

## **Reflection: TSU President**

**By:** Steve Kirby (1996-2000)

When I succeeded Don Schmidt, after six years as his Vice-President, we were in the midst of Mike Harris' "Common Sense Revolution". It never made a lot of sense to teachers and it was a very difficult period. However, even before the Harrisites could get to us, there were other lingering problems from the previous NDP era.

During the early 1990s, Ontario went through one of those cyclical economic downturns. In 1996, we were still trying to get back to salary parity with our elementary counterparts - we had gone on a 5-month work-to-rule strike in 2002 to get Just Cause protection (to protect teachers from arbitrary treatment by managers, be they Superintendents or Principals). In June 2002, we received Just Cause protection, but ended up falling behind in salary. The elementary teachers had taken the salary offer in January and abandoned Just Cause.

The Social Contract of the NDP era, which was a diabolical program set to split our membership whereby new teachers (anyone on the 10-step grid) were frozen in place for three years. By 1996 we were into bargaining with the twin salary aims of getting the "grid teachers" caught up and achieving parity for secondary teachers with their elementary counterparts.

Late one night in January 1997, with a mediator, Stephen Burkett, we approached a strike deadline. The strike was set to commence on my call at 7:00 a.m. Just after 5:00 a.m. I met with the mediator and our Provincial Collective Bargaining officer, Jeff Heximer. The situation was as follows: we could have salary parity now if we did not strike but the Grid teachers would have to wait until September or October to catch-up. The latter wouldn't be in writing, but the mediator and CB officer guaranteed it would happen as promised. If we struck, there were no guarantees for anything. I had been the Chief Negotiator in 1992 when we said no to taking the money. We had lived without parity for five years as a result. I took the decision to call off the strike and accept the deal after speaking to a couple of Executive members and the bargaining team. At 6:28 a.m. I told Andy Barrie on CBC Radio that TSU had a tentative deal and there would be no strike.

While I had the support of the bargaining team, I would lose the TSU Executive on a 4:5 vote. The Executive would not support my decision and the decision of the bargaining team. The resulting ratification meeting was a classic as most of our militants decried the decision. After a long, nasty meeting at the Toronto Convention Centre, where longtime friendships were lost, the membership voted 64 % in favour of the agreement. In October of 2007, just days before the historic teacher protest began, I signed off on the settlement of the grid teachers' salary as had been quietly promised that previous January.

Meanwhile, the horrendous split in the TSU membership was overtaken by Bill 160 and the unprecedented two-week political protest of the combined teachers from all public schools in the Province of Ontario in October 1997.

While the protest failed in the short-term, and we lost Principals and Vice-Principals from our Union, the politicization of TSU and OECTA, had a profound long-term effect. By September of 1998 TSU, and most of the Greater Toronto Area OECTA teachers (Toronto, York, and Dufferin-Peel) were locked out by their School Boards. The big issue for us was the demand to go back to seven teaching periods out of eight. The “bargaining” was put in the hands of retired judges appointed by the Harris Government to end the lockouts and allow these judges to “arbitrate” a solution, one that was preordained by the government. It was a travesty by a government that seemed to hate teachers. When our “arbitrated result” resulted in .67 classes out of 8, our Executive developed a plan to sabotage it.

I was brought before the Labour Relations Board and slapped on the wrist for this, *but* many of our members from that era will tell you that, other than an on-call here and there, we just ignored the extra duties we were presumed to be doing. It was much like those Vice-Principal “teaching assignments” of today.

On the political front, TSU and OECTA became politically active in the 1999 and 2003 provincial election. We did some damage in the 1999 election when we knocked off the Tory Education Minister, Dave Johnson in Don Valley South, replacing him with the Liberal candidate, David Caplan. My Vice-President, Kathleen Gardiner, and I were especially gleeful about that coup. It was Dave Johnson we had forced to meet with us on the last day of the political protest in 1997 (CFRB radio station 1010 reported our picket at a telephone substation as a “hostage taking”). Johnson, by the way, admitted he knew nothing about Bill 160, having recently replaced Mr. “create a crisis”, John Snobelen as Minister of Education!

We did some damage to the Harrisites in 1999 [that election is a story unto itself] but we buried them in the 2003 election. But that’s another story for another President. After serving two 2-year terms as President, I returned to the classroom at Pope John Paul II Secondary in September of 2000 and began to serve on the Provincial OECTA Executive for the next three years [which allowed me to play a role with the Working Families Coalition –a consortium of unions comprised of teachers, nurses, and construction workers – against Ernie Eves and the Harrisites in 2003].

One postscript., as I write this memoir, I am looking to another Provincial Election in October 2011 where the new Harrisites under a former golden boy, Tim Hudak, are threatening to re-launch their brand of destruction of public services, including education. Hopefully, TSU is up to the next challenge.

