NATIONAL
SECTOR COUNCIL
CONFERENCE

ORGANIZING FOR SUCCESS

COMMUNICATIONS

This profile is intended to provide CUPE members with basic information about the sector they work in from a national perspective. Find all our sector profiles and more information online at cupe.ca

CUPE members in the communications sector almost all work for private sector employers who are regulated by the federal government (CRTC). CUPE has approximately 7,900 communications members, the vast majority of whom (97 per cent) are in Quebec.

Local unions in the communications sector can be divided into three subsectors. The largest, with 79 per cent of our members, is the subsector made up of cable television, telephone and Internet service providers (Cogeco, Telus, Vidéotron, Bruce Telecom). Radio, television and print media workers (TVA Group, Global, RNC Media, Cogeco, Bell Media, Journal de Québec, CTV, Rogers Broadcasting) account for another 18 per cent of members. The remaining three per cent of members work in cinematography and postproduction (SETTE, NFB, Technicolor).

The jobs represented by CUPE in this sector include information technology technicians and specialists, call centre associates, office workers, journalists, creative technicians (camera operators, switchers, editors, integrators), directors and advertising representatives.

A number of other unions are active in the communications sector. The largest union in the communications sector in Canada is likely the Telecommunications Workers Union (affiliated with the Steelworkers) representing members at Telus and Shaw Cable. Unifor is the second largest and represent some workers at the Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, CTV, Global, Bell Media, The Winnipeg Free Press, and some printing companies. The Canadian Media Guild, with fewer members in the sector than CUPE, represents employees at Radio-Canada/CBC excluding Quebec and Moncton, TVO, TFO, Zoomer Media, Shaw, VICE Studio. The Confederation of National Trade Unions has a sizeable contingent of journalists, including those working at La Presse, Le Devoir, and Radio-Canada/CBC in Quebec and Moncton.

ISSUES

The communications sector is in constant evolution due, among other things, to the associated costs of technological advances and changing business practices. This frequently leads to significant changes in the nature of some kinds of work in the industry and even to offshoring and the loss of jobs. The following are some of the main issues affecting this sector.

Internet, the new competitor

Advances in information technology have been shaking up the communications sector. Cable operators are facing competition from programming and information that is

CUPE Canadian Union of Public Employees

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Workers face attacks that create a race to the bottom.

3 LOCAL LOSSES
Local news is getting squeezed out.

3 GROWING PRECARITY
More freelancers and contractors, less security.

4 ORGANIZING WORKS
Potential growth organizing excluded workers and in subsidiaries.

increasingly consumed via the Internet and new digital platforms (social media, apps, websites, Netflix, YouTube, shomi), many of which are located outside of Canada.

This threatens the companies that employ CUPE members as well as the expertise acquired over time by the workforce. For CUPE members, it is important to find ways to financially sustain traditional media (radio, television and newspapers) through the current technological shift, but it is also important to ensure that unionized workers can continue producing news and audiovisual entertainment regardless of the dissemination platform adopted by their employers.

New means of dissemination are also dramatically driving down advertising revenue in print media and television. Advertisers have shifted their investment focus to online advertising, depriving traditional media of essential revenue for producing news and entertainment programming. Precious advertising dollars now go largely to Internet multinationals such as Google and YouTube. Canada's traditional media are not playing on a level field against these huge international corporations.

Workers at cable television, telephone and Internet companies also face technological changes, and there is strong competition among data hosting services. Company profits, however, do not suffer much from this, as the decrease in cable television revenue, for example, is offset by increased revenue in online and mobile telephone services.

Technological change and disrupted business practices means the sector is in constant evolution.

Trade deal like the TPP favour global digital players. The TPP's "Netflix" clause stops countries from restricting access to online content.

Trade agreements and Canadian content

The communications sector is also under threat from various international trade agreements.

Certain components of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) are particularly worrisome. Although this agreement helps signatory countries protect their national cultural industries, there are exceptions that appear to favour global digital players such as Netflix.

For example, the TPP prohibits "discriminatory requirements on services suppliers or investors to make financial contributions for Canadian content development". This prohibition prevents the imposition of Canadian audiovisual production quotas on Netflix, for example, which could potentially jeopardize the creation and dissemination of made-in-Canada content. Another clause, the so-called "Netflix clause," prohibits signatory countries from restricting access to online audiovisual content.

The Trade in Services Agreement (TISA), could also have a major impact. In its current form, it would prevent Canada from doing such things as imposing limits on foreign ownership of telecommunications companies. Public utilities would also have to adopt a model more closely reflecting that followed in the private sector, which could impact the activities of entities such as the NFB.

Mergers, acquisitions and corporate interests

The communications industry has been rife with mergers and acquisitions over the last 15 years. According to prevailing logic in the sector, companies need to be constantly growing in order to remain competitive against the giants both at home and abroad, not to mention "over-the-top" media companies like Netflix.

This observation applies to broadcasters, content distributors and telecommunications companies alike.

Major concerns abound with respect to preserving jobs at these newly merged companies as they seek to streamline their operations to become as efficient as possible.

For journalists, the corporate interests of these major companies also threaten to compromise freedom of the press and the diversity and quality of information.

Local news

The space for local news on the media landscape continues to shrink. Production and distribution efforts are becoming concentrated in an effort to cut costs. In Quebec, for example, local news broadcast out of the region of origin now accounts for less than one per cent of all news available in the province. A variety of incentives and regulatory measures need to be developed to place greater focus on local information, as this helps to maintain the vitality of democracy. According to a study commissioned on the issue by CUPE Quebec and carried out by Influence Communication, the amount of local news available in a region has a direct influence on voter turnout at elections.

Evolving legal and regulatory environment

Minister of Heritage Mélanie Joly will be undertaking a large-scale consultation in the fall of 2016 on culture and the digital environment. The entire communications ecosystem could be affected dramatically by the outcomes of this consultation process. From legislation governing broadcasting and telecommunications to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and funding mechanisms, everything is on the table.

In the meantime, the Canada Media Fund (CMF), the CRTC and CAVCO (the agency that certifies Canadian programming) have begun tinkering with their rules. As a result, the abolition of daytime quotas for Canadian content when broadcast licences next come up for renewal (this coming fall or winter) is already a done deal.

BARGAINING

Wages and working conditions

Wages for unionized workers in this sector are decent. However, pay raises in recent years have been minimal – approximately one per cent and never exceeding two per cent.

Collective agreements and working conditions are generally good, although private sector employers do not always follow through on their commitments. Many report that the organization of work and labour relations vary widely from one employer to the next and that the climate at some companies is unhealthy.

Some collective agreements have “technological change” clauses that are well adapted to this kind of workplace, and could also be used as models in other workplaces.

Job losses, subcontracting and precarious work

In the last five years, job losses have not been a major concern in telecommunications but have been significant among broadcasters. In some cases, they occur through attrition; positions vacated due to retirements are simply not filled. Positions are also being merged in some cases.

Above all, the use of subcontractors and freelance workers is becoming more frequent, shifting work from unionized to non-unionized, precarious jobs, often simply through the use of subsidiary companies.

The communications sector is almost entirely private and profit-driven, as are new technologies. The relentless search for cost-cutting leads to job losses at the local level. Global and TVA are good examples of increased centralization of production at the expense of the community level.

> The amount of local news available in a region has a direct influence on voter turnout at elections.

Health and safety

Physical health and safety in the workplace are important despite the low incidence of accidents. Many concerns remain, for example, in the area of mental health. One study conducted by CUPE Quebec revealed high levels of psychological distress at call centres. In some occupations, a high risk of bullying and harassment has also been noted.

Organizing

The unionization rate, for all classifications, is fairly high in this sector overall, at least among the major players. Smaller employers and market newcomers, meanwhile, are not typically unionized.

Potential for organizing exists on two fronts.

First, we can fight for the inclusion in our collective agreements of members currently excluded from certification units. There are often many problems following a merger or acquisition, for example, where employers refuse to recognize some workers as part of the bargaining unit.

Second, we can increase our organizing efforts at non-unionized workplaces with a focus on subsidiaries of the companies where we already have a presence.

Potential for organizing exists on two fronts – organizing previously excluded workers, and organizing at subsidiaries.

Employers push for weaker pension plans but our members push back.

PENSIONS

Most workplaces in this sector offer pension plans, in some cases defined contribution plans, in other cases defined benefit plans. As private businesses, employers are often putting pressure to diminish the quality of the plans, and reduce their own level of risk. Some workplaces have opted for the FTQ's member-funded pension plan.

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