

**Creating a united front:
coordinating the 2003-2004 negotiations
of university sessionals affiliated to the FNEEQ-CSN
(Quebec)**

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1. 1987 to 2004: the path to cooperation _____

1.1 The 1980s: the need for coordination becomes apparent

It has been nearly 25 years since university sessionals (part-timers, contingent academic labor) founded their first union in Quebec. Today, eight unions are affiliated with the FNEEQ-CSN, the *Fédération nationale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec* of the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN) [Confederation of national trade unions, or CNTU].

25 years ago, each union negotiated on its own. Soon after, they saw the need to coordinate their bargaining efforts, using the resources made available by the *Regroupement université* (University Group) created within the FNEEQ-CSN. They began by exchanging information about local conditions. Their cooperation finally extended to developing coordinated strategies and tactics. The change proved very profitable.

1987 was a difficult year that motivated sessionals to collaborate more closely. A long strike of 2 months opposed sessionals and the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Strikes also had been necessary and negotiations arduous at the Université de Montréal, the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC), the Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR) and at the Université Laval (in Quebec City). It became clear that the unions needed to build a common front on the major issues, especially salaries, in order to strengthen their bargaining power vis-à-vis their respective universities.

1.2 The 1990s: first steps

The new decade opened with a round of contract renewals. They gave sessionals their first chance to meld their bargaining efforts. For the first time, the unions in the *Regroupement université* informed each other about their negotiations. Also for the first time, they launched a Quebec-wide publicity campaign to inform the public about university sessionals and improve their image.

In the 1990-1991 round, sessionals won a greater role in the administration of university affairs. Sessionals' representatives joined governing boards and committees, with full voting rights. Universities released funds to support many projects proposed by sessionals at each university. The projects focused on teaching and curricula: for example, more personalized supervision of students, better coordination among the teachers of the same or related courses, program and curriculum reforms, the creation of new courses and the preparation of teaching materials.

The 1990s in Quebec began with an economic recession. After the recession, both the federal and Quebec governments sought to curb deficits and reduce debt by drastically cutting their spending on social services—especially in health, education and housing. Universities tried to pass the cuts on to students and sessionals, for example by increasing class size and reducing the number and variety of courses. The pressure motivated our member unions to move closer toward a common front.

1.3 The 2000-2001 round: adoption of a joint plan of action

In 1998, after a long strike that lasted several weeks, sessional at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR), affiliated at the time to the *Syndicat canadien de la fonction publique (SCFP)* (Canadian Union of Public Employees, CUPE), won the promise by the university to have the Institut de la statistique du Québec conduct an independent study into the salary gap between sessionals and professors at the UQTR. This report would provide the first quantitative evidence of the degree of discrimination endured by sessionals.

In the year 2000, all of Quebec's university sessionals' unions—regardless of their affiliation to one or another union federations—adopted a joint plan of action. Together, they conducted a publicity campaign highlighting sessionals' contribution to the university and demanding equal salaries for work of equal value. They succeeded at least in narrowing the gap. Most Quebec universities agreed to increase the rate for a 45-hour course from 5200\$ to nearly 6000\$.

1.4 The 2003-2004 round: coordinated bargaining

Over the past year, 2003-2004, sessionals affiliated with the FNEEQ-CSN tried to narrow that salary gap even further. While respecting each other's autonomy, they coordinated their negotiations, increasing their leverage thereby and obtaining better terms for their members. In what follows, I will describe the details of that effort at coordination.

2. Preparing the 2003-2004 round _____

2.1 The ingredients of successful coordination

Success in coordinated bargaining requires careful attention to at least three matters:

- finding the degree of coordination that is acceptable to all participants and consigning it to a formal written agreement, the *entente de solidarité* (solidarity protocol)
- identifying which demands will be pursued in common
- preparing a joint publicity campaign to motivate members and to call public attention to the negotiations

2.2 Entente de solidarité (solidarity protocol)

COCAL V was held in Montreal in October 2002. Many Quebec sessionals participated. The day before the congress opened, the sessionals' unions affiliated to the FNEEQ-CSN signed the *entente de solidarité* (solidarity protocol) that would accompany and orient their negotiations during the 2003-2004 round.

While respecting each other's autonomy and specific situations, they agreed to several joint measures:

- share information
- elaborate a platform of common goals
- use the same signs, leaflets and other means of communication
- follow a common strategy to mobilize their members
- undertake specific activities to support each other

2.3 Identifying common goals for 2003-2004

Preparations for joint bargaining during 2003-2004 had already been underway for more than a year. Since the beginning of 2002, the unions had met to identify a list of common issues and bargaining goals. During the winter and summer terms of 2003, they produced a common set of demands:

- better salaries and an end to working for free in a number of university activities (such as the preparation of committee meetings)
- improving retirement plans for sessionals
- opening the possibility of early retirement
- improved working conditions (e.g. course sizes, quality of classrooms)
- stronger job security (e.g. attribution of courses, qualification criteria, evaluation of sessionals)
- higher benefits (e.g. insurance plans, vacations, parental leave)

2.5 January to May 2003: some unions prepare for negotiations, others start bargaining

During the winter and spring of 2003, all the unions in the *Regroupement université* held assemblies to inform their members on the strategy of coordinated bargaining. Members adopted the main goals and detailed demands for the upcoming round of negotiations.

At the **University de Montreal**, members of the *Syndicat des chargées et chargés de cours de l'Université de Montréal* (SCCCUM) voted in favor of a process of ongoing negotiation with the university, scheduled to continue until December 2006.

At the **University du Québec à Montreal**, where negotiations had begun in the autumn of 2002, the *Syndicat des chargées et chargés de cours de l'Université du Québec à Montréal* (SCCUQ) penned an intent of agreement in the middle of March 2003. The SCCUQ wanted to sign their new contract before the UQAM began negotiations with its professors' union. The SCCUQ was also wary of the conservative turn in government policy that might follow the provincial elections that had been called for April 2003. The SCCUQ pioneered by winning a program of early retirement.

2.6 Spring and summer 2003: the publicity campaign

The unions decided to concentrate on two themes for their joint publicity campaign:

- recognition of sessionals' contribution to the university and to students' education
- highlighting the high level of sessionals' professional qualifications, in order to dispel the unfavorable stereotypes about them

During the spring of 2003, the *Regroupement université* prepared a publicity campaign to bring sessionals' case to the public and to encourage members during their negotiations. The title of the campaign was *What would the university be like without sessionals?*

In the summer of 2003, the *Regroupement université* and representatives of its member unions prepared banners, buttons, leaflets and posters. They had to be ready for the fall, when negotiations would begin in earnest.

2.7 A common front on salaries

By the summer of 2003, settlements between the universities within the Université du Québec system and their professors produced salary increases that increased the gap between professors' and sessionals' salaries. In March 2003, the University du Québec à Montreal (UQAM) gave its professors a 6% raise. During the summer of 2003, the University du Québec en Outaouais (UQO) and at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC) granted similar increases to their professors.

In response, and for the first time in its history, the unions within *Regroupement université* agreed on common salary demands for the three years of the collective agreements: increases of 15%, 8% and 8%. This meant a final rate of 8000\$ for a 45-hour course, including vacation benefits.

The demands were high but justified. The previous round of negotiations three years before had narrowed the salary gap between sessionals and professors. The gap was widening again. Our unions realized that they must improve their bargaining power. They prepared joint actions for the fall of 2003.

3. Fall 2003: Negotiations begin

In the fall of 2003, negotiations began at the Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO) and at the Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR). They were at a standstill at the Université du Laval in Quebec City. Several joint actions were scheduled, notably:

- at the start of the fall term
- during Campus Equity Week at the end of October
- during the *Journée nationale des chargées et chargés de cours* (Quebec's University Sessionals Day) on November 22

3.1 September 2003: classes start and so does the publicity campaign

As students returned to school, several of our unions set up information stands to greet them with information stands, banners, leaflets and handouts making the case for sessionals' demands. They offered scholarships of 500\$ to 1000\$ to students who successfully answered a battery of questions about sessionals' role, contribution and working conditions. The unions took out ads in student newspapers and in the student agendas published by the universities.

3.2 October 2003: Campus Equity Week

During Campus Equity Week, at the end of October, the *Syndicat des chargées et chargés de cours de l'Université du Québec en Outaouais* (SCCC-UQO) voted in favor of a number of pressure tactics including a strike. All the sessionals' union presidents affiliated to the FNEEQ-CSN went to the city of Gatineau to show their support for the local union's demands. Their press conference received good coverage in the local news media. It was the beginning of our media campaign.

3.3 November 2003: Journée nationale des chargées et chargés de cours (University Sessionals Day)

Since 1999, Quebec sessionals' unions observe a *Journée nationale des chargées et chargés de cours* (University Sessionals Day) on the 22nd of November. It's an occasion to call attention to their presence, contribution, working conditions and goals. The unions distribute leaflets, place markers, and buttons at their universities. Some unions address themselves to the media through press releases and press conferences. In 2003, the main topic was the current round of negotiations.

4. Winter 2004: negotiations advance, members mobilize _____

At the beginning of January 2004, talks were proceeding slowly at the Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO). That was also the case at the Université Laval, where a mediator was able to move things along. At the Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR), January saw quick progress, but no meetings were held in February. At the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC) and at the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT), the unions were putting the finishing touches on their proposals.

The framework for mobilization was now in place and activities got under way. At the Université Laval et at the Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO), sessionals' unions applied a gamut of pressure tactics to get their points across: petitions, posters, billboard ads, leaflets and tracts, information stands. More and more members joined in.

4.1 The parliamentary commission on higher education, pressure tactics and lobbying

The provincial elections of April 2003, won by the Liberal Party of Quebec, had indeed produced a new and more conservative government. Pierre Reid, former rector of the Université Sherbrooke, became Minister of Education. He created a parliamentary commission on higher education. Hearings would begin on 16 February 2004. Sessionals' unions used the commission to present their case to Parliament, to Ministry of Education officials, to the media and, not least, to university administrators. The hearings became an occasion to combine lobbying, negotiations and varied pressure tactics.

To mark the start of the parliamentary commission, sessionals at the Université du Québec at Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT) took one hour off each 3-hour course. They used that hour for campus-wide activities designed to inform the UQAT community of their goals and situation. A week later, on February 23, sessionals at Rimouski (UQAR) and the Outaouais (UQO) declared 24-hour work stoppages, and Laval's sessionals began a general strike. The rector of the Université Laval, testifying before the commission that day, promised to quickly make a better offer to his university's sessionals. The university took a week before doing so and getting the talks moving.

Elsewhere, talks languished at the Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO). Several partial work stoppages gave way to a general strike after March 17. Mobilization efforts went very well in these two universities. Local media covered the *tintamarres*, the high-profile and high-volume marches on campus with fifes, trumpets and drums that called attention to the negotiations.

Meanwhile, most of the briefs and testimony presented to the parliamentary commission on higher education rarely mentioned teaching

or sessionals' contribution to the university. Sessionals remained invisible, although they taught more than half of all undergraduate courses.

The FNEEQ-CSN took advantage of the hearings to present their case formally and informally, by lobbying deputies, university administrators when they testified, as well as the media. The halls outside the hearing room nudged negotiations along. When a university's officials appeared before the committee, their sessionals' union greeted them with press releases concerning sessionals' working conditions and demands. The hearings were broadcast live on a public-affairs cable channel. They were covered by several newspapers, especially the respected and influential *Le Devoir*. Josée Boileau, editorialist at *Le Devoir*, expressed her astonishment at the overwhelming attention given by witnesses to the question of research funding, in comparison with the needs of teaching or with the contribution of sessionals to students' education.

On March 16, the FNEEQ-CSN submitted its own brief to the commission. The four FNEEQ representatives focused their remarks on sessionals' contribution to higher education, on the quality of their professional qualifications, on their working conditions and salaries. The Minister of Education promised an inquiry into their situation.

4.2 Strikes and agreements

On March 13, after 3 weeks of a strike, the **Université Laval** and its sessionals reached agreement on fundamental changes to their contract. Salaries, which had not risen in the 2000 round of negotiations, would go up by 21%. By the end of the new 3-year contract, the rate for a 45-hour course would rise from 5200\$ to 6200\$. Several other demands, all on the joint list of demands advanced by FNEEQ-CSN sessionals, were also granted improved representation of sessionals on committees and boards, better conditions for pre-retirement, and more aid for those teaching large classes. The new contract clarified the status and improved the salaries of the *chargés d'enseignement*, a recently-created category of sessionals, who are guaranteed a full-time teaching load over the year. The Université Laval agreed to stop challenging and rescinding previously granted accreditations to teach specific courses, a practice that threatened job security among sessionals. It agreed to pay the salaries withheld during the 3 weeks of the strike.

At the **Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC)**, the collective agreement was due to end in December 2004. Talks proceeded quickly, reaching agreement on March 17. This was an important agreement. It set a salary increase of 13.5% for sessionals' salaries that became the norm for the other negotiations still under way. The increases varied by category of sessionals, in those universities where sessionals had agreed to salary schedules differentiated by categories, based mainly on seniority. The intent of agreement was adopted on April 13.

Settlements followed in the other universities. On April 3, after several work stoppages and a 2-week strike, sessionals the **Université du Québec**

en Outaouais (UQO) signed an intent of agreement. They wanted and obtained a settlement similar to Chicoutimi's. They obtained it, despite the UQO's difficult financial situation. Travel allowances for sessionals were maintained, an important demand for an outlying university that hires many sessionals living in other cities. All the strike days were paid. On April 4, the members enthusiastically voted in favor of the agreement.

At the **Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT)**, bargaining had languished after auspicious meetings in early March. They resumed several weeks later. An agreement in principle was reached on May 8 that settled several local issues. The university agreed to attribute courses on a yearly basis rather than just for the upcoming term. Salaries would grow 18% over the next 5 years. The rate for a 45-hour course will attain at least 7000\$ in the last year of the new contract.

At the **Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR)**, talks had been going well in April, until the university presented its salary offer. The union sought a flat rate for all sessionals. The university proposed a salary scale that put 90% of the UQAR's sessionals at the lowest category. The union countered with a scale that limited the differential between the highest and the lowest category to 600\$. An agreement in principle was reached on June 11th. It was accepted by members on June 22.

5. **Looking back and looking forward** _____

Looking back over the 2003-2004 round of contract renewals, we consider that the benefits of coordinated bargaining among unions were well worth the very hard work required for successful coordination. Two challenges are particularly demanding: differences in timing and the (inevitably) varying pace of negotiations.

5.1 **Different timetables**

Sessionals in Quebec's universities do not renew their contracts at the same date. Thus, when talks were just beginning at Chicoutimi (UQAC) and Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT), they had already ended at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and had been going on for more than 6 months at the Université Laval, in the Outaouais (UQO) and in Rimouski (UQAR). We had to make special efforts to keep everyone informed of developments along the different timetables. Conference calls were numerous and necessary.

5.2 Different pace of negotiations

Some talks advanced quickly, others more slowly. Several got stuck before moving on again. It was a challenge to plan joint actions that would be relevant to all negotiating teams.

Interestingly, the new provincial government's sharp turn toward conservative social policies helped us in this regard, in what was surely an unintended effect on the government's part. Their policies generated great opposition, particularly from organized labor. Demonstrations, press conferences, 24-hour work stoppages and strikes provided occasions for general mobilization and for sessionals to call attention to their demands and situation. News media covered them well and contributed to a climate favorable to sessionals' demands.

5.3 Coordination produces results

Coordination contributed to the preparation of negotiations at the national and local levels. One advantage of coordinated bargaining is that the gains made by one union can "set the pace" and translate into stronger leverage for those who are still negotiating. Sessionals at the UQAM, the first to settle, obtained the possibility of early retirement. So did the other unions. Chicoutimi's salary gain of 13.5% over 3 years was repeated elsewhere, although distributed differently from year to year.

5.4 Solidarity justified and reinforced

The decision to coordinate local negotiations, and the means created to achieve such coordination, worked wonders for solidarity and cooperation among our unions. Those who had reached agreements with their universities encouraged those who were still at the bargaining table, not least financially. Financial aid from the larger unions allowed the smaller ones to fund 24-hour work stoppages and other pressure tactics. Often, a member would rise during a union meeting to double the aid proposed by their union's executive to sessionals at the other universities.

Coordinated bargaining bound the unions closer together by making people travel. Union presidents traveled to the different universities at strategic moments in the negotiations. They brought with them financial support, encouragement and advice. Conference calls reinforced the effect of their personal appearances.

Coordinated bargaining has shown its worth. In the fall of 2004, we begin to prepare the next round of contract renewals.