

Executive Committee's report

Comrades,

I officially call to order the 41st Convention of the Fédération de la santé et des services sociaux.

Our convention opens in the context of a global crisis of capitalism characterized by financial chaos on a scale not seen since the 1929 Crash, generating massive job losses, especially in manufacturing, and thousands of bankruptcies. We are in a crisis that shows the failure of the capitalist system, the failure of the neo-liberal ideology advocated by the governments of the great powers, including Canada. And although its means and scope are more modest, the Québec government has acted on the basis of the same ideological roots.

More than ever, a firm conviction of the legitimacy and necessity of our jobs and working conditions is required in order for us to continue to defend, promote and improve them, and thus be able to fulfil our mandate of contributing to the well-being of society.

We know, however, that there are very few voices in government presenting public services from this vantage point. We have a responsibility to defend and promote public services in health care and social services in this context, one in which governments will argue that government resources are scarce and must be concentrated on supporting the sectors of the economy that are in crisis. On the political front, we will be up against familiar rhetoric presenting us as privileged.

In these difficult times, we have to be ardent advocates for quality, readily available services so that all Quebecers have fair access to the social services and health care they need, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Our convention will be an opportunity to renew our resources, recharge our batteries, strengthen our solidarity and give us renewed impetus to continue our fundamental mission as a labour organization: to protect our public health-care system and quality jobs, **for the best now and in the future.**

Two very busy years

For the Federation and its unions, the two years since the last convention have been a period of adjusting to our new structures. First for the Executive Committee, where the dynamics were new, with changes in roles, duties and people; everyone had to work extra hard to keep up the furious pace dictated by prevailing conditions.

Adapting to our new structure – a response to a desire for greater autonomy in our various professional sectors that was hastened by the overhaul of bargaining units – was not done by just snapping our fingers.

At all levels of the Federation, we had to adjust to the changes in our structures and deploy ingenuity to keep our organization operating democratically to the fullest possible extent. Many of you had to review the way you choose your delegates to decision-making bodies. Others wonder about this new way of operating and are nostalgic for the old structures. This convention will not be a place for debating the new structures. Our experience with them is too short, and we need to live with them longer before assessing them.

In this context of adjusting to change, unions had to negotiate their collective agreement locally. Since these local negotiations did not all take place at the same time, and since unions did not all conclude their agreements simultaneously, the whole process left its stamp on a large part of the last two years.

In February 2007, we hoped that these two years would be a period of consolidation for our unions. But the Executive Committee of the Federation was unable to fulfil to its satisfaction its mandate of meeting with unions to provide them with assistance and support in the process of change resulting from the mergers of institutions and reorganization of bargaining units. Good preparations are needed in order to take full advantage of such discussions; we have to have had time to think back over our experiences and draw lessons from them. In the coming years, it will be up to all of us to initiate such meetings.

At all levels of the Federation, we saw a desire to take better charge of members' job-related and institutional concerns. We also saw how attached members are to an organization that is able to conceive and present a comprehensive vision of the health-care system that takes into account the realities of all its components, on a basis of real solidarity.

This attachment was voiced unanimously in the debate "For a single federation in health and social services at the CSN" at the CSN convention, work that mobilized our activist energies for more than a year.

But the daily defence of our members' interests has always been our leading concern. It is the reason why we took some time at a Federal Council meeting with the late H el ene Pedneault to reflect on the importance of mobilization. Who doesn't remember hearing her explaining the 10 commandments of mobilization, after recalling our origins as Catholic unions, and getting us to recite the mobilization prayer – "Holy Union, pray for us, Holy Union Members, pray for you, Dammit, pray for us!" – and pointing out that the "Dammit" was to help keep our indignation burning fiercely. Dear H el ene, thank you for everything!

There were bitter disputes for a number of unions in the private sectors. But what characterized the work of the Federation's private sectors, though, were the processes of co-ordinated and consolidated bargaining by sectors, with a view to combining all our efforts to strengthen our bargaining clout and seek the best possible settlements for the largest number of workers. In the same vein, the Federation and the CSN launched a major organizing drive in private assisted-living facilities. The work hasn't yet paid off to the extent we had hoped, but it is clear that we will have to consolidate it. The organizing drive is an important part of our overall strategy for countering the privatization of services and improving services and working conditions in this kind of facility.

In the public sector, all our work in preparation for the next round of negotiations was conditioned by the need to win back the right to free collective bargaining. All legal avenues were explored, all political tactics were tried to get the Charest government to change course and recognize the right to organize, the right to free collective bargaining and the right to strike for public-sector workers. Everything was done to strengthen our labour alliances. We have succeeded in setting in motion the broadest united front of union forces in Québec's public sector with the CSN-FTQ-SISP alliance, while at the same time jointly renouncing any campaign for changes in union allegiance in the summer 2009. This is the strongest response the labour movement could make to the Charest government's power play in imposing Bill 30. Our challenge will be to keep this united front going and vibrant until a collective agreement is signed, thereby showing that the interests of the people we represent are very important for us.

On the front of the struggle to promote and develop public services and to oppose public-private partnership and privatization, the past two years have been an opportunity for local struggles against plans for closing facilities, transferring services to the private sector and P3s, particularly in Montréal's university hospitals and a various CHSLDs. In the sector of services for the aged with reduced autonomy and the sector of services in mental health and intellectual impairment, we are currently faced with the transfer of clinical responsibilities from specialized institutions to the CSSSs responsible for the delivery of services within their geographic area. In numerous cases, we have again been confronted with the shift to a "community" approach, which for many amounts to a "deprivation" of services when it is not the outright "privatization of services."

We made a major contribution to the social debate sparked by the Castonguay working group. Given the scope of the struggles, it is more crucial than ever to conduct them in coalitions with all the forces in society concerned about the future of public services. To successfully push back the employers who want to dismantle our public services, we have to be persistent and unrelenting. The battle sometimes goes beyond local decision-makers; we have to take on government policies.

We have therefore put education and collective and political action back in the forefront: we have to think further about how we see the organization of services in order to progress in our struggles and improve our chances of success. This is precisely what we did with respect to services for the aged with reduced autonomy.

“For the best, now and in the future!” This is the direction in which we have to keep going!

And the financial crisis...

Can the anarchy characterizing the insatiable pursuit of profits in a globalized, deregulated economy result in anything other than a global crisis? The capitalist system itself spawns crises of longer or shorter duration, at roughly regular intervals. Some countries with more vulnerable economies, notably developing countries, suffer from them more than others.

The current crisis is serious – the most serious since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It attests to the failure of the neo-liberal capitalist system, based on the belief that markets can regulate themselves by balancing supply and demand. Politically, the champions of this theory want governments to be as hands-off as possible; they want governments to voluntarily refrain from setting up obstacles to their heroes of the pursuit of success and profits. Instead, they propose policies that will supposedly encourage investment spontaneously: tax cuts are supposed to fit into this category.

This is the especially the case in the United States, but it applies as well to all countries in the Western world to varying degrees. They have all been affected by the commercial paper crisis, falling stock markets and the unprecedented crisis in real estate markets – not to mention the collapse of the auto industry.

The recession has hit Canada and Québec too. In the fall of 2008, while minimizing the extent of the crisis in Québec, Premier Charest called a snap election, claiming a single pair of hands on the steering wheel was needed. Though it is true in theory that modern governments have more means at their disposal today than they did in the 1930s to avoid a recession degenerating into a crisis, they first have to want to really use them.

Defending and promoting a public health and social services system is more pertinent than ever

Investment in public services is an investment in social infrastructure. In times of economic and financial crisis, it is more important than ever to invest in social programmes like health and education that provide equity and a sharing of wealth.

The Québec government cannot and must not use government’s limited financial resources as a pretext for turning the development of the public system over to private interests.

This is a position defended by a growing number of groups in society: labour organizations, various advocacy groups, the Coalition Solidarité-Santé, Médecins québécois pour le régime public (the Québec counterpart of Canadian Doctors for Medicare), Québec Solidaire and many others.

It was reiterated loud and clear by the authors who contributed to *Le privé dans la santé – les discours et les faits*, published in November 2008. In the conclusion, they write, “... the introduction of private funding reduces fair access to services and increases the overall costs of the health-care system... private funding and delivery of health-care services does not offer any original solution to the challenges facing public health-care systems; the solutions are to be found in improving the care process.”¹

Multiple challenges

The next three years will bring its share of challenges. At the top of the list is the battle to win back our right to free collective bargaining in the public sector and sign a satisfactory collective agreement in the coming year.

To do so, we will have to take the offensive in defending and promoting public services. More than ever, we have to assert the value of the contribution that each of us makes to the collective well-being of the people of Québec. In these difficult times, we may be confronted with unfavourable public opinion. Some may be tempted to argue that in the public sector, we at least have “a job” and that the government has to intervene in other sectors of the economy that are in worse shape.

To this, our response should be that the interests of some can't be advanced at the expense of others'. We represent people who work but can't get above the poverty line, people who don't qualify for employment insurance benefits, people who work part-time, on-call, but don't get called in to work. We represent groups of jobs for which the average rate of pay is lower than in the private sector by 5% to 27%, depending on the group. We represent men and women in all job classes who are committed, dedicated, who want to work to make services better, more efficient, not so overburdened. We represent people who want to work without feeling perpetually overwhelmed by the weight of the work to be done, who also want better recognition for the work they do.

Better public services benefit Québec society as a whole.

¹ BÉLAND, François, André-Pierre CONTANDRIOPOULOS, Amélie QUESNEL-VALLÉE and Lionel ROBERT, *Le privé dans la santé – Les discours et les faits*, Montréal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2008, p. 455.

This is the point of improving the working conditions of the people who deliver these services day in and day out. We will have to change the negative image we've been given by the ones who want to profit from our public services.

Still fighting against privatization...

For more than 20 years, the FSSS and its unions have waged a relentless battle against privatization. The Federation adopted resolutions to this effect at previous conventions. Each time, we tackled the issue from different angles, depending on where the attacks seemed to be coming from.

In the 1990s, we focused our opposition on the new cure-all for making neighbourhood services available to all. In the wake of the socio-economic Summit, Québec was infatuated with developing the social economy. We maintained a critical stance and fought as hard as we could to ensure that care for people continued to be a public service, delivered by CLSC employees – family and social aides, nurses, social service workers, respiratory therapists and nursing assistants.

Next we targeted the threat posed by the contracting-out of auxiliary services, especially institutional food services, but also laundries and cleaning.

Far from defending the status quo unconditionally, as our main detractors allege, we undertook to promote alternative, innovative solutions – and did, in laundries, for instance.

The government's latest find – Monique Jérôme-Forget's favourite – is P3s, or public-private partnerships: all the possibilities of privatization combined, plus a more opaque process, more confusion about accountability, lots more money involved, with large amounts funnelled directly into the pockets of the law firms that draw up the huge contracts among all the parties concerned.

And all that for what? To save more money? There are no guarantees of that. For better cost control? Nothing is less certain. To improve risk-sharing? Sure, when everything works out well. But when things take a turn for the worse, it's always public money that's used to bail out the private partners. To gain more know-how? When it comes to projects as large as the university hospitals, all the companies and private firms that are used, the ones that have the expertise required for this kind of construction project, are the same, regardless of whether the project is a P3 or what is now called a traditional project. To make room for more innovations? In the rigid framework of a P3, with everything written into detailed contracts, there is no room for innovation. Each player sticks to its part of the contract. O.K., so it must be because it will be faster? Apparently once the whole thing is under way, deadlines are met!

Ms. Jérôme-Forget was fond of harping on the extension of Montréal's subway to Laval as an example that justified using P3s. The project supposedly cost more because the original plans put a station directly under the Rivière des Prairies. Does she want us to believe that this wouldn't have happened with a P3, that there would never be a mistake? Ask the mayor of London, England, what he thinks: he wound up with a half-finished project abandoned after the company that was supposed to modernize London's Underground in P3 mode went bankrupt. And if looking out for their own interests means that private corporations never make mistakes, can you explain why they go bankrupt? Why there are frauds? Ethical problems? Insider trading? And why we are in the midst of a full-blown economic crisis?

I'm not saying that everything would be perfect if there were no P3s; I'm just saying that P3s escape public scrutiny and debate and are not held accountable for policy directions that are fundamental for Québec society. We will oppose them and we will defend our side's interests.

And we won't leave anyone out. Hospitals need more than doctors to operate. Everybody here knows that. We want to reassert the value of the contribution made by all job classes and defend the public nature of all services, particularly auxiliary services. We will support the protection and development of jobs in these services, which have to remain public. **For the best, now and in the future!**

... all around the world

More than ever, this struggle requires that we develop solidarity beyond our borders, with other union organizations involved in the same struggle. The battle to preserve and develop public services is a world-wide struggle. Already, more than 600 union organizations representing close to 15 million members in about 150 countries have joined together in the Public Services International (PSI). One of its most important campaigns is in progress right now, on the theme of "Quality Public Services." As one of the largest federations in public services in Canada, the FSSS wants to participate in this organization. We want to make our rightful contribution, we want to take advantage of the experience of millions of other workers who, like us, are fighting to defend their public services.

Developing decent public services for the elderly with declining autonomy

In the area of services for the elderly with declining autonomy, we realized that too many people and their families are left on their own, abandoned by a public system that doesn't manage to organize services adapted to their needs.

It is certainly not the women and men who work to provide support for this clientele on a daily basis who are to blame for this situation.

No, as usual, the ones to blame are the representatives of the Charest government who, despite their fancy talk, shiny policies and consultations on the living conditions of seniors, don't follow through in practice on their fine platitudes and promises.

Right now, despite the aging of Québec's population, despite ever-lengthening waiting lists for long-term hospitalization, despite the inadequacy of home support services, the government refuses to give CSSSs the resources they need to fulfil their responsibilities toward people in need living within their territories. Just in home support services, scarcely 10% of needs are being met at the present time!

What is the government doing? It has frozen the number of beds in public CHSLDs at their 2005 level – approximately 35,000 – even forcing some regions to reduce the number of places they provide so that they can be redistributed to other regions where the situation is worse. This is why Montréal was told to close 2,000 beds, despite lengthy waiting lists.

This government prefers to give seniors tax credits and let them fend for themselves as best they can with all kinds of service providers, from private companies (like Melior, Cogir, the Savoie group of Résidences Soleil, etc.) to social economy enterprises, and community organizations and family members, or their own coping systems.

The FSSS and the CSN want better than that. We have developed a “platform for a positive social vision of aging.” Using this as a solid foundation, we propose the development of a national action plan that can be used by unions and regions confronted with closings or proposals for privatization of services to help define objectives and a work plan for the struggle, build coalitions and protect and develop essential services and quality jobs. **For the best, now and in the future!**

Effective action against labour shortages

When the early retirement programme was implemented in 1997, the FSSS foresaw the problems of serious staff shortages that would occur. The growing problems related to the retention and attraction of staff in more and more job classes constitute a major challenge for the public health and social services system. There is a lot to do to solve the problem at its root, to keep existing staff and interest young people in studying in health care and social services training programmes.

There has to be an active effort to ensure that institutions in the system have enough qualified personnel in each sector of activity to provide the services expected by the population of Québec. The government and institutions have to propose new approaches to labour relations and become more attractive employers in a context of labour shortages.

Unfortunately, what the Charest government has managed to do ever since it was first elected has been to tarnish the image of public services.

As if that were not enough, its neo-liberal ideological bent led it to aggravate the problem by promoting and developing the private sector. People who work for private facilities are not available to fill jobs in the public sector – unless, of course, they work for employment agencies, which results in additional costs for government and problems for the regular teams in institutions.

We are caught in a real vicious circle: the fewer people there are to work, the harder it is for the system to retain existing personnel. When, on top of everything else, Health Minister Bolduc unilaterally decides to suspend a temporary summer premium programme for certain institutions that need it, you have to wonder whether he's doing it on purpose.

It is high time that we obtained better pay and working conditions, a real improvement in the recognition of the value of our work. The Charest government will soon have the opportunity to show us at the bargaining table whether it wants to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. For starters.

The organization of work is the other area where we will be able to weigh the government's real interest in making changes. For close to a year now, the FSSS and about twenty of its unions have been involved in organization of work projects aimed at making the most of care processes, optimizing the contribution of other job titles in which there are no shortages and that could, while abiding by the laws on professional acts, relieve jobs in nursing care of some of their duties. We have the challenge of carrying out these experiments in nursing care, of achieving positive outcomes so that they will serve as an inspiration for all sectors of work and enable them to put a stop to the use of private employment agencies.

Promoting quality pre-hospital services and recognizing the value of the work these employees do

On more than one occasion in recent years, the pre-hospital sector has waged struggles aimed at promoting better-quality pre-hospital services. The sector proposed a reorganization of services aimed at improving call response times. Four pilot projects were launched, despite the Ministry's reserves and reluctance. Preliminary results from the four CSN pilot projects are extraordinary. There were major improvements in response times for emergency calls in all cases. Paramedics' skill in organizing their work and their practical involvement in the process contributed to better services.

Recognition of this professionalism does not, however, necessarily translate into better working conditions.

The struggles must be pursued with determination: significant gains obtained in the past three years include recognition of the value of paramedics' work equal to Ranking 17 in the public-sector salary structure and the development of the pension plan. Paramedics have worked hard for this, and the FSSS and CSN are proud to have played a role in their achievements.

What remains to be settled is the transition to and integration in the new salary scale. Paramedics are currently engaged in a struggle to the finish with the Conseil du trésor to have the value of their experience and in-service training recognized in the integration by July 1. Once again, the FSSS and the CSN will continue to stand in solidarity with these workers to help them obtain the respect they deserve.

There will be a period of changes in union allegiance for paramedics this fall. Ever since this group began to organize, the FSSS and the CSN have always proven their mettle in the struggle to obtain concrete improvements in paramedics' working conditions. This is what we will demonstrate yet again, loud and clear, to all the members we represent. The FSSS-CSN is the only organization able to represent paramedics properly and advance their interests. We will not spare any effort. They can all rest assured of our unflagging support.

Continuing to develop childcare centres

The childcare sector – the early childhood centres – is endowed with great vitality. It has developed steadily by taking in new members, gaining greater recognition for the important work that educators and all the workers in this sector do on a daily basis and improving working conditions for all jobs in the sector.

Thanks to years of struggles, these “babysitters” became educators, cooks, food service heads. They won recognition of their work and their expertise. They fought for and won a pension plan and group insurance. They fought for and won pay equity. In the past two years more particularly, they have debated a standard set of contract demands for negotiating on a regional basis. They now have to come to an agreement with the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance (AQCPE) on a regional bargaining process, with a view to beginning regional bargaining next fall.

They are now working on better in-service training. They want to establish a co-operative training group in their sector under the responsibility of a joint sectoral committee. Once again, they will be a source of inspiration for all our unions in the private sectors, since our goal is to develop similar training groups wherever possible.

Strengthening our presence in private institutions and community organizations

Private facilities are developing exponentially, encouraged by the Charest government. Since their overriding goal is to provide services at the lowest possible cost, there are situations of exploitation of workers that prove that the owners are often nothing but unscrupulous promoters.

At the same time, workers in this sector who decide to organize in a union are showing that they are determined to fight for changes and for respect. Their battles are bitter; strikes are frequent and sometimes last months, but they generally result in major gains, particularly on pay.

In order to continue to develop, this sector gave itself structures, in particular to co-ordinate bargaining and increase their bargaining power. Since the last convention, unions in the sector have adopted a model collective agreement and a new platform on pay aimed at further improving their working conditions.

The sector also set organizing targets. In the past two years, we didn't achieve the goals we had set. We don't intend to give up, though: we will revise our campaign so as to succeed in organizing more workers. It is our responsibility as a union organization to improve the conditions of the least well-off, and it is in fact in the interests of all workers in health care and social services to do so.

Intermediate resources (RIs) and family-type resources (RTF) and home childcare providers (RSGs) are certainly some of the most isolated and worst-off workers in the sector. With the obvious aim of saving on costs at the expense of the most vulnerable members of society, the government has diverted part of the development of social services, especially for children, the aged and persons with intellectual impairments, towards these kinds of resources. To lower costs, it has denied the most basic rights (right to organize, right to free collective bargaining, etc.). Following the Superior Court decision invalidating Bills 7 and 8, the government had to redo its homework. Since then, we have worked with the CSN's Organizing Department to enable the women doing this work to join our ranks. We have begun discussions with the Conseil du trésor for maximum recognition of their rights. We are using all the resources at our disposal to develop contract demands that correspond to the realities of these workers in atypical work situations and enable them to be included at last.

Encouraging responsible consumption and promoting the development of a green economy

We work in a sector whose mission is to promote and restore health. We also work to promote, develop and ensure egalitarian social relations. We cannot be indifferent to the future of the Earth. We are concerned about the future of the planet, about fair trade, about more responsible management.

This convention will be an opportunity for a real green shift that will force us to go beyond symbolic gestures. Unions have to be responsible consumers too. We will have to look at things differently, question the choices we make about consumption and change our individual habits and collective choices.

Health-care institutions don't do much recycling or recovery. Some of them waste a lot. We want to analyse the situation and call on our institutions to change their practices.

Conclusion

Comrades,

Our union is the best of what we are, the sum total of all our combined hopes to advance the rights of the people we represent, to roll back employers' management rights, to influence the course of events.

Our Federation is the future of trade-unionism in the health and social services sector, in pre-hospital services, in childcare, in private institutions and community organizations. The FSSS is the only organization in Québec that can have a significant representative position in each and every job title, the only that can combine the specific interests of some with the common interests of all, an organization that is determined to join forces with all the organizations that want to force our governments to make decisions in our side's interests.

Our members – men and women, of all ages, from different origins and walks of life, in all corners of Québec – are the reason we exist. They constitute our strength, our energy, our heart. The future of our organization depends on them; the future of our services depends on them; all our motivation, our drive, depends on them.

Our convictions are our ideals, what encourages us to continue our active involvement, to convince younger and newer members to join the ranks of activists, to take up the struggle side by side with us for justice and rights, to create their own traditions too.

Capitalism has exhausted its logic. The time is right to think about alternatives to the underpinnings of the current economic structure. The FSSS and the CSN have to participate in this thinking and analysis to avoid the repetition of other, more serious crises. Let this convention be the start of a process of thought and reflection that is full of hope for our members and the general public!

Comrades, we are at a crossroads: together, let's take the path of solidarity!

For the best, now and in the future!

Long live the FSSS!

Long live the CSN!

Have a good convention!