

Unit President Reflection

By: Sue Sillery

My recollection of events of over 30 years ago is somewhat blurred, but nonetheless, I was encouraged, and am pleased, to make a contribution to the development of an informal history of unit activities.

Thirty years ago, or more, the Unit president had a full-time teaching timetable (i.e. no release time for Unit duties). The Executive met once a month, usually in Scarborough. The Unit AGM and elections were held in a gymnasium of one of the schools, usually St. Joe's Wellesley, which was thought to be a central location. Meetings were not held in a hotel room at arm's length from the Board as is the case now. Meetings for school reps were held periodically and there was an annual information/appreciation dinner meeting with the reps at the now defunct Westbury Hotel.

In those days, the Unit President received very few calls from teachers. This may have been due to the culture of the time and the lack of any significant grievance procedures in the Collective Agreement of that day. There were few, if any, clauses in the contract on the resolution of disputes between teachers and the Board regarding possible noncompliance with the provisions of the contract. Thus, teachers were not turning to the Unit for assistance in the way that they might do today. The inclusion of well developed grievance procedures in every Collective Agreement was a top priority for the provincial OECTA staff advisors and a very necessary and successful initiative on their part.

The focus of the Unit was the negotiation of the contract. The priority was the establishment and enhancement of proper working conditions and compensation for teachers. The Unit Executive appointed a Negotiations Committee and that Committee had a high profile as its members carried out the essential work of the Unit at that time. The Unit President was an ex-officio member of the negotiating team.

Negotiations were different then. The elementary and secondary teachers of the Board negotiated together because there was only one contract which covered all of the teaching employees of the Board, elementary and secondary. Representation on the Negotiating Committee was by population, therefore there were always more elementary teachers on the negotiating team. Nonetheless, we worked in a good spirit of co-operation. Principals and Vice-Principals were members of OTF, so the contract covered their interests as well. Whether salary scales for elementary and secondary administrators should be the same or different was one of many points for discussion.

In those days, the Board of Trustees was responsible for setting mill rates which affected tax payers. In negotiation sessions, the issue of mill rates would arise as they allowed the Board to generate additional revenue and thus meet the contract requests of

employee groups. Of course, there were also good reasons for the Board to keep the mill rate low, especially in relation to the mill rate of public co-terminus boards.

Staff at OECTA Provincial provided workshops for local teacher negotiating teams throughout the province. Data on the salary scales in contracts of Catholic and non-Catholic boards across the province were scrutinized. Cost of Living Allowances were studied. Every contract in the province was analyzed for “best clauses” to be considered for inclusion in our own agreement, and, of course, grievance procedures and “just cause” clauses were considered essential.

Meetings of all teachers, elementary and secondary, would be held at the Canadiana Room of the Royal York Hotel. Contract ratification also took place in that venue rather than at voting sessions in each school as happens today.

The executives of over 30 years ago were in some ways like pioneers whose activities laid the ground for the good work that followed. Our motivation was always a profound respect for the work of the teacher and a desire to support and empower teachers by working with the Board to provide excellent working conditions and compensation.