

Gaining full bargaining rights

by Ken Novakowski

It happened in 1987. B.C. teachers gained full collective bargaining rights. And the grantor was a most unlikely politician—Social Credit Premier Bill Vander Zalm.

The struggle for full collective bargaining rights by B.C. teachers was a long and arduous one, marked by large mobilizations of members in “expanded scope” campaigns, by legal and political actions like the Charter challenge and by momentous and even tumultuous events like the “Solidarity” strike of 1983. In 1987, we were the only sizable group of organized employees in B.C. and the only teacher body in the country that did not enjoy the statutory requirement that their employers bargain all terms and conditions of employment with them. And we did not possess, even with our limited scope, the right to strike.

All that changed in 1987, a watershed year in the history of the BCTF. On April 1 of that year, the government announced two major pieces of legislation—Bills 19 and 20. Bill 19 was a piece of legislation that restricted existing rights for trade unions while at the same time including teachers as employees entitled to those rights. Principals and vice-principals were removed from the teacher bargaining unit with a clear “management role” defined for them. Bill 20 created a College of Teachers that was intended to certify teachers and also to represent the professional interest of teachers. Coupled with the removal of statutory membership of all public school teachers in the BCTF, this initiative was viewed as a government attempt to split the loyalty of teachers, creating a union “BCTF” and a professional organization “College of Teachers.” The labour movement was angry over Bill 19. And we were adamantly opposed to Bill 20.

The BCTF response was swift and united. Four weeks after the legislation was tabled, on April 28, after a province-wide vote, teachers in every local walked off the job and shut down every school in the province to protest the government legislation. Rallies were held in a number of communities while thousands of teachers jammed into the Agridome in Vancouver to hear their president, Elsie McMurphy, square off against the Vander Zalm government for its attack on the BCTF. A month later on June 1, teachers joined the rest of the labour movement in a one-day general strike to protest Bills 19 and 20.

When the dust settled and the legislation was turned into law, the BCTF faced a number of challenges. First, the legislation provided teacher locals with the option of choosing to be an “association” with limited scope and binding arbitration for resolving disputes or a “union” with full scope and the right to strike/ lockout. As well, with the removal of statutory membership, we were faced with having to voluntarily sign up teachers into the local and the BCTF. And the new College of Teachers loomed as a potential rival for the loyalty of teachers.

In the most significant mobilization of BCTF resources toward a single objective, the BCTF organized and co-ordinated its 76 locals to sign up teachers into the BCTF and to opt for, in every local, the “union” model for bargaining. Teachers signed up into the BCTF in the range of 98%. The campaign was successful beyond belief. And when elections for the College of Teachers were held, BCTF-endorsed candidates won all 15 of the elected spots on the 20 person board. Teachers were in charge of the college, and ensured that its mandate would remain limited to the certification, recertification, and decertification of teachers and that the realm of professional development would remain within the purview of the BCTF.

Faced with an outside threat to the profession and their organization, teachers reshaped and reformed their “union of professionals” into a new organization that would continue to represent all of the economic, social, and professional interests of teachers. As well, the public profile of the BCTF and its president, Elsie McMurphy, were raised to new heights through the campaign of opposition and mobilization. And we further strengthened our relationship with the labour movement through participation in the general strike. We then turned our minds to preparing for our first effort at full collective bargaining with the right to strike.

What emerged was a system of co-ordinated local bargaining. Locals were the bargaining unit charged with the responsibility of negotiating a collective agreement with their school board. The BCTF developed the *Collective Bargaining Handbook*, with model clause language on every conceivable provision that teachers might wish to negotiate. Local bargaining teams were trained by the BCTF and supported by staff assigned to work with locals. Additional staff were hired to assist and new policies and procedures were put in place to support the new bargaining regime, including strike pay and assistance.

The first round of full collective bargaining for teachers in 1988 continued to mobilize the excitement and energy of teachers that was generated in the sign-up certification campaign the year before. On November 28, 1988, Kitimat teachers began a 10-day strike before successfully concluding an agreement. Eleven other locals struck in the first round and others mobilized to achieve their objectives that became identified in the slogan “WHY NOT HERE?”. The important aspect of the experience of co-ordinated local bargaining was not that we did well—we did. What was so very important about local bargaining was the high degree of democracy and member participation in decisions and the process of achieving local collective agreements. As a Federation officer in the first two rounds of local bargaining, I well remember my visits to locals and the high percentage of members who attended meetings, took part in activities, and supported their bargaining teams in their efforts to achieve improvements in teacher salaries, working conditions, and professional rights.

The stories of local bargaining in the three rounds before provincial bargaining was imposed in 1994 constitute an exciting and dramatic period in the history of the BCTF. I can see a series of articles shaping up on the history of collective bargaining for next year’s *Teacher Newsmagazine*.

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