

# *An Agenda for Change?*

## *CUPE Ontario's 2007 Convention*

Stephanie Ross

CUPE Ontario emerged from its recent convention in Windsor, Ontario with an ambitious action plan and a renewed resolve to challenge the union's structure – which has often been called the union's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. With the St. Clair Centre for the Arts bursting at the seams with delegates, the largest convention in CUPE Ontario's history embraced, at least in principle, a highly politicized approach to collective bargaining as well as a programme for regionalization of decision-making and resources. In a union which has always been reluctant to make radical shifts in structure and internal power relations, CUPE Ontario's *Agenda for Change* document offers up a fairly radical challenge to both CUPE's national leadership and the many large locals who have always been staunch defenders of local autonomy. The enduring tensions between different visions of the union's purpose, and the proper structure needed to carry out that purpose, were on full display and manifested themselves in a variety of different debates.

The entire convention was charged in the aftermath of two recent key events. First, there was a lingering hangover from the 2006 convention's passage of Resolution 50, which committed the Ontario Division to solidarity and education work on the issue of the "apartheid nature of the Israeli state" and to "support the international campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions" until Israel recognizes Palestine's legitimate right to self-determination. Despite the resolution passing handily, the intense backlash from the media, Zionist groups, and sections of some locals' memberships raised the spectre of an attempt to reconsider and rescind the resolution. In anticipation, members of the Division's International Solidarity Committee were busily distributing an excellent background document on the issue, entitled CUPE Ontario's Resolution 50: Towards Peace and Justice in the Middle East.

Second, intense feelings generated by the very long and difficult round of collective bargaining between CUPE National and its three staff unions, in which the National demanded concessions on pensions and which resulted in a brief strike in March, were still very much in evidence. The Division Executive joined a long list of locals and district councils from across the country who sent reams of support letters to the staff unions during negotiations, expressing their profound opposition to the National's violation of its own longstanding anti-concessions bargaining policy for CUPE members. Locals not only had to do without staff at key moments in bargaining and arbitration hearings; they were also robbed of the moral high ground of a consistent anti-concessions policy at their own bargaining tables, placing many in very difficult positions with respect to their employers. Several

debates were pervaded by expressions of appreciation for the staff (bringing people to their feet repeatedly) as well as anger at the National, and both Paul Moist and Claude Genereux were in damage control mode for much of the convention.

*Agenda for Change's* regionalization proposals were framed by frustration with the National Office, but not merely over the needless conflict with staff. The document calls for a major rethinking of CUPE's overall structure and internal relationships, and asks whether they are best suited to engage the issues, institutions and power structures that shape public sector workers' lives. In particular, the importance of provincial government legislation and funding decisions requires both regional and political campaigns as well as coordinated sectoral bargaining. Sectoral bargaining has become increasingly urgent in several sectors, especially social services, given the fragmented nature of service delivery and the resulting archipelago of small employers and bargaining units. In this context, meaningful gains on wages, benefits and pensions, especially for the women and people of colour who staff these workplaces, are impossible.

*Agenda for Change* therefore links together several key goals: consolidated bargaining strength; regionalized decision-making, and more resources from the National are all crucial to winning pensions and \$15/hour for all CUPE members within 6 years; advancing the equality agenda; and organizing those sectors of part-time, low-paid and marginalized workers. Add to this a very detailed *2007 Action Plan*, which put forth an ambitious set of interlocking political, bargaining and organizing campaigns in all of CUPE's key sectors as well as the central issue areas of equality and political action.

However, both *Agenda for Change* and the *Action Plan* strike at the heart of the historic bargain which made CUPE possible and has kept it a decentralized national union of relatively autonomous locals. In order to make sectoral and regional decision-making meaningful, control over resources – both staff and money – will have to follow. Opposition to this comes from above and below the Division level. The National Office has always feared that a strengthening of provincial divisions or sectoral groups would allow them to split off and form their own competing organization. Opposition from particular locals also endures. Even though both documents passed overwhelmingly, with much excitement, and with the link between collective bargaining and political action convincingly and repeatedly made, several large locals in the municipal sector continue to defend autonomy, not least because they have greater bargaining power on their own than do many of CUPE's locals in much more decentralized sectors. By

coding autonomy as democracy, certain segments of the union can mask the sectionalism which informs their position and block progressive initiatives that call on the membership to expand the boundaries of their activity, solidarity and identity.

Of course, money is always the real test of how ready CUPE's membership is to follow through with a structural reorganization. Resources are central to CUPE Ontario's capacity to carry out the *Action Plan*, and *Agenda for Change* is a major strategy for accessing those resources. However, the results of that approach won't be known until October 2007, when the Division presents its proposals to CUPE's National Convention in Toronto. In the meantime, a second strategy was an increase of 22 cents in monthly per capita dues paid to the Division. However, despite an impassioned speech by Division President Sid Ryan, opponents convinced enough delegates to vote against; the resolution passed the 50% mark, but did not garner the two-thirds majority needed to make a constitutional change. A revised proposal for an 11-cent increase passed quite handily on Saturday.

The dues debate carried within it an interesting and ironic twist, and it was here the Resolution 50 made its reappearance. Several large municipal locals used Resolution 50 to back up their refusal to vote for a dues increase if the money would be used for political awareness campaigns (not to mention the printing of the Resolution 50 backgrounder). Channelling the ghost of former AFL president Samuel Gompers, Anne Dembinski, president of Local 79 (inside workers at the City of Toronto), argued that politics only serves to divide union members and weaken them at the bargaining table. Hence, the union should remain neutral on broader political questions and focus only on what it does best – collective bargaining. Strangely, also speaking against the dues increase, albeit for reasons of process, were the very activists central to Resolution 50's passage, and who in general support the vision of the *Action Plan* and *Agenda for Change*. Meeting as the Action Caucus, these members problematized the lack of advance notice and education about the need for a dues increase, which, they claimed, gave locals little time to debate the issue and instruct their delegates. Whether true or not, this intervention aided the more conservative locals in their bid to restrain the Division by diluting the coalition in favour of a much more politicized CUPE Ontario, particularly where it really counts: the financial resources to make the Action Plan a reality.

All this speaks to the broader question of what Left strategy can be in the context of a union like CUPE, whose leadership itself is often to the Left of many locals and members. What can an "action" caucus contribute when the action plan presented by



the executive board is so comprehensive, politicized, and full of radical potential if realized? While maintaining the democratic accountability of the leadership is always paramount, the left must be careful not to lose sight of the larger strategic picture by focussing on process for its own sake, particularly if it means undermining the very kinds of campaigns it passionately advocates. Also, by cutting the dues increase in half, the success of CUPE Ontario's *Action Plan* depends heavily upon what happens at National Convention, and whether Ontario delegates are able to convince other provinces that they too will benefit from a shift in CUPE's internal relationships. Given CUPE's past record, which has seen the union reject major structural changes despite support from the National executive on three separate occasions, activists will have their work cut out for them this fall. **R**

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# Building Union Power from the Bottom Up:

A Response to Ross' "Agenda for Change? CUPE Ontario's 2007 Convention"

## Members of the CUPE Ontario Action Caucus

In "Agenda for Change? CUPE Ontario's 2007 Convention," Stephanie Ross poses a question of significance to activists in several unions today: "what Left strategy can be in the context of a union like CUPE, whose leadership itself is often to the Left of many locals and members?"

In her article the recent CUPE Ontario convention appears to have had three main actors: 1) a progressive leadership with a "radical" *Agenda for Change*, which is being constrained by 2) a more conservative CUPE National and large locals that want to maintain local autonomy, and 3) activists grouped around the International Solidarity Committee and the Action Caucus.

In her account, this third group appeared out of step with the leadership's progressive agenda, unwittingly obstructing their efforts, at times even bolstering the ranks of conservative forces in key debates on the convention floor. In addition to criticising what she sees as their lack of strategy, Ross raises the question of the role of an activist base in a union with a progressive leadership. While this is a serious question with no easy answers, it is unclear from Ross' article what an activist base might offer in such a context. She asks, "What can an "action" caucus contribute when the action plan presented by the executive board is so comprehensive, politicized, and full of radical potential if realized?"

She cites two issues to illustrate her point. First is the impact of Resolution 50 from the 2006 convention, which she describes as a "hangover." Rather than a ground-breaking achievement for the international labour movement, Ross only notes how it was used by one delegate (who believes that the union should remain neutral on broader political issues) to obstruct the leadership's progressive agenda. In reality, most of the "backlash" against the union's position on Israeli apartheid has not been from CUPE members, but from the media and Zionist groups outside the union. Activists were busily distributing materials not in anticipation of a possible rescind motion, as Ross suggests, but as a way to implement the education mandate of the resolution (it was known long in advance that no local had submitted a resolution to rescind Resolution 50).

What she failed to notice, however, was the positive impact of this resolution on the union – not in terms of policies, but something much more important to building union power. While Resolution 50 was met with opposition, it also mobilized a new layer of CUPE activists (and inspired many long-time activists as well). By taking a bold and principled position and actually following through on a resolution from convention, by training a group of

about 20 union activists (many of whom had never been active in the union) and sending them to run educational workshops on the issue at Locals, Sectorial Conferences, Equity Committees, Executive Board, as well as Local and Regional Council Meetings across the province, this resolution has breathed new life into the activist base of CUPE Ontario.

At issue here is a difference of opinion about the role of activists in the union. Ross worries about activists being a nuisance or alienating themselves from a progressive leadership that is trying to adopt a progressive action plan in the struggle over institutional position. Her primary focus appears to be the adoption of this agenda at convention. In contrast, it is our contention that the strength of the activist base is much more important than any agenda adopted at convention, and that without an activist base no action plans can be implemented, even in a union with a progressive leadership like CUPE Ontario. While Ross focuses on the debate around the union's action plan, the activists, having seen many such action plans and recognizing their limits when they are translated from paper into practice, are trying to build a base that is capable of putting even the most limited objectives into practice. Until that happens all the action plans, however "full of radical potential," will not be realized. Consequently, much more thought needs to be put into how to build such a base.

This difference illuminates the rationale behind some of the activists' opposition to the proposed dues increase – Ross' second example of how some activists frustrated the progressive plans of the leadership. "Meeting as the Action Caucus," writes Ross, "these members problematized the lack of advance notice and education about the need for a dues increase, which, they claimed, gave locals little time to debate the issue and instruct their delegates." She goes on to caution that "the left must be careful not to lose sight of the larger strategic picture by focussing on process for its own sake."

Ross is correct that failure to approve the full dues increase proposal hurt some of the very activists who were raising concerns about the process by which this decision was being made – the lack of membership involvement and the disproportionate cut to committee budgets. However, openly challenging the leadership on using tactics that weaken the union speaks less to a lack of strategic vision, than to the strength of their conviction that the power of a union often has more to do with *how* it makes decisions than with what decisions are made in the end. Failure to confront the leadership on how it relates to the activists and the rank and file in favour of short-term budgetary gains only weakens the union in the long-term.

The agenda for change itself and the way the dues increase was presented clearly speak to the problems around the way decisions are made in the union and the failure to include the activists who will be implementing agendas in the agenda setting. For instance, the *Agenda for Change* presented goals for committees that committees did not set for themselves and did not reflect their actual plans. Assigning goals in a top down fashion does not build union strength or capacity. Then the dues increase was presented as all or nothing. The budget presented made it so that failure to adopt the increase would mean a severe gutting of committees making the actual implementation of the *Agenda for Change* unfeasible.

Overall, Ross' reflections focus almost exclusively on some of the intricacies of the long-standing debate on the relationship between various internal structures within the union. These are certainly issues of primary importance for the union, which cannot be ignored. However, there is another dimension to the project of union renewal beneath the surface of resolutions, budgets and action plans, which is not unrelated to the issues raised by Ross, but which often gets overlooked: the struggle to build an organized, independent activist base.

This effort is important because it confronts not only the internal structures of the union, but the very structure of labour re-

lations that limits union power today. Since the "postwar compromise" of the mid-1940s the labour movement has been plagued a disconnection between the leadership and the rank-and-file. In exchange for financial stability (automatic dues payments from members) and legal concessions which forced the bosses to recognize unions, the labour movement sacrificed its militancy. Within this new framework, problems in the workplace tend to be resolved by a professional layer of staffers, lawyers and arbitrators, rather than by the workers themselves through militant action. While this was a victory for the labour movement in many ways, we need to recognize that as a result rank-and-file members became disconnected from workplace struggles and from their unions, and their capacities to struggle have atrophied.

The question of the role of activists in a union with a progressive leadership must be approached with an eye to this broader context. Given the passivity and disconnection of union members today, the existence of an activist base cannot simply be assumed. Consequently, activists in a union, even one with a progressive leadership, must in the first instance apply themselves to the task of building such a base by politically re-skilling the membership. This has been one of the greatest achievements of Resolution 50. From this perspective, the actions of the activists in Ross' article take on a new significance. **R**

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## Union Activism and CUPE: A Further Reply

Stephanie Ross

In my analysis of CUPE Ontario's May Convention, I asked a serious question: in a union with a relatively progressive leadership, what role can and should a caucus of the Left play beyond claiming that "the plan doesn't go far enough"? Members of the Action Caucus conclude that my intention was to chastise them for being "a nuisance" to a leadership that has taken care of everything and to insist that they merely line up and clap appreciatively. Nothing could be further from the truth. Progressive leadership *needs* a mobilized and activist base, not just to keep them 'honest' and left-leaning, but also to legitimize in democratic terms their radical tendencies within and outside the union. What is at issue here is not a "difference of opinion about the role of activists in the union", but rather the *strategies* which activists should undertake to make the union more effective, democratic and militant. Action Caucus members and I share a desire for a

vibrant, membership-led, democratic and militant labour movement. But we diverge on the analysis needed to achieve this goal.

Action Caucus members are rightly concerned that I did not properly appreciate the impact of Resolution 50 on the internal life of the union through its mobilization of a new activist layer. The positive educational and capacity-building effects of this resolution were indeed visible, and caucus members' courageous and tireless efforts before and after the resolution's passage are a major contribution, which I perhaps underemphasized. The large numbers of young activists speaking at the microphones is also in part a testament to this valuable work. However, my point was to examine how this resolution was used by conservative forces within the union to support their own vision of CUPE as a depoliticized and locally-oriented collective bargaining machine to the detriment

of most of the membership's interests. While this group seemed to be smaller and more marginal than at previous conventions, it continues to have purchase amongst a significant minority of the local leadership (and perhaps more in the general membership) and effectively if opportunistically deploys deeply-held values about the link between autonomy and democracy. This group didn't have to convince a majority to block the financial basis for *Agenda for Change*: just over 33 percent was sufficient. Whether "unwitting" or not, the case against the dues increase from the Left bolstered, rather than marginalized, this position and did not engage with the substance of the plan.

It also did not offer an alternative vision of democratic politics within the union that would argue for the benefits of regionalization while insisting on the active facilitation of membership →

participation and control in these structures. Given the very difficult uphill battle required to extract more resources from CUPE National, *Agenda for Change* and all its latent potential for creating more effective and politicized collective bargaining and organizing structures, may be still-born. It will be those members in hard-to-organize sectors, who passionately demanded that the action plan be fully funded – and not the CUPE Ontario executive – who will suffer from the resulting lack of financial and institutional resources.

Action Caucus members seem less worried than I. They characterize the dues increase as a leadership attempt to make “short-term budgetary gain[s]” at the expense of building the union. They admit “some” members and activists were hurt by the failure to approve the full dues increase, but are not ultimately concerned: they are building the activist base necessary for any resolution or action plan to be implemented. The content of such plans is not especially important, and they do not offer an opinion on *Agenda for Change* itself or whether and how its elements might serve to strengthen grassroots activism. Nor do they focus on their fellow members’ very material interests in more effective bargaining structures or whether low wages might be a barrier to greater union activism. These goals must be subordinated to the conviction that *how* the union makes decisions is more important than *what* it decides.

The Action Caucus’s response to my focus on “the intricacies of the long-standing debate” in the union about structure seems to demote organizational history to an interesting yet irrelevant pursuit. However, as previous generations of CUPE activists will attest, union structure is *not* an esoteric question, but a central *strategic* one that needs careful attention. Attempts to (re)build an activist base – or to do *anything* in the union – take place within a concrete organizational context, with specific material and discursive resources, potential alliances, openings, and limits. Action plans need activists to carry them out, yes, but those activists also need more than force of will. *What* the union decides profoundly affects *whether and how* the members are able to mobilize and make claims within the union. To ignore this terrain, to

dismiss it as irrelevant to the project of union renewal, is, I fear, overly voluntarist and bends the stick too far in the other direction.

Action Caucus members also don’t offer an analysis of CUPE as such. Instead, their activity is framed as a response to the negative effects of the post-war compromise and institutionalized collective bargaining on unionism in general. Few on the Left would disagree that the legal frame-

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work has substituted bureaucratic procedure for membership action and contained much union militancy. But these insights are but a starting point, which tell us little about the variable ways that institutionalization was worked out in different organizations, and even less about how to intervene in actually existing unions. Surely it matters strategically that CUPE adopted a highly decentralized structure in order to prevent becoming like its more centralized private sector counterparts, both providing more room for independent grassroots initiatives (like Resolution 50) and creating important barriers to the initiatives that members themselves have desired?

Or that CUPE has always expressed a tendency towards more politicized collective bargaining, due not only to the connection between public sector workers’ economic interests and debates about public policy, taxes, and the relationship between citizens and state, but also to repeated attacks on its collective bargaining rights by successive governments? Or that, *despite* the strictures of the post-war compromise, CUPE has probably participated in more political and illegal strikes than any other Canadian union since the 1970s? Or that, unique in today’s labour movement, the Ontario leadership’s repeated calls for the union to use its National Defense Fund to finance – and thereby legitimize – just

such breaches of post-war “responsible unionism” might be a strategic resource? These all indicate a more complex internal political life that presents possibilities of alliance with both progressive leaders and those sections of the membership who experience bargaining as intensely political and who also grasp the contradictions between local autonomy and the effective implementation of democratic will at the provincial and national levels makes them open to a more radical vision.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me reemphasize: this is not a cheerleading exercise in support of the CUPE Ontario leadership. Like all unionists, they are contradictory. They should have taken a more active mobilizing approach when putting forward *Agenda for Change*, especially if they expect members to take ownership of the initiative and fight for it at National Convention in the fall. But it makes little sense to challenge leadership for its own sake. We must always assess when and how we “challenge the leadership openly” in terms of whether such interventions strengthen activist capacity. Activists also need to develop a more nuanced understanding of the terrain for socialist strategy than ‘leadership bad / grassroots good.’ Always casting leaders as mere bureaucrats out to increase their own institutional power base misses opportunities to support and deepen their more radical tendencies, which can then help to increase the space for ‘bold’ initiatives.

An abstract notion of democratic process that trumps other considerations risks derailing the structural changes that could support and amplify union renewal efforts. It may, as well, make the Left *appear* marginal to the majority of CUPE members and their concerns. Resolutions do not automatically guarantee action, and convictions alone do not guarantee a strategy. Both are ideas which become meaningful in concrete conditions. As socialists, we should aim to understand those conditions more clearly, in all their complexity and contradiction. **R**

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