



Federation of
Post-Secondary Educators
of BC

CFS Event
Speaking Notes, Cindy Oliver
Vancouver, January 19, 2013

Good morning and thanks for the invitation to speak here this morning.

It would be a bit of an understatement to say that the next five months are going to be critical for our respective memberships. I want to spend my time this morning giving you my short-list of what those critical issues are. I also want to talk about what we as a collective—faculty and students—can do to address that short-list.

I say collectively because there is a history—modest, but still very important—of our two organizations working together. Outsiders may downplay the importance of those collective efforts, but I certainly wouldn't be one of them. The fact that CFS and FPSE have been outspoken critics of skyrocketing tuition fees, chronic under-funding of our institutions and increased barriers to accessible post-secondary education is that we come from the same place in terms of values. We both believe that post-secondary education is a necessary building block for a modern, progressive and democratic society. [...]

We both believe that we have to take that message beyond the converted; it's not enough that here, in this room, we all nod our head and agree. We have to mobilize our members and the broader community.

I want to return to that point in a minute, but before I do I want to give you an update on another important issue for my membership and that's collective bargaining.

We are working both provincially and locally to conclude the 2012 round of bargaining. The 10,000 members that I represent have been part of the 250,000 provincial public sector workers whose collective agreements expired in March 2012. Heading into those negotiations we had been told by then Finance Minister Kevin Falcon (remember him? Isn't it strange how that portfolio has been something of a revolving door?) that the mandate for the 2012 round of bargaining was going to be a round set of zeros. That would have made it four years of zeros in the last four years, a prospect that every union at the bargaining table knew from the outset would be intolerable.

I give credit to the BC Federation of Labour and President Jim Sinclair for galvanizing provincial public sector unions into a coherent pushback strategy. It's never easy trying to make the case for wage increases for public sector workers, but in this round we stuck to a common theme, one that stressed the importance of the work we do and the need for a "fair and reasonable" settlement.

The short version of all this is that it worked. Although there was never a plan to have one master settlement for all 250,000 workers, we knew we had to set some important patterns at the front end that could then be applied to other settlements. That pattern was set by the BCGEU who were successful in negotiating a 4% wage increase over the two year term of the agreement. Even more important, the GEU also managed to defeat the provincial government's plan to sell off BC's Liquor Distribution Branch, a crown corporation that brings in close to \$750 million into the provincial treasury every year.

About 190,000 workers covered by various contracts have now settled with some form of the pattern established by the BCGEU. FPSE Locals are part of the remaining 60,000 who have yet to conclude contracts, but the way forward for us is a lot easier now that those other contracts have fallen into place.

I'm telling you all of this because I think it fits into the larger narrative that we need to focus on over the next five months, namely the importance of working collectively. As well, it's also very empowering to both activists and rank-and-file members to be able to see examples of how collective action trumps what is normally a pretty formidable force. The BC Liberals have been in power for twelve years. Throughout that period they've done some incredibly nasty things and still managed to hold on to power. [...]

For the average member, it's easy to succumb to the sense that if the government decides to head in a certain direction, there's not much that the labour movement, or other groups for that matter, can do to alter that course. What has happened in this round of bargaining proves that to be wrong, and that's a good thing.

In the next few months the labour movement is going to transform the energy that was deployed in coordinated bargaining into a very strategic and engaged plan of political action, all designed to get our members to do two things: 1) vote on May 14th; and 2) vote for a government that is going to make a positive difference in our lives. Most of us see the second point as a vote for the NDP, but we have to respect the fact that not all of our members will do that. Fair enough. As long as we connect the dots between what a government has done and what most people are looking to a government to do, we are confident enough of our members will vote for progressive change and that's good news for BC.

At FPSE we want to work collaboratively with CFS on both points. We know that you have run very successful "Rock the Vote" and "Get out and Vote" campaigns designed to get students to register to vote and cast a ballot on voting day. Our many campuses are great staging grounds for that to happen and we want to support your campaigns wherever they happen.

We also want to work with you to shine a bright light on post-secondary education. We believe it can be a very powerful, vote-determining

issue in the May election. We also think that our two organizations are well-positioned to make that happen. Again, working together we can advance that agenda in ways that other groups can't. We need to make every effort to ensure we use that advantage effectively.

One last point about political action and that's if there was any doubt that the stakes in the May election are high and getting higher, just take a look at what the corporate sector is prepared to do over the next five months. Business leaders in BC have banded together into a group called "Concerned Citizens for BC". The membership reads like a who's who list of big businesses in BC. They are building a war chest to pay for an ad blitz the likes of which we haven't seen for a long time in BC. Their message is a lot of fear mongering about the NDP and a lot of praising of the BC Liberals.

Remember for a moment that it was this very same cast of characters from the business community who designed and launched the Gordon Campbell "New Era" in 2001, an agenda that included massive tax breaks for business and de-regulated tuition fees for you. Their version of how the economy should work has been a disaster. Books will be written about just how destructive those policies have been. At its core, business leaders want small ineffective government and the most minimalist level of public services imaginable.

If voters truly understood the stark alternatives that these business folks are advocating, their message wouldn't have much resonance.

However, when you have millions to spend on an ad blitz, distorting public perceptions becomes a little easier.

Our strength—and I'm talking about the student movement and the labour movement—is our ground game. We have a connection to the community that should never be underestimated. We have credibility that is essential in any successful campaign. But because we don't have the luxury of a multi-million dollar war chest, we have to be both strategic and collaborative in how we campaign.

So my call to this group is work with us over the next five months. Make voter registration a priority in your membership. Together, let's make sure post-secondary education is a key ballot question for many voters. And let's make sure that the last 12 years becomes an example of what we won't be doing in this province. I look forward to the challenge. I hope you do too.