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**“Ultimately, we will achieve
better collective agreements.”
– Stephanie Blake**

by Katie FitzRandolph

The Network for Better Contracts is spreading its roots

OPSEU’s April Convention endorsed a new policy to improve support for the union’s bargaining teams and bargaining goals.

A policy is good, but policies alone don’t make change. It takes action, commitment and leadership to move policies off paper and into reality.

President Leah Casselman outlined the moves started over the summer.

Local presidents will be surveyed in early fall on their needs, regional needs, and the support they need from regional offices.

Ministry, Divisional and Sector teams will be asked how the union can assist bargaining and meet sectoral needs.

Researchers will pull together details on all contracts, expiry dates, bargaining units and service areas.

A new “Intranet” will allow internal strategic discussion on bargaining.

OPSEU’s Executive Board approved this foundation for the Network for Better Contracts. Another move will realign staff who work in negotiations, grievances and job security for better communication along sectoral, divisional and ministry lines. Bargaining will reflect grievance history and build on work at labour-management committees.

Training for staff and members will focus on stronger collective bargaining.

Region 5 Executive Board Member Stephanie Blake has served on two Network for Better Contract committees. “I think people who are heading into bargaining will be the first to see the benefit. The others will see it further along. Ultimately, we will achieve better collective agreements.”

Pat Schillemore is president of Local 365 and chair of the University Sector. Early discussions about the new network arose at the Broader Public Service conference last fall. “Sector leaders looked at how we do things and how we bargain strong collective agreements.”

In January, sector executives looked two years ahead. Their plans include training for bargaining teams, communication within sectors, finding the best contract language and coordinated bargaining.

“I think it will standardize our collective agreements and raise standards,” said Pat. “We’ll take the best language as the bottom line and build stronger agreements from that.”

“Training for bargaining teams will ensure they don’t spent their first sessions learning the process. If training happens before demand setting, team members can lead in developing priority demands, achievable demands and in explaining issues. Some issues involve long-term gains, and people naturally think of what is most immediately important to them, Pat said.

Stephanie says this training will help teams bargain good agreements.

The Network for Better Contracts puts sharper focus on the collective bargaining cycle, rather than the political cycles around union conventions and local elections.

Her first bargaining experience was with the late senior negotiator André Bekerman, who made a practice of training the teams he worked with. “We were fortunate because we had André.”

Pat thinks the new Network will build solidarity. “Coordinated bargaining will show members and locals they aren’t alone and that there are others dealing with the same issues. It will help to establish pride in the union and I think that’s important.

“When you achieve something because several locals are working on the same issues, people will feel that they are part of the broader movement.”

Pat stressed communication – using technology to distribute information and get feedback. Her local newsletter comes out monthly, supplementing regular meetings and electronic communication.

“We don’t go to the table for another year, but we are starting to build now. Our newsletter in June talked about labour relations problems and the potential for that having an impact on our income next summer. We’re not saying we will be on strike in a year, but we’re starting to prepare people.”

Stephanie agrees: “I can give one clear example. When we bargained last time, management wanted to bring in merit pay, as it had with faculty and CUPE. We went into demand setting with emails and leaflets and rallies around the issue and members voted unanimously against any form of merit pay. Management never even put it on the table. Our communication and mobilization worked.”

Her local continues to mobilize around bargaining. “In the past, the team tried to do it all. Now we have a group of members who are not on the team who will be in charge of communication, mobilizing, and strike preparation. If necessary, they would form the strike committee.

The Network for Better Contracts puts sharper focus on the collective bargaining



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For Pat, it’s a question of thinking more strategically. “It could be considered more work if you haven’t taken ownership in collective bargaining before, but it’s really more a question of using our energies in a different way. Crisis management is a high adrenaline way of operating, or you can plan ahead and control your response and have a better effect.

“Management is probably thinking it’s about time we caught on.”

Region 3 Executive Board Member Pauline Tapping points out that the OPS contract is only one of more than 400 OPSEU collective agreements. For her, the new network “shares

things that have worked in other sectors and other bargaining units. We build on each others’ strengths and successes.”

Terry Stinson of Local 436, chair of the 1999 OPS bargaining team, agrees that the real route to any trade union is bargaining collective agreements for members and enforcing them. “And you have to do both to keep your members happy.”

“I hope this initiative will educate delegates to demand setting that they have a job to do – at that meeting, and continuing until the new collective agreement is in place. The job is just about anything: local organizer, local leader, communications steward, strike preparation and strike organization.” ▲