

Speaking Notes for Cindy Oliver
FPSE Bargaining Conference
March 3-4, 2006-03-02

Good evening everyone. We have a full agenda for you tonight.

If you have been reading the newspapers lately or followed it in the electronic media, you'll know that collective bargaining in the provincial public sector has moved into high gear. One of the main drivers in that activity has been Finance Minister Carol Taylor's push to get settlements across all sectors in which the provincial government provides bargaining mandates.

Our panel tonight is going to give you some insights as to how various unions, as well as the broader labour movement, are working to achieve new collective agreements in their sectors. Despite the Finance Minister's talk about big surpluses, incentives, bonuses and 'conversation, not confrontation', bargaining with the Campbell government is still an uphill battle and one in which unions need to work closely with one another.

Because our agreements—for the most part—don't expire until 2007, we need to use this time to get ourselves positioned to achieve the best possible settlements that we can next year.

I want to talk very specifically about what I think needs to be included in that approach because although our end points are collective agreements, our strategy for getting those agreements has to be much wider than just bargaining. When we face administrators across the bargaining table, we need to not only have our demands and bargaining strategy well mapped out, we need to have built the case in the community, within the provincial government and within our allies in the broader labour movement, for the kind of public post-secondary education system that:

- **isn't** starved for proper funding,
- **isn't** undermined by constant privatization and
- **is** accessible to every student who wants to expand their learning and career options with post-secondary education.

What I'm suggesting is a bargaining strategy that's built on two tracks; one that recognizes the need to coordinate how we bargain as locals and one that builds the public support for much-needed improvements in our public post-secondary system.

We have already started work on both fronts, but what I'm hoping to hear from this conference are some ideas for how we can improve those efforts.

For example, we have put a lot of work into assessing how we can improve bargaining coordination amongst our locals. It isn't an easy assignment because there are

inevitable trade-offs on the road to strengthening coordinated bargaining. We have to respect/protect local autonomy, but that local autonomy has to also acknowledge/recognize the benefits of what I would call a common agreement format. Employers want us to be divided amongst ourselves and we have to work just that much harder to make sure that we don't create those divisions for employers to exploit and use against us.

We have prepared a report on 2004 bargaining and hopefully that report and tomorrow's debate can help move us closer to an internal bargaining strategy that gets better results for every local in our next round of bargaining.

We also need to think about how we force more employers to a common bargaining table. We know that the provincial government has an interest in common table bargaining. They went so far as to pass legislation to set up an accredited employer association for bargaining. But they have never taken the next step of telling post-secondary employers to use that mechanism. Instead, they have allowed those employers to waste money, time and effort on bargaining away from a common table. We can't let that situation go unchecked and we need to map out a strategy for ensuring that common table bargaining works for us in 2007, and for those locals that choose to come to the table.

Building the case for better funding for the public post-secondary system has been an on-going project for FPSE, but we have started to press that case in new ways over the last several months. Our efforts have been made somewhat easier by the fact that the provincial government is not 'crying poverty'. Far from it, there is a lot of money in the provincial treasury these days and we are making every effort to remind the Premier and everyone connected to the post-secondary system that it takes better funding and an overhaul of existing policies to even come close to achieving the Premier's goal of "the best educated and most literate" in Canada.

We have been making the case that better funding for public post-secondary education is part of a smart, sensible economic strategy. For those of you who were at our Spring Conference a couple of weeks ago you will remember Seth Klein's comments about how investing in post-secondary education pays real dividends to the public treasury in the form of higher future incomes for individuals.

Investing in post-secondary education is also good social policy. We know that the gender wage gap narrows as women advance in post-secondary education and training. If we want to create real equality, post-secondary education is a critical building block.

We also believe that better funding for public post-secondary education will help BC deal with a very serious economic problem—its looming skills shortage. Every occupation group—white collar or blue—will experience a growing skills shortage over the next five to seven years and making post-secondary education more accessible and affordable is the very best way to deal with that problem.

The case we are making for the public post-secondary system is not one in which we simply talk to the converted. We are making a very deliberate effort to involve more people from different perspectives in a public debate about how we strengthen the capacity of our public post-secondary system to meet the needs of every British Columbian.

With the help of the BC Federation of Labour we have organized a series of public forums on BC's looming skills shortage and the role that the public post-secondary system can play in addressing that shortage. We have included the President of the BC Chamber of Commerce in those forum panels because the employer community has to be part of this solution just as much as we have to be. The first one was held in Kamloops and was a real success. More are scheduled. We have one organized for Prince George on March 9th, another in Nanaimo on March 29th.

We have also been making the case for specific policy changes, especially in areas like developmental education. Here again, the emphasis is on pressing for changes that will strengthen access. Why? Because four years of bad policy and chronic under-funding have severely eroded access and our system can't reach its full potential if that access isn't there.

I just want to conclude by saying that the problems we face here in BC in terms of improving the funding of public post-secondary education are alive and well in other provinces as well. Last week I was invited to attend a meeting in Ottawa of all provincial governments to discuss the funding problems facing the public post-secondary education system. The bad news? The public post-secondary system across Canada has fallen behind over the last fifteen years and it needs major investments—measured in the billions—to improve access and affordability. The good news? Provincial Premiers across Canada recognize what BC Liberals seem hard pressed to acknowledge; the answer to our problem lies in adding capacity to the public system, not making room for private, for-profit training. (it was interesting to note that both Campbell and Klein were absent from the summit)

I was encouraged by those comments because it confirms that we are on the right track. Strengthening public post-secondary education with more funding and better access are not only good public investments, they are sensible ways to make post-secondary education work for everyone. And by coordinating our advocacy for post-secondary education with our objectives at the bargaining table, our members and our students will gain the most.

I want to now shift the focus a bit and move into tonight's panel discussion. We have asked three representatives from various unions as well as the BC Federation of Labour to talk about how they are approaching public sector bargaining with the provincial government. We have left time on the agenda for lots of questions and dialogue with the panel.