

Unions can and do make a difference in people's lives. We make no apologies for bargaining to improve the lives and economic security of union members, but we also believe that our proposals for improving EI and protecting pensions will serve the interests of all Canadian workers.

(Ken Georgetti is president of the Canadian Labour Congress,
Labour Day Message 2009)

It has been a few years now that I am officially retired from the teaching profession and no longer a “union” member. However as it is sometimes difficult to take the farm out of the farmer, I remain a teacher and a strong supporter of the union movement. People who know me have learned that I can be baited easily when topics dealing with education or unions are thrown into the mix. Recently a young teacher commented to me “why do we need unions anyways, we can look after ourselves”.

My first reaction was to think – “What this teacher needs is to go it alone for one year and to find out how easy it would be to negotiate individually”. But this temptation, to go it alone, to negotiate individually, to work out employment relations outside the context of the common good, is not something new. In my years as a union representative of OECTA, there was a constant gripe from some members that the union only protected the weak links in the system, that it cost too much for what it offered, and that it went beyond its mandate. One of the most difficult situations I faced as a union representative was dealing with members who made private side-deals with principals. Obviously the individual teacher found some benefit in these private arrangements: a special parking space, no hall duties, or perhaps no on-calls in exchange for some special service that contravened the collective agreement. Why can't teachers make these private deals if it is to their personal benefit?

I think the fallacy begins with the belief that the teacher (employee) can have both the benefits of the collective agreement and at the same time the benefits of private deals. When teachers work against the spirit and the letter of the collective agreement, they make it worse for others but ultimately for themselves as well. TSU would get the complaints from teachers when the Principals reneged on the terms of the private deals, for example when a teacher complained that he was getting on-call supervisions just like other teachers when he had an arrangement not to get any on-calls. The grievance process cannot be used to defend private “deals” made contrary to the conditions as negotiated and settled in the Collective Agreement.

Colleagues are well into another school year and as usual staff reps have given of their free time to learn about the important issues facing teachers this year. There is an executive with members who have a proven history of commitment to work for the common good. But the union is not the executive, or the executive and the staff reps. The union is the whole assembly of members and it is strong only when those members support actively their association.

Recently I was reading how the bishop in Scranton, Pennsylvania refused to recognize the teacher's union as its sole bargaining unit. Bishop Joseph Martino had declared that he was in fact "the one teacher in the diocese" and that teachers would have to trust the diocese that it would treat them fairly. At the same time, over \$1 million in arbitration awards for accumulated sick leave and severance pay was owing to former teachers and the diocese would not commit to paying these debts.

In Canada some 10 years ago, the Catholic bishop of Prince George, B.C. chose to close the catholic high school in Ft. St. John rather than allow the teacher's to form a union that would be associated with the B.C.T.F. At issue was the "Catholicity" clause and the ability of the church to control teacher's lives inside and outside of the school. The diocese would rather deny the Catholic youth of the diocese an education in a Catholic school than allow its teachers to be unionized.

These are two very isolated incidents, but teachers would be very foolish not to realize that many bishops resent the power of OECTA in defending its members. There are Catholicity clauses in the collective agreements, but as with all legislation these too have their limits. Without a union do you think your rights in a religious system would be defended? Think again! Your union executive could probably give you some very scary examples of situations that they have to deal with to defend members.

The primary role of the union is to negotiate fair collective agreements and to defend the rights of its members. This process is more complex in a religious institution, both because of the peculiar interests of the "religious" dimension of the institution and also because of the diverse "religious" culture of its members. T.S.U. represents members who come from very conservative religious backgrounds and associations, to members who are more liberal and characterized by their enthusiasm for church reform and the openness promised by Vatican II. Let it not be forgotten that T.S.U. also represents non-catholic members, some of whom became members as Bill 30 teachers who were transferred with the status as "conscientious objectors" but nevertheless were obliged to teach in a religious system.

I do think there are some big issues that members of T.S.U. and OECTA need to deal with such as union democracy. The relatively poor turnouts for union general meetings points to an apathy that is deadly for the spirit of the movement. There was perhaps a reason for the apathy and a distrust of the association. At one time OECTA was characterized as a management union, with far too many principals in union leadership positions. Union leaders on finishing their terms would receive lucrative promotions into the board hierarchy confirming the suspicions of many members about how their situations were handled by the union. Perhaps an evaluation of the provincial office is overdue. At a time when the Province is dealing with the expense accounts of management officials, perhaps there is a need to look at the Gold Card accounts of provincial office employees. The great union leader Cesar Chavez warned about union leaders who reserved for themselves so much more than the members and then failed to "remember" the situation of the average worker.

I do not subscribe to the view that the only purpose of the union is to negotiate a collective agreement. Of course that is primary, but the union cannot isolate itself from the broader world in which we all live. Members of OECTA can justly be proud of their contribution to justice and development through the Educational Aid Committee through which many projects in education around the world are supported. Through this program, members of OECTA reaffirm that they are committed to education and to the development of a better world beyond their own classrooms. OECTA is a leader in this area. T.S.U. at the local level also contributes to projects in which its members are involved. Of course more can be done, and many members are involved in peace, development and justice initiatives. Recognize the good that is being done and accept credit that is justly given.

The backbone of T.S.U. is found in the members who accept the difficult task of Staff Rep. This is a volunteer position, that too often brings anguish to the rep who is called upon to interpret the collective agreement and to monitor the local school reality. This requires a diligent review of statistics on class size and on-calls. It might result in a visit to the Principal to identify problem areas that would go to grievance unless rectified. Too often Principals, and sometimes members, fail to remain objective. They personalize problems and they take criticism as an attack against their integrity or reputation. The staff rep moves between the association and the members. The executive cannot know what is happening without the input of a staff rep who is actively working for the membership. As well, the unit has a number of committees which do invaluable service for the good of the collective group. At the end of the school year the tally would easily be in the tens of thousands of volunteer hours given by these members, all for the common good.

These are tough times for Canadian workers. Since this time a year ago ½ million workers have lost their jobs, and while the Unemployment Insurance fund boasts record \$billion surpluses, most of the unemployed do not qualify for benefits. Members of OECTA cannot isolate themselves from the reality of the general workforce. As public sector workers, teachers can safely assume that they too will be targeted by the government in a general assault on the public sector. Solidarity requires that workers stand together and perhaps this year T.S.U. needs to define where it can stand in solidarity with those workers who are suffering the most.

I do wish the members of T.S.U. a good and happy year in the profession. Believe in what you are doing and do it with a happy heart. Support your association by being involved. Even accompany your staff rep to a few meetings. Volunteer for a committee. Give your staff rep a hug! Be professional in dealing with administration so that they realize that a good working relationship with the union actually is good for them too and ultimately it is good for the kids. They are supposed to be the reason the whole thing exists!