

NUS/UNE ORIENTATION PAPER: MAY CONFERENCE 1975

In the summer of 1969 the CUS President stated that "anyone who supposes that we can continue to play political games with national unionism is clearly out of touch with existing realities. If CUS does not win a large number of referendums in the early fall then we will not only be politically impotent but financially bankrupt ...

No doubt in 2 or 3 years a National Union will reemerge but student unionism will have suffered a setback. In the interim students' councils will find that the circulation of ideas has slowed down, that there is no attempt to articulate national policy and that when the crunch comes they are on their own."

CUS had made too many mistakes to survive, but Martin Loney's prediction of a new national union was fulfilled. The crunch was coming in 1972 -- the Fiscal Arrangements Act expiring and governments suggesting that tuition be tripled. Most student governments were looking for friends and assistance, sparking a resurgence of provincial unions. (Only O.F.S. survived.)

Simultaneously the University of Windsor Students' Council led the effort to form a new national union. In May 1972 a national conference in Windsor gave tentative approval, outlined proposals for the union's structure and chose a steering committee to prepare for the founding conference.

Fifty student governments sent representatives to the November 1972 founding conference in Ottawa. The conference divided over an implementation issue -- Atlantic and Quebec delegates walked out because NUS/UNE could not be a federation of regional unions. The majority of delegates (Ontario and the West) established the present structure.

The first Central Committee was an extension of the original steering committee, and it spent five months publicizing NUS/UNE and soliciting members. The only income was donations and subsidies from student organizations.

That committee's work led to the first annual general meeting, held in Halifax. Negotiations by the Central Committee had made the thirty cent fee a fait accompli, and the Halifax meeting struck that fee although it was clearly too low. At the close of the Halifax meeting, there were twenty four members.

At this and the next conference (Edmonton, November 1973), the conference participants specified the areas of interest with which NUS/UNE should concern itself. The four areas developed were: financing of post-secondary education; housing; employment and the status of women students.

The membership fee provided an operating budget of approximately \$35,000 which facilitated the establishment of a national office. Two staff members were hired to co-ordinate the work done by volunteers across the country and improve the communications network within the organization, with other campuses and

outside groups. The office staff also began to make initial contacts with various federal and provincial government officials to prepare the way for the NUS/UNE lobby programmes.

In 1973-74, NUS/UNE began its lobby programmes which are now beginning to show results. The federal government was asked to do research on student aid programmes and prepare a long-term policy on it. At the same time, they were approached with some of NUS/UNE's short-term goals requesting that student union fees and educational expenses be considered tax deductible items. Since then, there has been a more concentrated lobby campaign on student aid issues as defined at the October conference of 1974. (At the same time, it was decided to go for a \$1.00 fee per capita to make this campaign possible.)

Although the short-term goals have not yet been implemented, the federal government is conducting a survey of the socio-economic characteristics of students for which NUS/UNE assisted in developing the questionnaire. The data from this survey will be used to determine students' needs in the government's reviews of student aid.

NUS/UNE has in its first two years experienced some difficulties, true to Martin Loney's prediction in 1969. The reasons for this are complex and sundry -- but suffice it to say that the development of a national union of students requires time in order to obtain the necessary experience and support to deal constructively with the many issues facing students.

Since October 1974, the concentration on student aid has provided the first consolidated campaign and concrete demonstration since 1968 of the unique value of a national student organization. The initial decisions on local campuses about the fee increase have so far been favourable, and there are signs that once again a large number of student governments are considering membership in NUS/UNE. It is hoped that having faltered once, the national union will now be conscious of its internal weaknesses and avoid them, so that ground lost in the last eight years can be slowly regained.

D. O'Connor
B. Buckingham
H. Creswick.