

VP Negotiations
Annual Report
April 12, 2005

When I wrote my report last year we had been talking with the Employer at the common table for just under a month and were hoping to have the protocol agreement very soon, so that we would be able to start bargaining and have an agreement by the late fall. The protocol agreement is the document that contains the rules and topics for bargaining and the topics. This agreement usually takes less than a day to negotiate. We finally got one at the end of May, which is about eight weeks after discussions started. Negotiations did start in June and proceeded with the same amazing speed.

Today, as I write this, we have almost finished both common and local negotiations. Although we have ratified most of our provincial agreement and all of our local agreement we still have to decide on a money issue. Do we take a 2% stipend from benefits already in our agreement or not? We will have an agreement that the provincial government helped us get and it will be completed before the provincial election. So for those who asked; yes, I think that the election did have an effect on the outcome of our negotiations.

Why did negotiations take so long? There may be several reasons. We had several unions participating in common table bargaining and we had a rather large package that consisted of the many items that each of these unions saw as a priority issues. Our aim was to “level up” working conditions. The Employer took time to respond to some of our proposals and outright refused to talk about others before we asked to exchange a settlement package. We dropped many of our items and the Employer kept theirs. Perhaps the number of items added to the length of negotiations but I think not. It was the length of time it took the Employer to get back to us.

It became apparent very early on that just as we wanted to level up our working conditions the Employer wanted to extend management rights. This was demonstrated in our discussions about regularization at NVIT, education technology, international education, personal harassment language, and job security.

There has been speculation about whether or not this need for control came as a directive from government. I personally do not think so. However, I think that the employers saw this as time that government would be support a move towards more management rights.

Another thing that slowed the process down was that although fourteen FPSE and seven BCGEU locals at the common table, there were only eight employers at the common table. Their spokespeople continually kept reminding us that they were only speaking for eight and could not tie the other employers to their decisions. However, whenever there was talk of anything that would expand management rights there was no mention of the employers who were not at the table.

Common table negotiations started to move quickly when two unions whose employers were not at the table took strike votes and one served strike notice. The issue that precipitated the strike vote was employer demands for changes in professional development and regularization. That union was at an institution in the constituency of the Minister of Labour who is hoping to get re-elected. So the Deputy Ministers of Labour and Advanced Education were sent to get a settlement for us. They were to get all the employers to come to the table and finish bargaining. They did get the employers to agree to remove concessions and to have the employers who were not at the common table to adopt the common settlement.

The government people were able to make money decisions. On at least two occasions in the fall the Minister of Finance and the Premier stated that all public sector settlements would be 0,0, and X in year 3. The math people on our bargaining team do not like the term "X" and wanted a real number. So as a result we were able to get a commitment of 1.5% in year 3. The deputy from finance was able to find 0.6% to be added to an employer controlled PD fund.

The deputy from finance also told us of other public sector agreements where money could be transferred from one part of the existing collective agreement to cash in hand. We did vote to look at this option. I did vote to look at that option as I thought that it would give money for everyone. However, as I was raising my hand I was looking through our local agreement and could not see where there was anything that could be used to find 2%. Now after looking at the collective agreement I am still of that opinion. There is also the philosophical question of taking a hard earned benefit from one member to give money to another. At both the bargaining committee and the executive level I voted against the stipend option.

When the bargaining committee was discussing our monetary demands I spoke and voted against asking for money. I did this because the SCFA members said that a pay increase was of low priority in a college where there were budget and enrollment problems.

That is a very brief summary of what happened at the common table. There were a lot of similarities at our local table. We had a difficult time getting a protocol agreement; the employer wanted some concessions, although there was not as many, nor were they as severe as those tabled at other small colleges but there they were tabled. Our employer wanted more control of how we do our work.

After the government facilitator ordered that we ratify both the common and local agreements by April 1 our employer moved quickly to complete negotiations. We then agreed to essentially "roll over" the old agreement, incorporate the few things that we had agreed to in our four days in December and February, and tidy up some language. They removed the items that we considered concessionary, we did agree to a list of things that the Labour Management Relations Committee will discuss in the future, and we signed a tentative agreement on March 30th in time for a March 31 ratification vote. There was only one vote against ratification.

Two things happened at our local table that made me uncomfortable. In the rush to “tidy up” some language we almost lost the ability to come back to a job after coming off Long Term Disability. This was deemed to be an oversight by our employer but we did have to ask to have it put back in.

In our local protocol agreement we had the ability to get full financial disclosure of items that might affect our members during the life of the agreement. With the rush to do a roll over agreement monetary issues did not come up for discussion. I wonder if this was done so that we would not be alerted to the impending layoffs. We will never know.

Now all that we have left to do is vote on the stipend option and possibly negotiate it.

We will have a collective agreement in place by May 16th, before the election.

In closing I would like to thank the hard working and thoughtful bargaining team of Judy Deon, Sally Glock, Janet Mayr, Su Meredith, and Paris Voykin. I hope that these people will be able to serve in 2007. They will have both the history and experience needed for what could be another difficult round of bargaining. Our executive also deserves a big vote of thanks for their encouragement and sage advice. And last but not least thank you to the members for their patience with the long periods of little information followed by the need to make quick decisions.

Respectfully submitted,
Bev Onischak