daily newspaper. Water Watch reached out to the local Board of Health and found considerable support. Opposition to a new board or commission to run the water system was so strong by June 2002 that the Deputy Mayor proposed deferring the matter until the fall, trying to buy time for the proposal to recover from all the bad press.

Water Watch stayed as active as ever. The coalition spent the summer handing out information at Councillors' picnics and barbecues, Canada Day parties and environmental community events. They continued to contact residents' associations, community groups and neighbourhood leaders outside the downtown core and continued to win over Councillors.

When the City Council held a public meeting on the issue, over 400 people packed the room to support Water Watch's position. For 3 hours, residents rose to speak urging the City to drop the plan for a water board. Not a single speaker favoured the plan. Works Committee Chair Brad Duguid acknowledged having been lobbied by big companies including United Water, a huge American firm owned by French multinational water giant, Suez Lyonnaise. Under scrutiny, other Councillors, including the Deputy Mayor, admitted being visited by lobbyists. Every denial the proponents had issued about hidden agendas, privatization and big multinationals was suddenly seen as hollow.

The Mayor's plan suffered another blow when the city's chief health official issued a negative report on the plan. The same day, the Walkerton resident's coalition and leading academics in the field of municipal government called on the City to abandon the plan at a press conference organized by Water Watch. Within 24 hours, the Mayor's team folded their hand. Using a draft plan designed by the City's Water Advocate, the City redrafted their plan, eliminating all privatization options. The nearly unanimously approved plan was hammered out with Water Watch representatives at the table.

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