

My Presidential Memoir

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President, 1986-88

Past President, 1989-2001

Begging the reader's indulgence, I will introduce my memoir with a bio-narrative that explains how I became involved with our Union soon after joining the board – a fulfilling relationship that lasted almost 20 years.

After being hired in 1983, the Board refused to recognize my 10 years of teaching at U of T, together with the PhD I earned in that time. This kept me awake at night and bothered me so much that I sought help from our EAP. My quest for fairness led me to understand that redress could only come through contract changes, so I began researching how other boards addressed grievances such as mine. What I learned in the process was how important and effective a Union can be, and this in turn led to what I personally consider one of my major accomplishments while in office. I will return to this story at the end of my memoir, and first address other, less personal challenges I faced while in office.

I began serving as Councillor on Greg Pollock's Executive Council between 1984 - 1985. While chairing the high school Strike Committee for TSU (formally Toronto High Unit), I experienced my first strike with our school board – then known as the MSSB.

In those days, our Unit still negotiated jointly with the Elementary Unit and Greg Pollock, who was on half-time release, ran most Unit business from a basement room in his home. We often met there for our Executive meetings, and he got clerical help from his sister-in-law, Betty Fitzpatrick. At the end of his tenure, the Executive decided it was high time for a full-time president and proper office space, but no one with sufficient experience was willing to run. With considerable temerity, I took the plunge.

My immediate challenge as the Unit's first full-time president was to furnish and equip an office and hire Betty as full-time clerical support. As I was anxious to "professionalize" the office and the Unit, my focus was on Professional Development, whose profile I wanted to raise above that of Collective Negotiations. I worked with my new executive to establish a dozen or so standing committees, and to define their mandates. Emile Timmermans, who ran against me for the presidency, agreed to work with me and Marc Llanos on a Constitution and Bylaw I had drafted for our Unit. The solid foundation we laid lasted more than a quarter century; a time during much changed.

Barely accommodated in our new office, our first big challenge came, surprisingly enough, from the Diocese. Then under the leadership of Archbishop Aloysius Ambrozic, we were directed to implement a religious education curriculum – even

though schools had already been working with a popular curriculum developed together with Monsignor Dennis Murphy of the Institute for Catholic Education.

In a telephone conversation with the Archbishop, I soon learned that the teachers' curriculum was unduly influenced by liberation theology and pop psychology, and too freely delved into everything from Marxist ideology to popular psychology and secular humanism. The bishop was unmoved by my "philosophical" argument that well-educated students need to understand communist ideology in order to reject it, and secularism in order to contend effectively with modernity.

The lesson we learned from this controversial "debate", which was covered in the papers and radio, was that church authority would not give ground to pedagogical considerations. Thus, over the objections of our religion teachers and department heads, who implored their president to stand up for them, the Archbishop's preferred curriculum was "piloted" in all schools. This was my "political baptism" as newly-elected president of MSSB's catholic high school teachers.

Despite this inauspicious start, my Executive and I were unfazed in our efforts to chart TSU's future at a time when there was considerable change in the air as a result of William Davis establishing completion of funding for our high schools. This was a huge challenge in itself. But in its heels came a surprise challenge from the Education Relations Commission (ERC, which governed collective bargaining for teachers) which radically changed the context of collective negotiations in 1987. The ERC forced us prematurely to explore the desirability and feasibility of conducting our own, separate collective bargaining.

Younger teachers may not realize that high school teachers then negotiated jointly with elementary teachers within the MSSB. Nevertheless TSU (then THU) traditionally had full standing within OECTA as a separate unit, even though it did not have its own Bylaw, and simply worked under that of its sister negotiating unit. This was unsatisfactory as far as my Executive I and were concerned because of the distinct needs of our Unit, not to mention the many changes we were undergoing.

When I began my tenure as President, our Unit barely had a thousand teachers, nevertheless it was the largest high school unit in OECTA and second only to MSSB's gargantuan elementary unit. By the end of my tenure in 1988, TSU expanded by almost half, and this growth was expected to continue. My executive council was eager to lay the track, not only for our own Unit, but for all high school units in OECTA.

Our Executives were convinced that high school needs were very different from the needs of our elementary counterparts. Consequently, we asked whether we should be negotiating separately from the elementary unit, and forming our own negotiating team rather than remain a small contingent of the joint negotiating team (2 out of 10 members on the joint Economic Advisory Committee). We may not have been ready to

achieve this during my tenure, but we did set the stage for Paul Duncan's decisive referendum in the following year.

To resume my personal story, before running for president, I had researched at the ERC offices to develop draft wording for a new clause on Related Experience in our Collective Agreement, which was deliciously dubbed the "Sal Amenta Clause" by Johanne Stewart, the Board's chief negotiator. By the time I returned to the classroom, our negotiating team succeeded in introducing a new clause into our Collective Agreement that moved me from the third rung to the top of the salary grid – Santa Clause finally delivered!

Soon after returning to school I was seconded to FEUT for five years, and after that returned for another ten years to work as a co-op teacher, during which time I continued serving as Past President until my retirement in 2001.

While I worked assiduously to represent my members during a difficult two years that saw our Unit mushroom and mature, and another dozen years after that as Past President, the Union brought me, not only fairness, but also an enormous sense of professional satisfaction.

Though gratifying, this was not merely a personal triumph. What was truly gratifying, as I sat on the Related Experience Committee, until retirement as TSU's longest serving Past-President, was to establish a formal and effective mechanism for recognizing individual members' previous, related teaching experience.

Over the years, this Committee has served TSU members as well as the Board. By recognizing related experience on the salary scale, the Board attracts experienced teachers during shortages in high-demand areas and teachers with related experience can have it duly recognized. I'm proud to have been instrumental in duly recognizing and rewarding relevant experience which members have gained outside the school board.

This is now a generally-accepted practice, and it is tangible proof that a union can indeed serve individual members. It was wonderful for me to be able to show my gratitude through service to my fellow members and catholic colleagues.