

## SECTOR PROFILE

# Communications

## NATIONAL SECTOR COUNCIL CONFERENCE

*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](http://cupe.ca)*

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CUPE members in the communications sector almost all work for private sector employers who are regulated by the federal government (CRTC). CUPE has approximately 7,300 members in communications, the vast majority of whom (more than 98 per cent) are in Quebec.

Local unions in the communications sector can be divided into three subsectors. The largest, with more than 80 per cent of our members, is made up of cable television, telephone and Internet service providers (Cogeco, Telus, Vidéotron, Duclos and Michaud, Aptum, Bruce Telecom, Vista Radio and Cochrane Telecom Services). Radio, television and print media workers (TVA Group, Global, RNC Media, Cogeco Media, Bell Media, Journal de Québec, CTV and Rogers Broadcasting) account for another 15 per cent of members. The remaining three per cent work in cinematography and postproduction (SETTE, NFB and 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, sound mixers), directors and advertising representatives.

## Issues

The communications sector is in constant evolution due to, among other things, technological advances, changes in the habits of consuming audiovisual content and business practices of the main actors in the sector. This often results in major changes in the organization of work and, unfortunately, relocations and job losses.

## THE INTERNET AND UNFAIR COMPETITION

Advances in information technology are shaking up the entire communications sector. People are increasingly getting their programs and news via the Internet and with new digital platforms (social media, apps, websites, Netflix, Disney, YouTube), a trend that has increased during the confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These online platforms, which more often than not are located outside Canada, are not only waging unfair competition against Canadian broadcasters and cable operators but are soaking up a large share of the advertising revenue relating to the distribution of information produced on our media. Though new initiatives such as Apple News are seeking a more equitable income sharing arrangement between producers and online broadcasters, there is still a long way to go before our traditional media are on equal footing with these huge multinational corporations.

In addition to offering products at very competitive prices, these corporations are not required to pay income tax or collect sales taxes (GST/HST) on the advertising purchased in Canada, except in Quebec (QST) and in Saskatchewan where provincial sales taxes apply. Companies such as Netflix are in a similar position and, in addition, they do not have to comply with regulatory requirements, unlike Canadian broadcasters.

The federal government's unwillingness to regulate services such as Netflix and require them to abide by Canadian tax laws places Canadian broadcasters in a vulnerable position that is totally unfair. This situation poses a threat to companies that hire our members and to the professional expertise their teams have acquired over time.

Governments have begun to put in place various means of support for traditional media (radio, television and newspapers), but there must also be some assurance that unionized workers can continue producing news and audiovisual entertainment, regardless of the broadcasting platform chosen by the employer.

### **CRISES IN THE PRINT MEDIA AND LOCAL NEWS**

Local news is being increasingly elbowed out of the media landscape. In the face of plunging revenues, employers are using technology to concentrate broadcasting in major centres. In Quebec, for example, local news produced by TVA's regional stations is almost completely aired from its head office in Montreal. Global has been using this model country-wide for several years, but it has reached its limit with the further drop in revenues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As for the print media, hundreds of newspapers (mainly weeklies) have disappeared in the past 10 years due to tumbling advertising revenues combined with the switch to digital technology. Many others have closed their doors or merged operations due to the economic slowdown brought on by the confinement and the pandemic.

The federal government has announced \$50 million in aid for local newspapers in underserved communities and payroll tax credits for print media companies and for digital subscriptions. It has also enabled newspapers that would become non-profit organizations (NPO) such as La Presse + to issue charitable donation receipts, but few have been able to take advantage of this arrangement to date. The Government of Quebec has also come out with a payroll tax credit for newspapers, which is over and above that of the federal government.

All of these support measures must be extended to television and increased due to COVID-19, which has severely impacted all media, which still had to continue producing news during the confinement at a time

when their income base was crumbling. The Canadian Association of Broadcasters applied to the CRTC for regulatory relief this summer for all television and radio stations. At the same time, Corus announced major cuts to its staff of reporters, including in Montreal where CUPE members work. RNC Media and Bell Media scaled back the wage rates or the hours of their employees during the first wave of COVID-19. Some 300 employees of the TVA Group were laid off or went on the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy.

CUPE must continue the struggle to safeguard quality local news that contributes to the vitality of democracy. In these times of uncertainty, it is more essential than ever to debunk the conspiracy theories and other fake news circulating on the Internet.

### **EVOLVING LEGAL ENVIRONMENT**

In 2016, the Minister of Heritage announced a large-scale consultation on culture and the digital environment. Everything was on the table from legislation governing broadcasting and telecommunications, to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), to funding mechanisms. This consultation led to the tabling of a report and a cultural policy, followed by the announcement of a review of the acts governing broadcasting, telecommunications and radio communication in 2017.

It took until June 2018 to get down to serious business. A group of experts was convened, and its work resulted in a report containing 97 recommendations to adapt our laws to the new reality of the globalized distribution of content. The Yale Report (named after the Committee chair) was submitted to the government in late January 2020, and the Minister of Heritage announced her intention to table a bill to modernize the *Broadcasting Act* this fall. At the same time, a review of the *Copyright Act* could begin in early 2021. A related right which newspapers have been seeking for several years could be added to force Web giants

to share with traditional media the advertising revenue they have been stockpiling from the use of news produced by the latter.

CUPE and the Coalition for Culture and Media are anxiously waiting for the legislative amendment process to begin, as it will take a few more years for all of the regulations to be tailored to a digital environment.

### **HEALTH AND SAFETY**

Occupational health and safety issues have gained a profile larger than ever in the sector due to the government's declaration that telecommunications systems and the media were essential services during the confinement.

Aside from the health situation and the measures taken to protect workers from COVID-19, the social tension caused by the pandemic and the obligation to wear a mask has also shed light on the risks of bullying and harassment confronting workers in the media, whether in front of or behind a camera.

Unions in the sector have agreed to take part in research on occupational stress and psychological well-being in the context of massive teleworking and measures implemented for essential workers during the pandemic. This study is being spearheaded by professor Julie Cloutier of the UQAM School of Management Science, who took part in the study on psychological distress in telecommunications call centres in 2011.

### **TRAINING**

Given the rapid technological change and teleworking that is taking hold in all sectors, the training and development of workers in the sector will become increasingly more important.

This will particularly be the case of the telecommunications subsector, where corporations will eventually need fewer information technology positions and more artificial intelligence experts.

### **RECRUITING AND ORGANIZING**

Excluding the job losses attributable to the coronavirus, the communications sector has lost more than 600 members in the past two years, almost exclusively from the media, which brings to the forefront the issue of recruiting new union members.

The unionization rate for all classifications is fairly high in this sector overall, at least among the major players. Meanwhile, smaller employers and market newcomers are less likely to be unionized.

## **Pensions**

Most workplaces in this sector offer pension plans ranging from defined-benefit pension plans to defined contribution plans. In the private sector, employers are intent on reducing benefits and their own level of risk. Some workplaces have opted for the FTQ's member-funded pension plan.

## **Bargaining**

### **WAGES, WORKING CONDITIONS AND JOB LOSSES**

Wages for unionized workers in this sector are decent. However, pay raises in recent years have been minimal – approximately one per cent and rarely more than two per cent, due in particular to the negative growth of media. Employees with the *Journal de Québec* had to resign themselves to renewing their collective agreement in September 2020, which called for no wage increases and the loss of 15 permanent positions. On the other hand, their colleagues with Global were able to make some gains relating to group insurance, the pension plan and the wage structure; however, wage increases were capped at 1.5 per cent. The negotiation of a first collective agreement at Bell Media is still ongoing.

Negotiations are under way at Vidéotron. Subcontracting and technological change are central issues

in the talks. Very clearly worded clauses dealing with subcontracting (particularly stemming from the 2003 lockout) are being circumvented by the employer, which is increasingly resorting to every legal means at their disposal to stretch out the duration of arbitration sessions. The subcontracting issue was also central to bargaining at Cogeco, where a collective agreement calling for wage hikes of 2.25 per cent per year and the creation of regular positions was signed in the spring.

Working conditions are generally good in the sector, but the work atmosphere in some companies is unhealthy. Such is the case with the TVA Group where employees used an anonymous tip line mandatory for publicly-traded companies to report abusive behaviour of managers in the newsroom. This initiative by members resulted in the departure of a senior executive from the company in September 2020, where several attempts by the union to rectify the workplace atmosphere situation had failed previously.

### **SUBCONTRACTING, PRECARIOUS WORK AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE**

Since the communications sector is almost entirely in the private sector, the profit motive is paramount. It has been noted in recent years that increasing numbers of freelancers are being used and that employers are resorting to strategies to move work to non-union affiliates where jobs are more precarious or to entities outside the country that offer less attractive wages and working conditions.

A survey of some locals in Quebec revealed that technological change is the driving force behind subcontracting in the sector, since it facilitates teleworking and makes it harder for unions to demand compliance with collective agreements. Under the circumstances, the generalization of teleworking has heightened concerns, which could be amplified by the automation of work following an increased use of artificial intelligence once 5G cellular technology has been implemented.

## **Campaigns**

Following a resolution from the CPSC convention in 2017, a campaign against subcontracting telecommunications jobs overseas was launched on Facebook over the summer. This campaign, which was calling for large grants from the Universal Broadband Fund to be earmarked exclusively to jobs in Canada, saw its message take on greater importance with the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19. The protection of personal information is a key issue in this campaign that calls upon the involvement of members and citizens.

An ad hoc committee on technological change was also established by CUPE Quebec at the initiative of CUPE 2815, but its work was interrupted by the pandemic. This committee's mandate is to advise the management of the Quebec division on positions to be taken with respect to technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence and automation.

At the National Film Board, a member recognition campaign was put on pause by the pandemic, but representations are continuing with Heritage Canada to increase the funding of our national producer. In spite of the success the NFB has had on line, particularly during the confinement, it is on life support. The government funding it receives is almost \$14 million under what it was about twenty or so years ago with allowance made for inflation. The Liberals did not honour their reinvestment promises from 2015, the budget is not indexed to the cost of living, and in addition, the NFB must reimburse the government for its move to downtown Montreal from its paltry budget.