

After the Association of University and College Employees began to investigate other unions and organizations of unions as a first step toward possible affiliation, I decided to do some investigation of my own. The things that I wanted to know about the other unions were not the kind of things that would likely be written down in the constitution and bylaws, and they were certainly not the kinds of things you would likely find out in conversation with a business agent. What I wanted to know was this: How does it feel to be a 'good' union member in the union under consideration? What would a 'good' union member change about the union? Is change possible?

Ted Byrne and I met about the time of the first AUCE 2 strike in 1975. I knew that he had been active in his local of BCGEU after he left SFU, so he would be able to make an informed comparison of the two unions. First we tried a taped interview which I transcribed, but neither of us were satisfied with the somewhat fragmented nature of the results. What follows are questions that I posed in writing, and answers that Ted composed after some consideration.

Some of us feel that in AUCE we were able to work towards more equitable salaries for clerical and secretarial work--the jobs traditionally held by women--and that we were successful in winning good maternity benefits, compassionate leave, and so on. We worry that to continue this fight as part of another union might mean first fighting a predominately male membership, then fighting an indifferent executive, and then maybe getting to the employer when we were already exhausted. Is there justification for this worry?

First of all, I don't think AUCE is that far ahead of the unions it's contemplating affiliating with--at least not in terms of wages. And, throughout the economy the wage disparities between jobs done largely by women and jobs of "equal value" done largely by men still persist. They certainly do in the BCGEU. The lowest wages are paid in the Admin Services Component (clerical workers). My own job, which was basically clerical-grade 2 on a six-grade schedule- paid about \$13,000. The average wage in the BCGEU was more like \$16,000. So the struggle you're describing is one you can't finally win, and one which needs to be fought throughout the entire trade union movement. It can't be effectively waged in isolation from the labour movement as a whole. It is a struggle that can only be won by first establishing the principles on the convention floors of CUPE, BCGEU, the B.C. Fed, etc.

The BCGEU pamphlet on women in the union mentions only 'equal pay for equal work'. Has BCGEU in fact been fighting for equal pay for work of equal value?

Undoubtedly the people on the Women's Committee understand the difference between the two concepts. But I haven't seen any evidence of their promoting equal pay for work of equal value, except perhaps very gradually thru such mechanisms as across-the-board increases. There is an 'Equal pay' clause in the Master Agreement. It seems to point beyond 'equal pay for equal work', but it's pretty cautious. It refers to 'similar work or substantially similar work'. If my memory serves me well, there were no feminist oriented resolutions at the last convention.

What would have to be done to get the convention to pass a motion that the Union negotiate (i.e. attempt to negotiate) equal pay for work of equal value?

If the resolution was framed in such a way that it differed radically from current BCGEU policy and practice, even getting it to the Convention would be a problem. It would have to be supported by enough locals in at least one component that it would be ensured of being endorsed by that component. If it came to the component executive from only one local, say the SFU local, it might very well be defeated at the component level. So it would be essentially a job of making cross-local contacts, of getting the resolution before the membership of various locals. This problem would be worsened if SFU were part of Component 14, the component that includes those locals governed by the Labour Code, and which is now being divided into locals and sub-locals.

← In other words, the resolution might first have to be taken to a local meeting where several other sub-locals would also have representation.
 # So, let's say the resolution was finally passed by the Component executive. It would then be certain to get to the Convention. Whether or not it is passed at the Convention will have a lot to do with the recommendation of the Resolutions Committee--a committee appointed by the Provincial Executive. It would be interesting to see statistics on how often the convention delegates have voted against the recommendation of this committee.

Let's say that there was a recommendation to defeat the resolution. Again, your only hope would be to have already garnered broad support-- support from several different components. This would be very difficult given the structure of the union, and the lack of organized opposition.

So, hopefully, there would be a great long debate--twenty minutes maybe-- and it might even look like you have a chance. At that point, if the establishment was determined to see the resolution defeated, John Fryer would take the mike. He would speak against the motion and it would be defeated 5 to 1.* But don't lose heart, you may have another chance in two years time.

* The most overt exhibit of pressure to support the resolutions committee was during a debate over increased centralized control over collective bargaining. Just at the point where the vote was taken the General Secretary entered the convention hall to a standing ovation. He addressed the convention for approximately fifteen minutes with respect to the resolution at hand . . . The subsequent vote, although highly contested previously was almost unanimous as a result of his speech.

Anderson, John C., "The Union convention", Industrial Relations, v. 32, no. 3. The essay is based on the BCGEU June 1975 Convention. The General Secretary referred to is John Fryer.

A pro-affiliation letter to the last AUCE Anchor commented that "It would be nice to have both--a democratic and powerful union--but those terms don't go together very well these days". What do you think about that?

I believe it's true that there's an inverse relationship between (concentration of) power and democracy. But to state it as an absolute choice is incorrect. I don't believe that power, or 'clout' is the only motivation behind AUCE's desire to affiliate. Just as important should be the desire to be a part of the labour movement in a way that AUCE can't be in its present state, to carry the principles that AUCE stands for into the larger arena of the labour councils, the B.C. Fed, the CLC. I think AUCE should be allowed to affiliate on its own. But what AUCE should concentrate on if it decides to affiliate by joining a larger union, is the possibility of negotiating a relationship with the larger union that doesn't change the nature of AUCE, that doesn't do damage to its democratic structure and its ideals. In affiliating with the BCGEU, for instance, we would have to look at the question of the relationship of the non-elected staff representative to the local, the lack of provisions for a local grievance committee, the 2/3 majority strike vote, the problem of being a sublocal in Component 14, and so on.

There is some concern about the BCGEU recall procedure. Is it true that it operates from the top down, i.e. that the provincial executive can lift membership cards? Is it true that members can't petition for a recall vote of executive members?

According to the Constitution, a local can recommend suspension of a member to its component executive, which can then make a decision on that suspension, subject to appeal (to the Provincial Executive). The Provincial Executive has the right to suspend or to terminate a member, subject to appeal (to the CLC Ombudsman - yes, man). The Provincial Executive also has the right, since the last Convention, to suspend from office any officer or steward of any local. There is no provision in the constitution of the union or in the local bylaws that allows for the recall of executive officers.

Would it be possible to organize any effective opposition to the provincial executive?

Of course it would be possible. There must have been a pretty healthy opposition operating at the time the union first resolved to call itself a 'union' rather than an 'association' (as it was called from the early '40's until 1969). There were considerable changes brought about at that time, and brought about through strong and organized opposition. I know of attempts in recent years to form oppositions around certain questions, but most of them withered away or backed off. I remember reading a newspaper article in 1977 (Vancouver Sun, January 7, 1977) in which John Fryer lambastes a 'highly vocal minority within the union', 'people who never grew up from being students'. There is currently a group trying to organize opposition within the union-- opposition to some of the more regressive resolutions passed at the last convention, and to the kind of manipulation of the membership that led to the signing of the last quite unsatisfactory master contract.

How much input does the local membership have into what is asked for in negotiations and how much feedback do they have during negotiations?

Each local in Component 14 (the component I belonged to) negotiates its own contract. The Negotiating Committee consists of three members of the local plus the staff rep who is an ex-officio member of the committee. In the local I belonged to there is an Items for Negotiation Committee which prepares on the basis of a poll of the membership, a list of items. The membership is consulted fairly regularly at general and occasional special meetings. The staff rep takes a leading role in negotiations, and the membership tends to put its trust in him (it is a him at the moment) because he is a 'professional'. There is very little questioning of Negotiating Committee recommendations. It was quite astonishing how little questioning there was of the proposal, presented by the staff rep during our last negotiations, that we trade our two-year no layoff clause for changes in the auxiliary situation that was, admittedly, unbearable. There was no resistance.

Some people in our union think that having a professional negotiator will solve all our problems.

Personally, I don't believe in the mystique that has developed around the so-called professional negotiator. I think professional negotiators tend to sap the membership of its own ability to continuously develop leadership internally, and also, as a corollary, saps it of its militancy, leaving whatever militancy is left to be manipulated by these same professionals. Also the essential antagonism between labour and management is clouded in a situation where you have professional negotiators bargaining on both sides. A kind of inverted triangle is formed with the membership on the bottom.

We have trouble in this local getting people to run for executive or committee office. I think people are reluctant to take on the heavy work load. Did this ever happen in your local?

It seems to be a problem sommon to all unions. Our executive was, more often than not, elected by acclamation. Committees were appointed by the chairperson. Most of the committee members were also on the executive. so there was, when I left, an unhealthy concentration of responsibility in the hands of a few.

How do you see your membership in the Canadian labour movement? Do you feel that you, as an individual, are part of a class movement?

Yes, I think that the working class should be represented provincially and federally by large associations of the trade unions that represent it in the work-place. I don't believe that it is being well represented by the associations that exist presently. Nevertheless, I think that these organizations have to be reformed from within, because they were created by the working class over a long period of struggle, and they belong to the workers and must come to represent the working class.

*Perce Groves - Local 2
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