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Strategy Stream III : Our Ultimate Vision, the Place of Our Struggle in the Broader Society

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF TEACHERS' STRUGGLES IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

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Abstract :

The Fédération nationale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec (FNEEQ-CSN) represents the vast majority of teachers in institutions of higher education in Québec. This is why the future of the working conditions of teaching staff in universities and post-secondary educational institutions is a crucial issue for us.

We believe that one of the keys to defining a concrete response in terms of strategic orientations is to **link our organizations' specific union struggle to a broader perspective of social struggle**, based on radical democratic aspirations capable of indicating the direction in which we want society to develop.

In this regard, these remarks are designed to demonstrate that **the State's responsibility in education cannot be limited to basic education** at the primary and secondary levels. The choice of a genuinely public sector of higher education is a crucial choice of primary importance, not only because of contemporary technical and economic development but also with a view to democratic prospects of social emancipation.

Therefore, this is concretely how we want to continue the struggle to improve the working conditions of the teaching staff we represent in higher education, through the negotiation of collective agreements on working conditions in teaching that stand in opposition to a narrowly economist, bottom-line logic in education.

**Chairman of the Workshop,
Representants of National Unions,
Dear fellows Participants,**

It is a pleasure for me to present the point of view of FNEEQ Union on this issue. As a host of the last COCAL Conference in Montreal two years ago, we are highly concern with the future of our members.

We have deliberately couched in these terms, *What is the future of teachers' struggles in higher education?*, the question put to this workshop. The original question dealt more specifically with our organization's vision of the future of contingent teachers in universities and our strategy for achieving the fullest possible equity for all teaching staff. We have dealt with some of the more specific aspects of this question in others workshops or discussions. Here we want to focus on the more general issue of our overall vision of the future of the struggle of teachers, even if we will shortly address to the specifics aspects of the question.

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1. Union and social struggle

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To better define our vision of the future of the struggle that lies before us as a union organization, let me go back to the experience of the struggles of the FNEEQ's two main component groups, in the context of their specific battle:

- teachers in CEGEPs, post-secondary institutions characterized by a centralized system of collective bargaining, which are part of the public sector, given their funding and the agencies responsible for their governance and oversight;

- and contingent teachers in universities, characterize by a decentralized system of collective bargaining, which we associate with a private system of institutional governance.

We don't think that the struggles of these two component groups are the only ones that reflect our position here. They are our examples, and obviously the ones we know best. We are convinced that in the various specific struggles waged by the organizations that belong to the COCAL, there are other experiences that reflect this same quest for global emancipation.

2. CEGEPs: public post-secondary institutions

Québec has a network of public post-secondary, pre-university education composed of some fifty institutions that provide more than 150,000 students with programmes of intermediate education between the high-school and university levels. These **CEGEPs** (for "Collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel," or general and vocational colleges), offer programmes leading to the job market or to university studies, without charging tuition; in other words, they are fully funded by government.

Curricula at the secondary and university levels are adjusted accordingly to avoid increasing the total number of years of education. In other words, earning an undergraduate university degree doesn't take a young person in Québec any longer than it does for the same degree in other Canadian provinces or in the United States, despite the lack of institutionalized intermediary studies between high school and university elsewhere. Bachelor studies at the university level are reduced to three years, and the duration of elementary and high-school education adjusted accordingly.

So what is the difference? Well, since there is no tuition for CEGEP studies, it costs a student less to obtain a university degree. As well, this dynamic creates general social pressure to keep down tuition at the university level, since access to higher education is unequivocally recognized as a crucial social choice.

Reactionary social forces in Québec, including those now in power, draw on neo-liberal approaches. They have sparked a vast debate in education: how can Québec's system of education be made more efficient? In other words, how can attacks on public services in education help reduce the size of the State?

The first network targeted for cuts is the post-secondary college system. And the arguments are readily trotted out: apply the North American system, do away with CEGEPs, extend high-school education, create technical institutes that will charge students for training programmes, and finally, add a fourth year of undergraduate university studies that will force students to pay more to get a first university degree.

For more than 35 years, the public CEGEP network has provided a transition from high school to university or the labour market, in a framework of learning associated with higher education. Originally created to speed up the modernization of Québec and help close the gap in levels of education, today CEGEPs have enrolment rates that mean that more than 60% of youth in a given age group have access to higher education. The result is that Québec is one of the best-educated societies in the world, and ranks first in Canada for post-secondary enrolment.

What irritates the promoters of efficiency in education even more is that students in the technical and pre-university sectors attend the same institution and receive the same general education in philosophy and literature, aimed in practice at developing their social consciousness as citizens. This corresponds to a vital function of the educational mission, but one that is far removed from utilitarian objectives that have nothing to do with culture or an intellectual mix and intermingling.

For 35 years, CEGEP teachers have made tremendous efforts to consolidate these institutions and develop the expertise needed to help young people acquire more maturity and succeed in higher education. The battle to develop public institutions has gone hand in hand with the creation of a bona fide teaching profession in post-secondary education.

In this regard, tenure plays a key role in consolidating the involvement of teaching staff and the development of the teaching profession. Although tenure is also being called into question and is under constant attack, and there is an increasing trend towards more contingent teachers, especially in continuing (or adult) education, the foundations of the vast majority of teaching activities in CEGEPs **have been based on public funding and the fact that the institutions' mission had little to do with the profitability of a business venture.** So, because of that, our goal for contingent teachers in those institutions is to obtain fully equity with the tenure. And we succeed already to make sure that non-tenure teacher with a full charge of teaching and part-time teacher got the same working conditions as the confirm tenure teacher. The status of teachers in these institutions is therefore particularly bound up with social choices about education.

Last May, unions affiliated with the FNEEQ mobilized for a centralized demonstration in defence of public colleges. Hundreds of teachers travelled for hours by bus to participate. CEGEP teachers answered the call and mobilized to defend CEGEPs. The battle will continue in the fall, and it will inevitably take on the guise of opposition to neo-liberal policies, with prospects for a social strike in alliance with other sectors of the labour and social movements mobilized against the current government. The issue in education is simple: what's at stake is access to higher education for young people in Québec, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or social origins. This is how CEGEP teachers will defend their working conditions: by taking a stand against neo-liberal policies.

3. For full integration of contingent teachers

The struggle of contingent teachers in Québec universities is discussed at length elsewhere in the report by Marie Blais, who is responsible for the lecturers' sector in the FNEEQ. Spectacular progress in the working conditions of this part of the teaching staff has been made in the past five years. It was not rare for some of these teachers to have their compensation more than double in just a few years as a result of negotiated agreements. More funding for student guidance and supervision has been another remarkable achievement. Why and how have all these gains been made?

There are a number of explanations for the success of the lecturers' struggle. For instance, changes in the organization of work have led universities to recognize the

work done by contingent teachers in universities. But this recognition was only won through concerted mobilization by unions over a number of years. Marie Blais's report discusses the strategy developed by the FNEEQ to take as much advantage as possible of the opening created for lecturers through these developments in the organization of work.

At the heart of this struggle there is the battle for the fullest possible equity, given the work done by contingent teachers in universities. Here we would like to suggest some perspectives on some specific aspects of the question raised by the workshop: full or partial equity? What is our vision of the future for lecturers?

In our opinion, the fullest equity is what does justice to the work done by the teaching staff, in accordance with the role and duties assigned to them. In other words, in a context of recognition, the battle has been to make breakthroughs in establishing procedures for distributing the work that consolidate the teaching team, both by stabilizing the teachers hired and by retaining as many teachers as possible.

However, the issue is no longer quite the same once the gains obtained bring lecturers' working conditions considerably closer to those of all other teachers in society, and in particular the working conditions of CEGEP teachers. We think that a new phase is now beginning, with two crucial issues that will now have to be clarified:

- the issue of bridging procedures from one status to another within the university faculty;
- full integration through the creation of a new status that allows a teacher to move out of contingent job status for good.

If the working conditions of lecturers in universities are now comparable with those of any other teachers in Québec, it is partly because equity remains an utterly legitimate approach in democratic terms, and union action has managed to make the most of that.

However, there are other political factors that explain the gains, including factors related to the work of university teachers: recognition of the work done by lecturers depends on unequivocal support in terms of the resources provided to them to assume their duties and thus help the university fulfil its mission.

Furthermore, these gains, which are so important for teachers, depend also on broadening access to higher education, as public colleges have done. It has to be recognized that heightened requirements in both the job market and the social sphere entail making university more accessible. These were also levers put to good use in the battle for equity.

4. Recognition of the right to education cannot be reduced to primary and secondary education

Even from a neo-liberal perspective, public schools may be justified if they correspond to a utilitarian economic logic, as an essential factor contributing to social reproduction. Thus, we are sometimes told that neo-liberal policies don't call into question primary and secondary education. In this regard, it is worth quoting Milton Friedman, well-

known if not necessarily well-liked in the field of economics, especially here in Chicago:

It can be presumed that social gains are greater at the more basic levels of education, where there is virtual unanimity about content, and that they decline steadily at higher levels of education.

Our re-translation from a French translation: Milton Friedman, *Capitalisme et liberté*, Paris, Laffont, 1962

Friedman's approach here is based on the idea that individual gain is greater at higher levels of education, while gains for society are more obvious at lower levels, which is why it is in society's interest to separate higher education from basic education and thus limit the public system to basic education.

This approach must be challenged. Besides not offering any guarantee that public services at the primary and secondary levels will not come under attack, as is now happening in UK, this conception stems from an utter disregard for the need for greater access to higher education in knowledge-based societies like advanced capitalist economies.

The drive to weaken public services everywhere is a major part of the neo-liberal offensive to roll back the right to education, as François Cyr showed in his remarks yesterday in the debate on the international context. And there are two sectors in education that are especially vulnerable to these attacks: the vocational sector, and the sector of higher education, which also includes a significant vocational component.

Thus, the struggle for better working conditions for teachers in both universities and post-secondary colleges is intimately related to the battle for recognition of the right to education beyond basic education. Recognition of the value of the work of teaching is thus a crucial condition for strengthening the right to education for all.

Thank you for listening.

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