

April 17, 2020

Ontario University Workers' Coordinating Committee (OUWCC) Report

The OUWCC was held at the CUPE Ontario headquarters on February 20 – 23, 2020. The opening night included a greeting from Susan Gapka (Pink Triangle rep), Fred Hahn (CUPE ON president), and Candice Rennick (CUPE ON sec/treasurer), and a tribute to Janice Folk-Dawson (former Chair of OUWCC, current Ontario Federation of Labour Exec. VP.) There was a panel on Resisting the Ford Agenda with Janice, Fred, and Diana Zawadzki speaking about the theme of the conference: Resist, Defeat, and Replace.

Friday morning began with Graham Cox and Ben Lewis on a panel about Tools to Defeat. Graham talked about court challenges as one of the tools. The win over the 'Student Choice Initiative' (SCI) was huge. However, Graham fully expects it either to be overturned, or subject to new legislation that makes certain fees optional. That's not to say we shouldn't take them to court, but we need to change people's minds in the general public, and be prepared to continue the fight as well. He talked about how flooding the market/funding institutions better for eg. STEM programs would force wages down for those 'good' and 'necessary' jobs – which would also lead to reduced funding, if graduate wages are one of the metrics. He also talked about some ways to deal with issues in bargaining (1% limit etc.) in other ways.

GC quote: 'There's no such thing as political and non-political fees – they are all political.'

Ben talked about the performance- or outcomes-based funding and the very important question – who judges 'performance'? There is a goal of 80% of public funding for institutions meeting the targets, which leaves budgets up in the air from year to year. Funding will be withheld if targets aren't met. The metrics being considered – graduation rate, graduate employment rate, and earnings, institutional strength/focus, skills, research and funding capacity etc. – push universities to be more business-focused and put into question what universities are supposed to be and do. Also, please refer to what Graham said about STEM programs. Some other repercussions are increasing inequality as fewer lower income students are able to access university and/or graduate, and having students pushed through or courses dumbed down so as not to affect funding. Ben's phrase 'compounding inequity' stands out. Ultimately, we could have fewer, more unequal universities as funding is cut for 'underperforming' institutions, with surviving institutions being those that will 'perform' according to a very specific political agenda.

We had breakout groups to talk about the three main ideas:

Resist: education, bargaining strategies, etc.

Defeat: solidarity structures, strike support, etc.

Replace: political action

We looked at these two topics in different breakout groups in the afternoon, so there will be a summary of the discussions later in this report.

Friday's afternoon panel was on Organizing Members to Win and included Stephanie Van Stralen and Preethy Sivakumar (CUPE staff reps) and James Watson (CUPE Local 3906.) Preethy talked about the importance of, and the differences between, mobilizing, and organizing. Mobilizing is about showing our power by working with people (and leaders, and organizations) who agree with us that things need to change. It is resistance, challenging the systems of power. Organizing is about building our power long-term, about expanding the people we want to involve in our work to win changes to work etc. It involves identifying, recruiting, and developing new leaders, and developing relationships with other organizations who share our goals. We want to 'alter the relations of power to benefit our class', the working class.

Preethy Sivakumar quote: 'All the fights are about power.'

James took us through his Local's process of a successful strike campaign. (Their key demands were met - 80% to 90%.) He talked about internal and external mobilizing and organizing, formalized member orientation work, a townhall they held to get word out about the possibility of a strike, about outreach – 'solidarity coffee' – offering free coffee to folks, and support signs – 'I support/am willing to go on strike' photos, and letters to the BoG – 'I support [specific demands of] 3906!' James also talked about some areas of improvement – organizing more systematically, better pacing and timing, 'stress tests' – where is the membership at, and what escalating actions are members prepared to do? Educating members about strike details could (always) be improved as well.

Stephanie talked about the process of organizing for certification. The most effective way is to start with a group of workers interested in forming a union in their workplace. Be sure to check the scope clause – know who is or isn't covered by existing unions on campus. Scope can be expanded to include others or form a sub-unit in some cases. Conversations with workers that identify important issues, leaders in the workplace, etc. are important. 40% of those in the proposed bargaining unit must sign membership cards, but 50% (at least) is recommended. The CUPE organizer submits an application to the Ontario Labour Relations Board with the signed membership cards. A copy of the application (but not the signed cards) is sent to the employer. A secret ballot is held in the workplace within five business days from the date of application. At least 50% + 1 of votes cast must vote in favour of joining the union.

Resist:

- . educate – members, the public
- . have political conversations with family, friends, co-workers, etc.
- . build, work with campus coalitions
- . bargaining – give members realistic expectations, but: look at getting language to reopen language around wages etc. if Bill 124 is overturned; look at setting minimum standards around

paid prep time (quantify actual time needed, and work for additional paid prep time); language around having 'benefits' such as work boots considered instead as PPE?; work towards equity rather than the 1% limit?

Defeat:

- . solidarity structures
- . strike support statements (especially for smaller locals)
- . share media/updates with other unions on campus
- . strengthen/create community networks

Replace:

- . political action
- . learn more about political parties' various policies and implications
- . replace parties who don't support working class interests but ALSO keep politicians' feet to the fire – make sure they do what they said they'd do.

Communities, Not Cuts has tools and resources:

<https://communitiesnotcuts.ca/>

Saturday, February 22 – The People vs. Conservative Cuts Rally

At 8:15 am, we were on the bus headed to Niagara Falls! It was an important show of support for all the teachers, parents, workers of all kinds who have been or will be negatively affected by the Conservative cuts. The Conservative Party were having a policy convention – originally to be a four day thing, it ended up lasting a bit over a day. There were 80 buses, from all over Ontario. We had decorated drums that got us a good spot up near the platform truck aka stage. There were costumes, great signs, many many union flags.

Highlights:

Making signs on the bus to Niagara Falls; Mohammad Ali and his daughter Ameerah, Socialist hip hop; Dr. Seuss inspired signs; the mother and daughter speaking about cuts to autism services; seeing Guelph well-represented; meeting up with others from various communities; drumming! Pictures will be posted as well.

Sunday, February 23 – Action Plan, and Elections

The Action Plan was passed.

OUWCC New Executive:

Chair: David Simao (CUPE 1281)

Vice-Chair: Kathleen Webster (CUPE 2361)

Health and Safety Representative: Joe Rossi

Employment Equity Representative: Merlin Charles

Injured Worker Representative: Steve Pepper

Recording Secretary will be decided by the new executive at their first face-to-face meeting.

U of Guelph Campus Representative: Juanita Burnett (CUPE 1334 Unit 1)