Highlights from the History of the Canadian Union of Public Employees[1]

For Pat Lenihan, giving birth to CUPE 25 years ago was a lot like helping a large, full-term infant separate from its mother.

“I believed all my life in unity—the unity of the labour movement . . . pushing for a merger of the two unions in the public employee field,” Lenihan said.

Like many of Canada’s early unionists, Lenihan believed in the goal of One Big Union—a concept that was popularized on this continent after World War I by the Industrial Workers of the World (popularly known as the Wobblies).

An Irish immigrant to North America in 1922, Lenihan became a member of the Wobblies, riding the rails and looking for work in the western United States and Canada.

It was a heady time for an idealistic young man: singing workers’ songs and putting his back into whatever jobs came his way. Lenihan called hoboes his friends and mingled with thousands of men on the move as the 1920s turned into the Dirty Thirties.

During the 1930s Lenihan worked as a union organizer in Alberta. Timid at first, he soon became a fiery speaker whose booming voice could hold the attention of large crowds, without benefit of a microphone. Having settled in Calgary, Lenihan got a job with the City of Calgary and was even elected to city council.

A National Union, From Sea to Sea

By the late 1940s, Lenihan’s vision turned to the formation of a national union to represent civic employees from sea to sea. As president of Local 37 of the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) representing Calgary’s outside workers, he approached other civic employees’ representatives at the 1952 convention of the TLC (a predecessor of the Canadian Labour Congress) with his idea. At the time, no national union for public employees existed within the TLC. The practice was for individual locals to receive their charters directly from the central labour organization.

The TLC’s executive liked Lenihan’s idea. “They said, if we could get support from locals representing at least 17,000 TLC members, we could have our own organization with the right to charter locals.”

By the time the 1953 TLC convention rolled around, Lenihan had the support of 22,000 civic and hospital workers from the Maritimes to B.C. They called the fledgling union the Canadian Federation of Civic Employees and, according to Lenihan, “we went into business and set a per capita tax of five cents for every member.”

In 1955, at its founding convention in Windsor, the union’s name was officially changed to the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). Garnet Shire, president of Local 79 in Toronto, was elected president and Lenihan was chosen first vice-president. Bob Rintoul, a former member of the transit section of Calgary’s Local 37, was appointed

[1] This document was produced by the CUPE Public Relations Department in 1988 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the foundation of CUPE. It was corrected for formatting and character errors in 2026.

national director of the union, whose national headquarters were to be located in Ottawa.

A year later, a momentous event occurred in Canadian labour history. The country's two labour congresses, the TLC and the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), merged to form the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC).

In 1956, changes were also afoot at NUPE. Shire had to resign for health reasons and Lenihan was acclaimed NUPE president.

With the formation of the CLC and the spirit of unity the merger generated, it was apparent that NUPE and another public employee union, the National Union of Public Service Employees (formerly affiliated with the now-defunct Canadian Congress of Labour), were in direct competition for the hearts and minds of public sector workers. Lenihan's dream, now, was to arrange a merger between NUPE and NUPSE, to create in Canada's public sector something that resembled the One Big Union of the Wobblies.

With only 10,000 members at the time of the CLC merger, NUPSE was smaller than NUPE. But it had a longer history. NUPSE was founded at a 1952 convention in Sudbury by civic employees and hydro workers from Toronto, Sudbury, London, Sault Ste. Marie and St. Catharines. They had decided to create a public employees' union within the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), rather than remain independently chartered locals of the umbrella organization.

Four years after its formation, with head offices in Toronto, NUPSE had expanded into the hospital and board of education sectors in Ontario. It had moved into Manitoba, where it wooed the large Winnipeg Federation of Civic Employees (now Local 500) into affiliating.

Having also organized locals in northern Quebec, NUPSE was proud to call itself a national union. Its national director, Stan Little, was a dynamic organizer and an effective administrator with roots in Toronto's needle trade unions and the York Township Hydro Workers' Union.

In Canada's post-World War II economic boom, NUPSE knew the stage was set for either a fierce competition with NUPE, or for the two unions to join in forging one strong, progressive organization for public employees.

In April 1956, just before the CLC's founding convention, Lenihan and some of NUPSE's officials agreed to approach the new CLC with the idea of forming one big union for public sector workers in Canada. To everyone's delight, the CLC agreed. A merger committee of the two unions was struck. It met for the first time on July 18, 1956.

The Birth of CUPE

Seven years later, after complex and difficult merger negotiations, NUPE and NUPSE members gathered in Winnipeg, on Sept. 24, 1963, to launch the Canadian Union of Public Employees. Altogether, 78,317 members from 483 locals were represented by the new union. NUPE brought about 50,000 members to CUPE, while NUPSE members accounted for nearly 30,000.

With 30 years' experience in the union movement, Stan Little became CUPE's first president. Bob Rintoul, formerly the national director of NUPE, was elected CUPE's first secretary-treasurer. It was decided the new union's headquarters would be in Ottawa.

In a telegram of congratulations, the United Steelworkers of America told the newly-elected executive: "CUPE has a big and challenging task—to extend the concept of unionism and the benefits of collective bargaining to all public employees. Even if that means they outstrip us some day as Canada's largest union, we wish them well."

On its birthday, CUPE was already the second largest union in the CLC and the largest Canadian union affiliated with the Congress.

At its founding convention, CUPE delegates passed resolutions condemning contracting-out and work for relief payments. The membership supported unemployment insurance, portable pensions, the right to strike, and the New Democratic Party.

And what happened to Pat Lenihan? After his one-year term as president of NUPE, he became one of NUPE's and then one of CUPE's first organizers and national representatives in Western Canada, with a "territory" that would horrify even the hardest-working CUPE rep today: Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta! Until 1969, he was Western regional director of CUPE. He also served many years as an Alberta Federation of Labour vice-president. He died in Calgary in 1971 at age 78.

A Child of the Sixties

Conceived in the 1950s, CUPE was the offspring of North America's baby boom era. But by the time it was old enough to walk and talk, the union was a child of the '60s.

CUPE was as rambunctious as all the other new kids on the block. In its first year of operation, CUPE chartered 39 new locals and increased its membership by eight percent.

"As we go into the second year of CUPE's existence, what are the main problems we face?" Stan Little asked. "I think it's plain that our major task will be more organizing. This is important because unorganized public employees represent a danger to the standards of those already organized."

By the end of the decade, no one doubted CUPE's magnetism. In December 1969, the union's membership stood at 130,000, almost double what it had been at the founding convention six years earlier. The fastest growing union in Canada was flourishing in the hospital sector, as well as expanding its base of support among civic and hydro workers.

One of CUPE's earliest and most important organizing victories came in 1966 when the union won the right to represent 9,000 Hydro workers in Quebec. Another was the affiliation of CBC employees in 1967.

Early in the 1960s, Quebec's energy minister, René Lévesque, nationalized privately-owned power companies. Employees of the new public utility, called Hydro-Québec, were ripe for organizing. By October 1964, CUPE and Quebec's Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) were locked in an organizing battle. CUPE deployed six full-time organizers across the province, in addition to regular field staff, in a bid to sign up as many Hydro employees as possible.

A year after CUPE was certified to represent the office, trades and technical staff at Quebec Hydro, the huge local went on strike for better working conditions, higher salaries and province-wide parity for office and technical employees. Beginning in June 1967, six weeks of rotating strikes across the province kept management personnel rushing to maintain services. The public was not inconvenienced at all. In addition to winning the strike, the workers won the admiration of unionists across the country for using rotating strikes—a strategy that had hitherto been virtually unknown outside Quebec.

In January 1966, the former president of NUPE, Bill Buss, who had held the position of director of organizing since CUPE's formation, died suddenly. He was succeeded by John "Lofty" MacMillan, a former New Brunswick police officer who would help build CUPE's membership substantially in the years to come.

Three months later, more staff changes were afoot. At the March meeting of the National Executive Board, Grace Hartman, former president of Local 373, City of North York, and one of CUPE's general vice-presidents, was appointed acting National Secretary-Treasurer following the resignation of Bob Rintoul from that position for personal reasons.

Hartman was the first woman to serve as a top official within a Canadian union. In an interview with the Windsor Star just a few months before her appointment, Hartman remarked that "more and more women are taking responsibility as union officers despite the demands on their time of keeping house and working."

Early Pay Equity Breakthroughs

CUPE claimed its first pay equity breakthrough on July 1, 1967 when female members of Local 101 in London, Ontario, won an end to wage discrimination. The local's previous collective agreement contained two wage schedules—one for women and one for men. The women identified these different wage schedules as a "sore point" during negotiations and were able to win equal wage rates.

At Oshawa City Hall, city supervisors who were not CUPE members complained loudly and publicly in April 1967 that they were being paid less than the CUPE members they supervised. Because Local 251 had negotiated 20 per cent increases for outside workers and 18 per cent increases for inside workers, city supervisors found themselves twisting in the wind on pay-day. The city's finance department agreed to look into the matter on the supervisors' behalf.

Less than a year later, 60 management and supervisory employees of the Borough of York threatened to join CUPE unless their employer agreed to wage increases as high as CUPE's negotiated wages. At the time, some union members were earning $500 a year more than their supervisors.

Throughout the 1960s, CUPE's success in attracting new members depended heavily on its ability to win substantial increases at the bargaining table. Because CUPE members were adept at negotiating what by today's standards are astronomically high wage increases, union membership was coveted by those who were without it. The word inflation was not in the vocabulary of most Canadians in the early 1960s. Unemployment was low. Being a union member meant better wages. It also meant better fringe benefits. As a result of CUPE's initiatives and successes in negotiating longer paid vacations, extended health care benefits and good pension schemes, the benefits of union membership were becoming obvious to more and more public employees.

To safeguard its future, CUPE decided, at its third national convention, held in Montreal in November 1967, to establish a National Defence Fund. Payments into the fund by individual members were described as being "less than the price of three packs of cigarettes a year." An initial $1 assessment was levied on the membership and the per capita tax was increased by 10 cents. The fund was designed primarily to provide strike pay.

The Women's Movement and CUPE

The women's movement was an integral part of the consciousness-raising experience that affected CUPE and all of Canadian society in the late 1960s. With 40,000 female members (one-third of the union's 115,000 membership in 1968), CUPE represented a substantial number of the nation's unionized female workers in hospitals, school boards, city halls, commissions and the CBC.

"The majority of female union members who fight for true equality do so without the wholehearted support of their fellow trade unionists." This blunt statement was the nub of CUPE's brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, presented at formal hearings on Parliament Hill in November 1968. The Commission, presided over by Florence Bird, was set up to examine and make recommendations on the condition of women in all facets of Canadian life.

CUPE's candor about the level of respect women were afforded within the union movement shocked many. The program of reform the union suggested to the Commission included amending and expanding various aspects of federal law to improve conditions and remuneration for working women. CUPE's "shopping list" included more and better day care, better maternity leave provisions, and legislative changes that would not require men's and women's jobs to be identical before equal pay legislation could apply.

The same year as the Royal Commission hearings, Grace Hartman, who had been elected CUPE's National Secretary-Treasurer at the 1967 convention, attended a Third World Conference on Women Workers' Problems. Sponsored by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the conference drew 100 delegates to Germany from 42 countries. Hartman was the only delegate from North America to attend.

When the Royal Commission handed down its recommendations for reform, CUPE set up a special national committee to work for implementation of the proposals. Eight of the commission's 10 recommendations were identical to those CUPE had presented in its brief. The main recommendation was that the federal government draft a national day care act to provide federal funds for the construction and administration of day care centres across the country.

The entrenchment of women's rights and women's issues into CUPE's fibre continued with the 1971 national convention—a convention whose stated purpose was to focus attention on issues affecting women in the union. After a full morning of debate at the Chateau Lacombe Hotel in Edmonton, 665 delegates passed what some felt was a long overdue resolution. It simply said: "Not enough has been done to protect women workers."

About 20 per cent of convention delegates—the highest number ever—were women. One of those delegates, Lucie Nicholson, an Ontario hospital worker who was later to become president of the Ontario Division, told the convention: "We're not asking for rights, we are demanding them."

CUPE women were asserting themselves as never before. And by speaking out about the discrimination they faced, their union grew stronger and more united.

"Unions can be just as discriminatory as employers, just as discriminatory as tax laws, just as biased in favour of men as the rest of society," said Grace Hartman in an address to a Conference on Women's Rights in January 1972. Women have to fight within their unions, she said, for equal strike pay with men and for maternity leave clauses which are easily overlooked when there's a male majority. Women also have to fight against pay discrimination and barriers to promotion, she said.

"For all their rhetoric about justice and democracy, unions have failed in the most basic way to be just or democratic," she told CUPE clerical workers in Toronto. "We have more women in elected and appointed positions than any other union and though our record here is still not dazzling, we have talked boldly about the problem and conscientiously spelled it out for the public."

It was this ability to speak and be truly heard that allowed CUPE women to feel the union belonged to them—and they belonged in it. The strength of women's commitment to CUPE would be crucial throughout the 1970s as governments' attacks on collective bargaining in the public sector tested the union's mettle.

Government Becomes the Problem

Government in the 1970s became the problem, not the solution. In their relations with organized labour, both federal and provincial governments were increasingly oppressive. Before the 1970s, except for a few specific instances such as the national rail strike of 1950, government legislation preventing strike action was unknown outside Quebec. By the early 1970s, five more provinces (B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Newfoundland) had passed laws curbing or banning strikes and lockouts in "essential" services. CUPE members working for hospitals and public utilities were being systematically stripped of their right to strike.

At the 1973 national convention—CUPE's 10th anniversary—president Stan Little launched "A Plan to Keep Our Union Strong." For five days, 900 delegates in Montreal discussed—and acted upon—important issues such as shoring up the defence fund, expanding services to CUPE locals, and reforming and revitalizing the CLC.

Inflation was increasingly the crucial topic of conversation in workplaces and homes across the country. Canadians watched as the Prices and Income Commission, described by Little as "an untrustworthy propaganda tool," was replaced in 1975 with Pierre Trudeau's infamous Anti-Inflation Board (AIB).

The legislation to set up wage and price controls (or wage and wage controls, as the union movement aptly dubbed the 1975 law) elicited an even stronger denunciation from Little.

"Wage controls are the War Measures Act of 1975," he said. "The policy announced by Mr. Trudeau makes the public employee front-line cannon fodder in what will surely be a phoney war on inflation. The only thing that won't be phoney will be the victims of wage control mechanisms."

At age 64, after 12 years as CUPE's president, Stan Little announced in January 1975 that he would resign prior to that fall's national convention. He said it was "time for a younger person to take over."

Acclaimed as CUPE's new president by convention delegates, Grace Hartman vowed to lead the union into the fight of its life.

"We will turn the heat on and melt the wage freeze," she pledged.

Hartman also called on CUPE members to become more politically active. "CUPE not only has to support the NDP, but must also start mounting political action programs of its own."

True to Hartman's word, during the era of wage controls the national union led the way by launching high-profile campaigns against wage controls. A 30-minute CUPE film called "Out of Controls" poked fun at Trudeau, the minister of labour, John Munro, and the AIB chairperson, Jean-Luc Pepin, while exposing the unjust and arbitrary nature of the legislation.

Ultimately, CUPE members all across the country paid a monstrous price for wage controls. In hospitals, at city halls and at school boards, CUPE's legally negotiated wage increases were "rolled back" to 5 per cent by the AIB. The union calculated that in one 15-month period at the height of wage controls, the AIB removed $23 million from CUPE members' pockets.

In June 1976, the CUPE executive board decided to wholeheartedly support the CLC's call for a one-day general strike to protest wage controls. When the sun set on Oct. 14, 1976, more than 100,000 CUPE members had joined one million other Canadians in the largest general strike in Canadian history.

"We're out to fight controls!" was the slogan. Speaking at the Winnipeg rally, Hartman warned the government that "the price for political deceit is political defeat. With more than 800,000 persons out of work and a general slowdown in the economy, we are seeing the worst of both worlds—reduced purchasing power and high unemployment," she said.

The ineffectiveness and unfairness of wage controls had sunk into Canadians' heads; only the federal government seemed able to ignore the fact that inflation had increased 10 per cent in 1975 and in 1976 was running at 9.4 per cent, Hartman told the crowd. Controls weren't working.

In early 1978, after suffering three years of wage controls, CUPE was determined to win back the membership's buying power—power which had been cut off during the AIB's lifetime.

Speaking to 400 CUPE members at an Ontario municipal employees' conference in Toronto, Hartman urged CUPE members to use every means possible to achieve wage increases high enough to catch up to the inflated prices that were being demanded for food, clothing, furniture and housing.

Provincial divisions soon participated in large-scale campaigns designed to win public support for higher public sector wages. Job security was another issue CUPE members strongly pursued at the bargaining table after wage controls were lifted.

Solidarity Beyond Canada

As CUPE emerged from the dark days of wage controls, it was able to look around the world and see that injustice wasn't peculiar to Canada.

In March 1978, two representatives of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) met with CUPE and other union officials in Ottawa to tell the story of their struggle for freedom from South African rule in Namibia. One of the SWAPO delegates, Aaron Shihepo, revealed that South Africa's black unions are not recognized by government or business and that strikes are outlawed.

A month later, CUPE announced it was closing its national accounts with the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce because it and three other major Canadian banks had refused to stop loaning money to South Africa.

"Instead of acceding to our request to withdraw their funds from South Africa, these Canadian banks attempted to justify their continued support of this repressive regime," CUPE president Hartman said in a press release. CUPE called on all locals and CUPE members to cancel their accounts with the offending Canadian banks.

Now 16 years old, CUPE was filled with zeal and idealism. Members across the country optimistically adopted labour's slogan for the 1979 federal election campaign: "The perfect union: me and the NDP."

Although CUPE was still a young organization, it had a wisdom beyond its years. If the union gravitated to the NDP, it was because it supported the party's policies against wage controls and repressive labour legislation. CUPE also saw the need to protect its membership, to provide it with the research and public-relations support needed to win contracting-out fights, and to raise wages to levels that would keep pace with inflation.

If that meant engaging in a goodly number of strikes to meet the needs of the membership, then CUPE was prepared to support strikes galore. It appeared there were some scores to settle before the wage control wounds could begin to heal.

Caring for the Vulnerable

Throughout the 1970s, CUPE increasingly attracted social service workers to its ranks. Its image as a strong but gentle union appealed to people working in the helping professions.

One of the largest contingents of CUPE care-givers worked in the nursing home/home for the aged sector. Although many were "public" employees (their employers being municipalities or non-profit organizations), many others were private sector employees. Their "bosses" fell into two categories: individual entrepreneurs out to make a profit, and "big business" ventures operating on economies of scale.

CUPE members in this sector—as well as those employed by non-profit organizations for the mentally or physically disabled—suffered poor working conditions and abominably low pay. There were also concerns that owners of the homes were depriving elderly residents of proper food and care through understaffing.

It was no coincidence that most of the workers providing care to the elderly in Canada's homes were also women. Until they became CUPE members, their employers often saw them as easily exploited—and easily replaced if they made a fuss. The world of the private nursing home tended to be a dark, shadowy one until CUPE exposed it to the full glare of daylight.

To this end, in 1980 CUPE set up a national task force on nursing homes. Issues such as lax enforcement of safety regulations and the ability of private owners to avoid public disclosure of costs, income and profits all fell under the task force's critical eye.

By July 1980, when Maclean's magazine did a cover story on nursing homes (prompted by the deaths of 22 elderly victims of a nursing home fire in Mississauga), all of Canada learned about the horrors that lurked behind the closed doors of many private nursing homes.

The magazine's writers and researchers turned to CUPE's task force on nursing homes for information that was not available elsewhere. The union's legitimate concerns were fairly reported and CUPE's sense of outrage over the deaths was shared by millions of Canadians who read the magazine at home. CUPE's credibility was never higher.

The Hospital Workers' Fight

In 1965, the Tory government in Ontario, despite strong opposition from CUPE and other unions, had removed hospital workers' right to strike, replacing it with binding arbitration.

The province's 16,000 CUPE hospital workers deeply resented binding arbitration. By the beginning of the 1980s, it had forced them to accept 17.1 per cent pay increases over a 30-month period—while the cost of living rose by 26.1 per cent over the same time. In September 1980, when their previous contract expired, hospital workers were demanding a $2 an hour increase plus cost-of-living increases in a one-year contract. The Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) offered 65 cents an hour in each of two years.

In October 1980, 91 per cent of CUPE hospital workers rejected that offer. With no talks scheduled and the OHA announcing it would seek binding arbitration to force the rejected agreement on them, CUPE members began making their frustration with the OHA known to politicians through intensive lobbying and public demonstrations.

In February 1981, CUPE members at 51 of 66 Ontario hospitals walked off the job in an eight-day strike. Despite intimidation, tension and occasional incidents of violence on the picket lines, the striking workers were elated because they had finally taken the ultimate stand against the anti-union law.

By the time the walkout ended and the dispute was referred to arbitration, all of Ontario had seen the government, the hospitals' administrators and the police use their power to force yet another unwelcome contract on CUPE members.

CUPE raised issues such as staffing levels and the quality of care in Ontario hospitals. It wasn't a strike just over money. What the public saw were committed union members with a high degree of unity who were willing to defy an unjust law, no matter what the personal consequences.

During the strike, 22 CUPE members were charged with contempt for defying a Supreme Court of Ontario order to go back to work. On June 11, 1981, CUPE President Grace Hartman, Ontario Division President Lucie Nicholson and National Representative Ray Arsenault were sentenced to short jail terms on charges of contempt (related to the Supreme Court ruling).

Altogether, 36 hospital workers were fired, 3,442 were suspended, and 5,582 received disciplinary letters as a result of participating in the strike. In the months immediately after the strike, CUPE successfully fought the dismissals through arbitration.

An All-Out War

"Governments at all levels are limiting or removing our right to strike, refusing to bargain with us in good faith, contracting out more and more work, excluding more employees from the bargaining unit and even in some cases deliberately provoking and prolonging strikes in the mistaken belief that that will help them balance their budgets."

Grace Hartman's litany of complaints was already too familiar to most CUPE members hearing them at the 1981 national convention in

Winnipeg. For the first time in its history, CUPE was awash in strikes. In 1982, a special one-day national convention had to be convened to replenish the National Defence Fund after a moratorium was placed on it.

"The defence fund was never expected to sustain a major war," Hartman said. "The last two years have witnessed an all-out war being waged against public sector workers, and as the biggest union, we're unfortunately the first into the trenches." An assessment of $5 per member was immediately levied and a further $1 per member per month was paid by members until the Defence Fund reached a comfortable operating level of $10 million.

In the spring of 1982, with most provincial governments (at the urging of the resurrected Trudeau government) instituting some form of public sector wage controls, CUPE launched its "free collective bargaining" campaign, using a white dove in flight as the symbolic representation of the freedom CUPE members sought.

In 1983, with CUPE's membership at 294,633 (15,000 more than it had been six months earlier) and with eight hectic years as the president of Canada's largest union behind her, Grace Hartman decided to do what most workers do when they reach normal retirement age: retire.

"The federal and provincial governments have enacted no fewer than 17 pieces of legislation since our 1981 convention that are aimed at crippling public sector unions and suspending their rights," she said in her last address as CUPE president. "The task we have before us is no less than the preservation of a decent, caring, civilized society."

Coming of Age

Economic recovery was the buzzword at that 1983 convention. Unanimous support was pledged for B.C. CUPE members in their "Solidarity" campaign against the Bennett government's cutback programs. And the union adopted a central policy statement on women which vowed to "make women's issues a primary focus of the union's economic recovery program."

A year later, the first CUPE women's conference, called "Survival in the Crisis," was held in Winnipeg. A moving film—"Yes, We Can!"—had its premiere at the conference amid discussions on technological change and pay equity.

CUPE's new national president, Jeff Rose, former president of Local 79 in Toronto, assumed leadership of a strong union celebrating its 20th birthday. CUPE's maturity was reflected in the fact that it was feeling its own power and assuming a leading role in Canada's social and economic life.

"Our fight today is not only for our own members but for all Canadians who are suffering from unemployment, deprivation and discrimination. Our fight is based on a view of society where human values prevail, and our task is to work vigorously with all those who share our vision of social and economic justice," he said.

More than 400 delegates—100 of them from churches as well as women's, native and anti-poverty groups—joined union members from CUPE, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the National Union of Provincial Government Employees (NUPGE) at a historic conference on government cutbacks held in Ottawa in early 1986. Organized by the three unions, the two-day event was called "Sharing Our Future."

For the first time, organized labour was meeting formally with economists and other Canadians to work out ways of building a better Canada.

"We decided to organize this project because we don't subscribe to the trend away from a caring society," Jeff Rose told delegates in his address. Twelve in-depth research studies were commissioned by the unions. The maintenance of existing links and the building of more coalitions with other like-minded groups emerged as other ongoing projects of the conference.

Later in 1986, two more important conferences brought CUPE members together to devise strategies for tackling particular problems. CUPE's national health and safety conference in Halifax in November attracted 300 enthusiastic members for three days of discussion on workplace hazards in the 1980s. Included in the talks were issues such as communicable diseases, smoking in the workplace, ventilation, violence at work, and employee assistance programs.

On the heels of that exciting conference, the equal opportunities section of CUPE national office sponsored a three-day pay equity conference in December. Delegates examined the nuts and bolts of achieving equal pay for work of equal value, both through collective bargaining and through political action.

The year ended with a convention to launch CUPE's new Airline Division, after 7,000 members of CALFAA (the Canadian Airline Flight Attendants' Association) voted to affiliate with CUPE.

With so much activity and a membership that reached 331,000 by early 1987, CUPE decided it was time to make sure it was communicating more effectively with its members. The old Leader (a one-page newsletter) was transformed into a monthly eight-page newspaper with a wider circulation.

The new publication (available in French as Le Leader) kept the same name as its predecessor and presented its news in a lively, eye-catching way. The first edition rolled off the presses in the fall of 1986. It was to be stapled into an edition of either The Public Employee or The Facts on an alternating basis.

Another CUPE milestone was reached in 1987 with the successful "Ways of Winning" conference on contracting-out. More than 500 CUPE members from all sectors travelled to Toronto to learn how to effectively fight contracting-out and privatization. Two 20-minute videos produced for the occasion explained and dramatized methods which had been used by CUPE members in Montreal and Moncton to beat back contracting-out.

By the time more than 1,400 enthusiastic CUPE members gathered in Quebec City at the 1987 national convention, there was a mood of optimism in the air. The union was mature enough now to consolidate a spirit of unity and confidence. The past melded with the present as Stan Little and Grace Hartman shared the spotlight with Jeff Rose. "Never, never forget that you are the living, beating heart of the greatest union in Canada," Hartman told cheering delegates.

In his address to the convention, Rose struck a more sober tone when he warned that the Mulroney government's free trade deal was a serious threat to CUPE members and other public sector workers.

"It will mean a greater influx of American multinational firms that specialize in hospital and nursing home management for profit, in the operation of day-care for profit, in the running of prisons, schools, water and sewage treatment, fire protection, urban transit and many other public services for profit," he said, dubbing the result "Kentucky fried public services."

But CUPE, he added, was "brimming with energy and self-confidence."

Into the 1990s—and Beyond

With the same spirit that launched the union on its way 25 years ago, CUPE members are celebrating a silver anniversary that honours our accomplishments and struggles. We know we have what it takes to meet the challenges of the 1990s and beyond.

Together, we're stronger. Together, we'll move ahead.

Together, we'll move ahead.

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