

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TORONTO SECONDARY UNIT

by Jim Geens

The Toronto Secondary Unit (TSU) was created as District 32 of OECTA in 1965, its first president being **Father Clare Malone** of Michael Power High School. This reflects the fact that the majority of Separate School teachers then were members of religious orders. Several factors favoured creating high school units at that time.

First, there were the unique requirements of teachers' professional development and teacher welfare at the high school level. Second, the Robarts' Tax Foundation Plan allowed Separate School Boards such as the MSSB to widen their association with private Catholic Schools to pay for /Grades nine and ten. Thus, in 1965, full OECTA membership was predicated on partial employment with a separate school board in those grades.

A noteworthy contribution of the religious orders was made in the form of 15% less MSSB pay for their teacher members than for lay persons. Annual federation dues at that time were \$60.00 per statutory member.

In September 1965 the Unit started with 19 schools, including, besides Toronto, Sudbury, North Bay, Barrie, Midland and Whitby. By 1971 membership had reached 506. Today (1990) there are 39 schools, over 2000 members and the unit is still growing. The rapid increase in membership in the 1980's caused a strain on the capacity of the volunteer executive to deal with the growing bureaucracy of the MSSB and the enforcement of the complexities of teacher contracts.

In 1981 it was apparent that the duties of Unit President could no longer be fulfilled after school hours and on weekends. Therefore, in May 1982 the Unit General Meeting authorized then President **Joe Ravesi** to half a year's release for Unit duties, and to a part-time office in St. Augustine's Seminary. In May 1986 a full-time presidency and a rented office were approved by the membership for **Sal Amenta**. Then, after much research, the Executive under **Paul Duncan** held a referendum in December 1989 in which members approved the purchase of a permanent office.

Many precedents and traditions were set early within the Unit. For instance, it was immediately recognized that negotiations required solidarity; hence, the Unit had always worked with elementary and AEFO members for this purpose. In fact, in 1971 the MSSB made it clear to President **Gerry Smialek** that it would not negotiate with TSU separately, nor would it allow the high school unit to be excluded from the joint negotiations.

In those days negotiations proceeded differently from the way they are now conducted. Before Bill 100 (1975) teachers did not have the right to strike, and with a scarcity of qualified teachers (many were teaching on Letters of Permission) it seemed wise to collect written resignations and threaten to submit them **en masse** before midnight of May 31 or December 31. Many contracts were hammered out in the last hours, with a large cardboard box sitting on the teachers' side of the table, ready to be pushed across.

A form-letter to all teachers from **Ed Brisbois**, then chairperson of the MSSB, dated May 12/70 states in part: "You are now being asked by your Economic Policy Committee to resign from the Board's service. If the Board has to receive and accept these resignations it will be with deep regret on my part."

While such threats and posturing have always been a part of negotiations, settlement was always achieved without rancour, and relations with the Board then were even cordial. Every teacher, for instance, received a personally signed Christmas card from **Ed Nelligan**, the director.

In December 1973, with the threat that 180,000 students across the province could be without teachers, the educational system was thrown into confusion by Bill 274 which would have revoked teachers' rights to resign **en masse**, and invoked compulsory arbitration. Led by **Myrna McPherson**, teachers of the TSU joined their colleagues on Tuesday, December 18, 1973 to withdraw their services for one day and rally at Maple Leaf Gardens for a march to Queen's Park. In the end, Bill 274 did not receive a second reading, and most disputes were settled by collective bargaining.

Previous to this, our teachers had accepted a three-year contract (1972-75) when the oil crisis produced the rampant inflation of 1973-75. Following the USA example of wage and price controls, the Canadian government introduced similar legislation for Canada in October 1975, setting up the Anti-Inflation Board. TSU's new president, **Tony Adams**, joined negotiators **Mike Flanagan** and **Ed King** to fly to Ottawa along with the EAC and Trustees, to convince the AIB to allow a 39% increase in salaries to stand.

By 1975 Toronto Secondary had established a tradition of appointing highly competent negotiators to the new Economic Advisory Committee. Such persons as **Jack Fenn**, **John Ware**, **Frank McAllister**, **Father Fitzgerald**, and **Jim Brown** had already earned the respect of both Elementary Unit negotiators and TSU members.

In 1975 Bill 100 became law, allowing teachers (but not principals and vice-principals) to strike for better salaries and working conditions. At this time, our high school teachers decided deliberately not to seek improvements in working conditions through the contract in order to preserve the viability of the private schools. That same year, the Executive under **Mrs. McPherson** reached a memorandum of understanding with Metro Toronto Elementary Unit and AEFO to formalize ad-hoc arrangements for negotiations.

The Elementary Unit would appoint seven members to the EAC, the TSU two, and AEFO one. EAC expenses would be paid on a **pro rata** system based on audited membership. Unit presidents would be **ex officio** members of the EAC.

Bill 100 brought to negotiations such built in delays as fact-finding and mediation. By 1979 TSU negotiators **Ed King, Vince Nichilo, and Greg Pollock** had introduced Long Term Disability Insurance, and had come to grips with the process of negotiating under Bill 100. It was while **Susan Sillery** was president that our high school teachers came close to striking for the first time. The enormity of the problem of co-ordinating a strike in grades nine and ten while keeping the private sector of the schools open was brought home forcefully. While a strike was avoided in 1979, it became apparent that ultimate responsibility for a strike lay not with the appointed EAC, but with the elected joint-executives. thus, a constitution was set up for this controlling body between 1980 and 1985. The joint-executives consisted of the elected representatives of the TSU, Metro Elementary Unit, and AEFO, which jointly made policy and directed negotiations through the EAC. Thus the EAC and the Strike Co-ordinating Committee were directly responsible to officials elected by its membership. It was under this system that the strike of April 5-11, 1986 took place.

Between 1979 and 1985 differences between the teachers and the Board widened. Teachers perceived themselves as highly-educated professionals being denied partnership in the educational process by a Board that saw them only as employees in a period of "restraint" while the MSSB had hired an industrial lawyer to represent the Board at negotiations. More and more the Staff Allocation Committee approach of the MSSB was seen not to be effective. Teacher negotiators **Vince Nichilo, Tom Etele, Greg Pollock, Joe Ravesi, Tom Donovan, Vince Citriniti** and **Chas Hamilton** all indicated that bargaining was being unduly prolonged by the Board's use of the features of Bill 100 to delay a contract settlement.

In 1985 on Easter Sunday a contract was finally achieved at the last minute without resorting to a strike. Again the horrendous problems facing a strike in the high schools were encountered and many theoretic solutions proposed. However, as working conditions did not improve, **Greg Pollock**, president of the TSU, led the teachers in the five-day strike. **Tom Millius** served as EAC chairperson during this round of negotiations with **Vince Citriniti**. For the first time teachers gained in writing grievable working conditions in their contract.

In December 1986 the Educational Relations Commission ruled that existing OECTA secondary units had to negotiate separately from their elementary counterparts unless the membership chose not to. President **Sal Amenta** hurriedly convened a Unit General Meeting at the Triumph Hotel in January 1987 and it became obvious that the Unit was not prepared sufficiently to begin separate negotiations that very month as Bill 100 would require. Thus the decision was

made to negotiate jointly with Metro Elementary Unit and a two-year contract was made. This proved to be the last joint negotiations for the high school teachers.

In 1988, the Unit membership, by a narrow margin, voted to have their Executive try to negotiate a **modus vivendi** with Metro Elementary for joint negotiations. Unfortunately, agreement could not be reached and a second referendum authorized **Paul Duncan's** Executive to negotiate separately in 1989. Based on past contracts, a two-year agreement that for the first time addressed high school issues only was reached in June 1989 by our negotiators led by **Stan Kutz**.

From the start, Professional Development of members has been a priority for this Unit. At first there was only one "teachers' day" per year; our Unit was expected to organize it, run it, and pay for it. By 1971 over 500 teachers met in such places as the Inn on the Park or the new Ontario Science Centre to hear speakers on all aspects of education. But even by 1966 the need for individual PD grants and bursaries was apparent when two St. Joseph Sisters requested car fare to an educational conference in Ottawa during that October Unit General Meeting. They were turned down due to lack of funds. It was not until September of 1971 that the President, **Jim Brown**, announced that monies were available for local PD meetings to the extent of \$100 per subject area. By December 1972 the first individual PD bursaries were issued and became a unique feature of this Unit. Under the careful direction of **J.P. Patenaude**, the criteria were established for the receipt of these funds. Amounts for these climbed until they had become almost 25% of the budget in 1975. They have remained the largest single budget item to this day. Encouraging members to attend conferences and upgrade their skills and knowledge remain a major function of this Unit.

One of the reasons implicit in the creation of District 32 was OECTA's faith in the eventual completion of the Separate School system. By 1970 new terminology such as "continuum", "extension", "truncated" and "K to 13" came into regular use. Ontario Liberal and New Democrat opposition agreed that OECTA's cause was just. But by May 1971 the minutes of the Unit General Meeting showed a sense of black foreboding.

"**Mr. Smialek** (TSU President) reported that the Provincial OECTA had requested from the high school districts as to what action would be expected from OECTA in the event of Catholic high schools being closed down. **Mr. G. Smialek** posed the possibility of the school buildings being taken over by a public school board. would OECTA/OSSTF (sic) be expected to bargain that all the teachers of that school be hired by the public board? Even those non-members in Grades 11-13? Even those on probationary contracts?"

The Provincial election of October 1971 justified that foreboding. Having run on a platform of anti-extension, **Bill Davis'** Progressive Conservatives were re-elected with the highest majority of his career. Catholic high schools in Ottawa did close down. In Toronto new and old methods of financing private schools were found; walkathons, bingos, lotteries, raffles, car washes, Monte Carlos, and a myriad of other fund-raising activities. Taking on heavier teaching loads became common, and as the population of the religious orders declined, it was to the lay teachers that these tasks were passed on.

Pessimism gripped OECTA, and it was during the 1973 Annual General Meeting a motion was proposed to abolish the high school units, as they were now called. **Mrs. McPherson** led TSU to "nip in the bud" this motion by convincing the delegates to postpone the debate about abolition "until completion is achieved".

By the early 1980's many schools were in crisis. Religious orders with fewer and fewer members in the classroom found the cost of subsidizing students in Grades 11, 12 and 13 prohibitive. At the same time, the flood of immigrants to Toronto and the implementation of Bill 82 (1979) meant that the curricula had to be expanded to include ESL, guidance, general and basic classes. In 1983-84 drastic measures were being used just to survive. Then, on June 12, 1984 **Premier Davis** reversed his policy towards separate schools, announcing his government's intention to bring about completion.

Whether this change of heart was motivated by the teachers' "overwhelming arguments", the pending court action by the Catholic Students' Union, or the shift in voting patters in Ontario, is now beside the point. Catholic schools were not only saved, they would be fully funded by taxes which had for so long gone to the public schools only. the funding would be introduced over a period of five years. In 1989 the Ontario Government granted Separate Schools a share of the commercial assessment for education, fulfilling most of the recommendations of the MacDonald Commission (1986).

However, completion did not occur without its challenges and in 1987 the Supreme Court rejected the legal arguments of its critics. Then individual members in other Units legally fought OECTA's jurisdiction over membership. At the same time, the Hamilton Separate School Board challenged the legality of the ERC forcing separate negotiations. Both of these challenges were defeated in the Supreme Court of Ontario in 1989. That year, avoiding the rancour that had occurred in Hamilton, the MSSB announced the purchase and transfer of four schools from the public school boards in Toronto. At the same time St. Michael's College School opted to become a private school and left the unit.

Completion has, however desirable funding is, brought its own problems which all educators, and teachers in particular, must address singly and collectively. At the 1985 AGM the delegates from the elementary schools voted overwhelmingly to retain high school units. So now everyone faces new question: How will the Catholicity of our schools be maintained? How will our schools cope with the worldliness and violence in our society? How will OECTA respond to the unique problems in our secondary schools?

The Toronto Secondary Unit has become the model for many areas now setting up their own secondary units. Having for so long concentrated on the survival of both our schools and our unit, TSU is now beginning to offer the services long available in other affiliates. For example, since 1985 the Membership Services Committee under the leadership of **Bill Doyle** has vastly expanded its role within our unit with its excursions, mixed tournaments and social functions. also, TSU members are beginning to participate in Provincial Affairs with **Joe Ravesi** and **Emile Timmermans'** work on the OTF Board of Governors.

Where we go from here depends very much on the way teachers view and accept further challenges and how well we retain our dedication, commitment, and faith.