

HISTORY OF STUDENT UNIONISM

This paper is a brief review of student organization in Canada. It contains an overview of certain trends and patterns that have emerged, then traces the history of the successive organizations and ends by leading into the NUS/UNE orientation paper. The perspective of the paper is almost exclusively national, as opposed to provincial, because the major source of material was the CUS archives and because until the 1960's provincial organizations were unknown.

Overview

Although Canadian students had a national organization from 1926, their organization has proven unable, so far, to achieve the strength and stability shown by other national student organizations, many of them younger. Certain problems and trends have been evident over the past 49 years. These include difficulty of administration, regional rivalries, fluctuating membership and a basic enthusiasm for co-operation.

The very size of Canada hinders the communications and inter-institutional relations that are necessary to build the strong sense of common action that many look for in a national organization. It often seems that the only two alternatives are a highly centralized operation which is remote from its members, or one which is so decentralized that efficient administration and decision-making is impossible.

Since the mid 1950's regional differences and rivalries have been a noticeable source of friction. Students have sometimes been unwilling to recognize and allow for regional differences in tactics and attitudes, even when there was agreement on policy and goals. Differences over policy have been obscured by the preoccupation with regionalism. In addition there has been the sentiment that a national organization must directly represent a large majority of post-secondary students or else have no credibility. This sentiment goes beyond the practical problems of low revenue that accompany a smaller membership. The insistence upon a constantly large membership led to virtual panic when, in any one year, several members left the national organization - regardless of their reasons for doing so.

Indeed, one disturbingly constant pattern is the rise and fall of members' interest and actual membership. At three times in the past 49 years most student governments have watched serious problems develop in the national organization. Each time the reaction of many was to withdraw until the organization improved, or to conclude that any national organization was not worth the effort. Each time some members chose to analyze the problems and apply additional resources to the solution. Twice this succeeded - unity was restored and with a new enthusiasm the organization prospered. In 1968-69

the rebuilding effort came too late, and it faced the new element of mass media coverage of the difficulties. No cure for fluctuating membership has been suggested, and if it continues Canada's national student organization may always be relatively weak in comparison to others.

Another quality of national student organizations has been their sponsorship of co-operation within the post-secondary education community. The most successful of these efforts led to the creation of Canadian University Press, a co-operative of student newspapers that was founded on the initiative of student governments and funded by the national student organization for several years. Co-ordination of athletics, co-operation among the various groups of professional students and competition in sports and debating have all received strong and often essential support from the national student organization. A similar effort was sponsorship, in the late 1950's and the 1960's, of eleven national seminars on a variety of issues which were of growing importance in post-secondary education.

#### National Federation of Canadian University Students (NFCUS)

Canadian student governments first joined together formally in December, 1926, at a Montreal conference which founded NFCUS. Within a few years most student governments had joined.

NFCUS's founders had been inspired by the British National Union of Students, and the original activities included sponsorship of intercollegiate debating and European travel along lines developed by NUS-UK. Another priority, gaining national student discounts, had success in the rail and sporting goods industries. Much of the early enthusiasm was generated by an inter-regional student exchange scholarship programme. NFCUS convinced the universities to participate and although only a few scholarships were available each year the programme was viewed as a symbol of the new co-operation and wider horizons of Canadian students.

The early growth of NFCUS was cut off by the Depression. Low enrolment meant financial difficulty for most student governments, and part of their response was to reduce the NFCUS levy and hold national conferences biannually rather than annually. Some continuity was provided by having the same person serve as National Secretary-Treasurer from 1929 to 1939. However, the low income and infrequent meetings led to losses in experience and continuity of office. Work begun in the late 1920's continued but little else was started. NFCUS came to be regarded as a purchased service rather than a meeting ground for Canadian students.

The ill effects of the organizations slowdown and limited role were most obvious when another national organization, the Canadian Student Assembly (CSA), was created in December, 1937. Its purpose was to provide a forum where university students discussed international and national issues, reaching decisions on a student position. There was considerable debate as to which organization should represent Canadian students. The issue was settled when the CSA fell apart in the face of accusations that it was anti-war and engaged in partisan politics. One result was that NFCUS moved to fill the need for some exchange of ideas at the national

level.

During World War II most NFCUS activity ceased, and it was the task of 1944 and 1945 conferences to renew consciousness of the Federation. A cross-country tour by the 1946-47 President greatly helped the rebuilding. He both convinced most student unions to resume active membership and laid the foundation for NFCUS's first serious involvement with the international student movement. For the most part the organization was content to continue in its pre-war path, although there was some agitation for reduction of the financial barriers to post-secondary education.

A permanent office in Ottawa was established in 1951, and this served to increase the internal continuity of NFCUS. However, the more active role and increased political involvement caused strains among the members that had not previously existed. As the veterans graduated enrolment decreased, causing a decrease in NFCUS income. It was impossible to meet all of the demands upon the organization, and some of the members began to join and leave with alarming regularity. The division was most often between larger and smaller members; although there were also differences over policy (eg. scholarships vs. loans as the form of government assistance to students). The low point was 1956, when NFCUS leaders considered dissolving the Federation because it no longer represented at least half of the university students.

The response to the fluctuating membership was a more ambitious NFCUS programme, stressing national unity and the need for an adequate national student aid plan. NFCUS participated in the Canadian Education Conferences, and interest in the Federation increased with the general growth of concern about education. The period from 1958 to 1962 was untroubled and fairly productive. NFCUS directly represented up to 80% of the university students. Its members were pleased with the work of the executive and staff. The public was receptive to students' desire for better assistance.

#### Canadian Union of Students/Union canadienne des étudiants (CUS/UCE)

New problems arose in 1963 when NFCUS failed to find a structure and political stance that satisfied all members. Some wished NFCUS to continue as largely a service organization that lobbied for students but did not become involved in the wider issues or social analysis. Others, especially the Québécois, saw students as members of the working class who should be paid for their contribution and who should take part in working class struggles at home and abroad. All members agreed that the differences between the English and French speaking nations of Canada should be recognized when NFCUS dealt with educational issues and elected its officers, plus in amending its constitution. Another point of consensus was changing the name to Canadian Union of Students in recognition of NFCUS's elitist base and the expected growth of non-university post-secondary education. The break came when in executive elections the service oriented English speaking members prevailed over the politicized members (mostly French speaking, but including a significant English speaking group.)

That decision and the growing sense of independence in Québec led quickly to the establishment in 1964 of l'Union générale des étudiants du Québec (UGEQ). By 1966 both the French and English CUS/UCE members from Québec had joined UGEQ. However, the federal government's failure to begin making large grants to education meant that both organizations took the political path from 1964. CUS/UCE concentrated almost exclusively on education, campaigning for lower financial and social barriers to post-secondary education, universal accessibility to education and open decision-making within the educational institutions. Education was seen as part of the economic and social structure, a part which should be consciously involved in changing that structure and which should realize that it reflects the larger structure's values. CUS/UCE initiated and administered a comprehensive Means Survey which provided much of the data regarding barriers to post-secondary education. CUS/UCE also worked in associated areas of direct effect upon students such as housing and travel.

In 1966 and 1967 opposition within CUS/UCE grew as a result of the policy regarding, and fostering of on-campus debate about, national and international issues which had no direct or obvious effect upon students. Simultaneously CUS/UCE emphasized more than ever the need for local work around the issues and policies with which it was involved. The regional conferences of CUS/UCE were abolished and the role of CUS/UCE staff was expanded to include field work (advising and assisting the member unions during one week visits) as well as the established work in research, communications, lobbying and travel. In most predominantly English speaking provinces the student unions formed independent associations to discuss provincial issues or the provincial aspect of issues and to decide policies. Unlike CUS/UCE these organizations had no per capita fee and staff. There was apprehension that they would appear to some as a substitute for CUS/UCE, or as a first level of external activity, rather than a means of co-ordinating local work on the issues and policies important to Canadian students.

In 1968 CUS/UCE continued to develop policy on education, Canadian society and international affairs based upon a radical analysis. It also endorsed confrontation as a politicizing technique, including confrontation between CUS/UCE and its members. The fieldworking system was strengthened, but poor communications with student unions and individual students was still a problem. The mass media portrayed CUS/UCE as a violent organization, and CUS/UCE leaders tried to convince students of the value of confrontation and involvement in "non-student" issues rather than sell the organization as a source of services (which it still was) and a vehicle for the exchange of ideas among students. The result was that 30 campus referenda on CUS/UCE membership were held, with 18 deciding against.

By the summer of 1969 a rebuilding effort had begun, founded on rejection of unrealistic rhetoric and willingness to accommodate most student viewpoints in deciding CUS/UCE policy. Before the change could have much effect the 1968 image resulted in several more referenda losses, cutting the membership to 13 student unions with about 35,000 members in all. CUS/UCE ceased operations

in November, 1969. UGEQ had wound up in 1968 when faced with similar problems and such fragmentation of the politicized students that even many local student unions were rejected and wound up. Only the travel departments of the two organizations survived, and they have continued as separate organizations although without the larger organization's support they are weak and have little impact at the campus level.

National Union of Students/Union nationale des étudiants (NUS/UNE)

From 1969 to 1971 several student conferences found that the CUS/UCE problems had so frightened student leaders that very few were willing to start building a replacement. Provincial and regional organizations - usually little more than voluntary organizations - rose and fell. Sometimes they met with success, but few had more than one satisfactory year while several lasted for only a few months.

The atmosphere began to change in 1972. Various provinces were reviewing post-secondary education; the Fiscal Arrangements Act negotiations raised the possibility of greatly increased tuition; most students realized for the first time the problems of graduating with a large debt already incurred. An effort was made to renew the provincial organizations, with success in British Columbia and Ontario. Once again most student governments expressed approval for the concept of a national organization.