

**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
ORIENTATIONS**



**TOGETHER
FOR EACH OTHER**



**66th CSN Convention
VIRTUAL | 2021**



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Orientations Submitted to the 66th Convention

Our 66th Convention is being held under unprecedented circumstances. The virtual format forces us to do things differently. Delegates will therefore be asked to debate general policy orientations and to mandate the Confederal Council to draw up action plans.

IN NOVEMBER 2020, we met with over 450 union representatives during the pre-convention regional consultation. They confirmed what we had suspected: that COVID-19 is hitting hard. The pandemic that has upended daily life, social relations, employment and how we work is also affecting union life and mobilization.

THE TWO-PRONGED PUBLIC HEALTH AND economic crises that disrupted our lives and our union activities in 2020 will continue to be felt in 2021. This is reflected in the orientations submitted to the 66th Convention. We have also chosen to prioritize issues related to changes in the workplace, bearing in mind the four main pillars of our work as a union: bargaining, mobilizing, organizing and representing.

Health and Safety

Since the pandemic broke out, the health and safety of our members has been our top priority. We have been making ceaseless efforts with both employers and relevant government ministries on this front.

The number of employees experiencing mental health problems is reaching alarming proportions. Many workers and union activists are living with daily stress, distress, isolation, exhaustion, anxiety and fear of contamination.

Employees who are working from home are at less risk of catching the virus but are not immune to its effects. Teleworking with children at home, as employees had to do during the spring lockdown, has been a source of stress and anxiety for many. The isolation and changes in working methods associated with forced telework on a prolonged basis can also affect their psychological health, not to mention issues around adequate space, Internet access, etc.

These exceptional circumstances also had repercussions on the workload and psychological health of staff at union locals. In extreme cases, the pressure has forced some to withdraw from union work altogether. A growing number of executive committees have to cope with absences and vacancies. Our ability to respond to the needs of members and to play our role in the workplace has been weakened. This situation calls for action by all components of the CSN.

Expand Self-Help Networks

Since the 1980s, the CSN has developed self-help networks composed of members who are active in their workplaces, under the aegis of the central councils. Their original purpose was to help people overcome substance abuse problems. Over time, their scope has expanded to include mental health problems. They have also helped negotiate and set

up employee assistance programs. Self-helpers are not therapists and are not a substitute for existing resources or the union, but they are trained to listen and refer people to appropriate services and resources. In the context of a public health crisis, they serve a very valuable function.

In 2014, the 64th CSN Convention called on the central councils to continue their efforts to develop and strengthen self-help networks. However, the presence of such networks remains uneven. Once the obstacles have been clearly defined, we believe we will be able to step up our efforts and increase the number of networks. Obviously, it's unrealistic to think that every workplace can have trained self-helpers. This is why we want to identify other forms of support and act quickly to help unions deal with COVID-related distress and mental health problems, in collaboration with the central councils and the self-help network development coordinators.

Bargaining During the Pandemic

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many unions have redoubled their efforts to make sure their workplaces are safe. Access to PPE, issuance and enforcement of health directives, premiums for workers who provide essential services and paid COVID leave are among the main demands.

The pandemic has also led to an increase in absences and sick leave. There are many reasons: infection, waiting for results, quarantine, helping loved ones, stress, psychological distress, etc. Access to paid leave varies widely, depending on the workplace and the collective agreement. The situation is particularly difficult for workers who only have access to the two days of paid sick leave or family leave provided for in the *Act Respecting Labour Standards*.

The federal government has introduced temporary income supports for workers who need to take time off due to COVID-19, including the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit. These measures are intended to supplement EI benefits. Employees who are entitled to short-term disability benefits or sick leave must use them before accessing federal government programs. In some cases, employers are demanding that employees use their vacation days, which is unacceptable.

Health and Safety Law Reform: Real Protection for Everyone

The occupational health and safety bill, which was supposed to be introduced in the spring of 2020, was delayed by the pandemic. In the end, Labour Minister Jean Boulet tabled Bill 59, *An Act to Modernize the Occupational Health and Safety Regime*, on October 27. Having remained virtually unchanged for over 40 years, an overhaul of our occupational health and safety system was long overdue.

The CSN adopted an action plan and proposed a series of changes to benefit workers in February 2020.

Bill 59 includes some advances when it comes to prevention. There is also coverage for domestic workers and interns, as well as new provisions for the construction industry

However, the bill also has shortcomings and includes major setbacks to workers' rights. Five points of particular concern are the loss of acquired rights and power for priority groups 1, 2, and 3; the expansion of prevention efforts to new sectors falls short of what we had hoped; the impact that some of the changes will have on women, including those respecting preventive withdrawal and the role of attending physicians; the lack of recognition for burnout; and setbacks when it comes to compensation for workplace injuries.

As we gather for our Convention, a parliamentary committee will be holding hearings on the bill. The CSN will be there to demand substantial changes. We will also work with the opposition parties that are favourable to our demands during the clause-by-clause consideration of the bill, all while maintaining pressure on the government.

Alongside the fight for an occupational health and safety system that protects everyone, the CSN is encouraging unions to make health and safety a priority at the bargaining table. Writing health and safety measures into the collective agreement is one of the surest ways to ensure the protection of workers.

ORIENTATIONS

Support central councils in creating self-help and assistance networks within the unions, as they deal with mounting distress and mental health problems.

Support efforts by the federations and unions to safeguard workers' health and safety (including psychological health), particularly as concerns compliance with health standards, access to PPE and paid COVID-19 leave.

Continue our campaign for amendments to Bill 59, *An Act to Modernize the Occupational Health and Safety Regime*, and oppose any loss of existing rights.

That unions include occupational health and safety in their demands when a negotiating collective agreement, and that the General Bargaining Coordinating Committee (CCGN) coordinate all such negotiations.

Union Life and Mobilization

For years, union life has been a top priority for all CSN components. There were two motions on the subject at our last convention. Following extensive consultations, an operational plan including a series of initiatives was developed. Implementation is still in progress.

Delegates to the 66th Convention will be called upon to discuss union life and mobilization once again. Proposed changes to the Professional Defence Fund (PDF), primarily involving access to strike and lockout benefits and the amount of these benefits, will be discussed. These changes reflect our desire to increase the bargaining power of unions as they fight for improvements to their working conditions.

This being said, the health crisis has had a major impact on union life and on our ability to mobilize. In addition to the challenges created by health restrictions, many workers and union activists are experiencing isolation, exhaustion, stress and distress. This has forced us to revisit our practices and innovate.

Digital Technologies: An Additional Tool

Over the course of last November's tour, a number of people spoke to the impact of digital technologies on union life and mobilization. Clearly, these technologies are all the more important in the current situation, as gatherings are banned.

While some see this as an impediment to union life and mobilization, others regard it as an opportunity to increase participation in union meetings and innovate to support mobilization.

This is not the first time the CSN has considered the use of digital technologies and social media to promote participation and union democracy. However, the health crisis has accelerated that process and provided an opportunity for experimentation. It has also overwhelmed some legitimate reservations. But it has not erased the importance of human contact and face-to-face activities—on the contrary.

In the coming months, the CSN will step up its efforts to support unions in the use of these technologies. In the longer term, we must take advantage of the potential these new means of communication offer and incorporate them into our union action.

Stronger Support for Union Activists

Union action would not exist without the contribution, dedication and commitment of activists. However, activists often have a tough row to hoe, and never more so than during this pandemic. The increased levels of stress, distress and incidences of mental health problems among workers is also affecting union activists. This is an issue of concern to our movement as a whole.

The struggles that the CSN undertakes are not limited to improving working conditions through unionization and collective bargaining. We also fight for economic, social and political changes that will benefit all workers. In the coming months, we want to set up a working committee focused on political action by our members.

ORIENTATIONS

In collaboration with the federations and central councils, support unions with the use of digital technologies and social media to help strengthen union life and mobilization.

Provide the members of affiliated unions with tools to help them be active in the union without burning out.

Develop the necessary tools to promote union life and encourage members to be politically active. Create a committee for this purpose.

Labour

Among the changes in the workplace brought about by COVID-19, the expansion of teleworking is certainly among the most salient.

Before the pandemic, 10% to 15% of the workforce was working from home. It is estimated that, during the spring lockdown, the proportion jumped to more than 40%.

It is too early to say what percentage of the workforce will be teleworking after the pandemic. However, the lockdown demonstrated that many jobs can be done from home. It is also likely that telework has gained favour among certain employers.

Among employees, opinions are divided. The most frequently cited advantages include less time spent commuting, flexible schedules, increased autonomy, better work-life balance and less stress. On the other hand, working from home can also mean isolation, longer hours, heavier workloads, difficulty separating work from personal life, and a loss of privacy.

Telework is only one of the changes made possible by technological progress. In the years to come, the rise of digital technology, robotics and artificial intelligence will continue reshaping the workplace, transforming our jobs and the way we work.

Our collective agreements are often ill adapted to these new realities and adjustments will be necessary. To support the federations and the unions, the General Bargaining Coordinating Committee (CCGN) has produced a telework bargaining guide and is following up on it. The unions will also be invited to come discuss transformations in the workplace in the wake of the pandemic at the next Gérard Picard Conference, slated for the fall of 2021.

New Rights in a Changing Labour Landscape

While unionization and collective bargaining are among the most important tools for improving employment and working conditions, labour laws also guarantee rights and protections that are essential to limiting the power of employers and, in some cases, abuse of power.

The spread of telework is a good example of changes in the workplace that affect our union work across the board. In addition to its impact on collective agreements and bargaining, telework affects union life, mobilization and organizing. Because it increases the fragmentation of workplaces and tears groups apart, telework creates significant new challenges for mobilization, for exercising the right to strike and for the possibility of unionization. It is also another compelling example of the limitations of current labour laws, notably the Labour Code.

During the last three-year period, a series of labour laws and programs were amended, including the Act respecting labour standards (2018), the Pay Equity Act (2019), the provisions of the Labour Code dealing with essential services in the public sector (2019), the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (2020), the Supplemental Pension Plans Act (2020), the Canada Labour Code (2019) and others. In each of these cases, the CSN made sure its voice was heard.

Some of the amendments have been in line with our demands. However, too many people still have inadequate protections, especially the self-employed. We must maintain the pressure on governments to expand and strengthen workers' rights in the coming months and years.

Organizing is Vital

The challenges that exist in the workplace require the existence of strong trade union organizations. Without unions, all that remains are governments and individual bargaining power. Of course, this isn't the first time we address the issue of unionization. In 2014, the CSN's 64th Convention adopted a motion that specifically addressed unionization in the private sector, including a six-year plan. While the results are not all in, it is already clear that they will fall short of our expectations.

At the same time, it must be recognized that the new realities of work and employment have not made it any easier to organize, at least not in the traditional way. More diverse employment relationships, smaller businesses, the fragmentation of employee groups across space and time and an increased sense of professional identity are all challenges we must address. It should also be noted that how the ongoing labour shortage can convince workers to rely on their individual bargaining power and lose interest in unionization.

But while there are many obstacles at this time, they are by no means insurmountable. They must spur us to redouble our efforts and innovate.

ORIENTATIONS

In collaboration with the federations, support unions in negotiating issues arising from telework and technological innovation; the General Bargaining Coordinating Committee (CCGN) should develop, disseminate and monitor a strategic bargaining framework.

Update our demands concerning labour legislation and lobby governments to obtain legislative gains, with special attention to the situation of self-employed workers.

Reflect on the process of unionization to improve our practices, renew our strategies and establish priorities and a CSN action plan.

Post-COVID Recovery

The CSN is already engaged in discussions and actions related to the post-COVID-19 recovery. Along with others, we are calling for a low-carbon economy, a just transition, significant reinvestments in public services (with special attention to care and accommodations for seniors), improved working conditions to attract labour, access to qualifying and transferable training, enhanced income security programs, buy-local policies and greater self-sufficiency in strategic economic sectors.

Clearly, achievement of these objectives is closely connected to government budgetary choices.

Fight Any Return to Austerity

The public health crisis has had an unprecedented impact on economic activity. Without government assistance, thousands would have sunk into poverty and businesses would have closed their doors forever.

The combination of significant portions of the economy coming to a standstill and the need for massive government spending has quite naturally led to unprecedented budget deficits and increased public debt, both in Québec and at the federal level.

With the crisis is still very much with us, François Legault's government has already announced its intention to balance the budget again within five years. Most observers consider this timeframe unrealistic without spending cuts and service cutbacks. If the government keeps to that target, it will inevitably mean a return to austerity.

To fight this course of action, we must build our capacity to act. We will have to point out the devastating effect that austerity has on the access and quality of public services, as well as the working conditions of those who deliver them. This will be an opportunity to show the connection between years of fiscal austerity and the problems experienced by our systems of public education and health and social services during the pandemic.

Public services won't be the only ones to suffer. All of the government's missions will be forced to pay the price of a swift return to a balanced budget, including vast areas such as culture and the defence of the French language, the fight against climate change, regional development, support for businesses and job training, transfers to individuals and families, and so forth.

There are other options. We have already suggested that deposits in the Generations Fund be suspended and the management of Québec's public debt be reviewed. We are also calling for more energetic measures to fight tax havens and tax evasion. The CSN's position is that the government should rely primarily on growth to increase its revenues. One good way to support growth is to invest in public services.

Defend Public Services

A large proportion of the CSN's members work in the public sector. It is natural that we would defend them, particularly during periods of collective bargaining.

We all know that improving working conditions has a positive impact on the quality of public services. The current public health crisis has provided striking evidence of this. The problems faced by the public education, health care and social services systems have largely been due to difficulties in attracting and retaining staff due to deteriorating working conditions and major problems in how work is organized, which we have been denouncing for years.

The pandemic has also demonstrated the critical role of public services. When hospitals are overwhelmed or schools and daycare centres are closed, it is not only the public that suffers: all economic activity is affected.

Attach Conditions to Government Assistance for Businesses

Over the next three years, the CSN must intensify its efforts to strengthen democracy in the workplace. The financial assistance given to businesses by the government to support worker training and reskilling for the digital and ecological transition must be made conditional on worker participation.

It's not just a question of giving employees access to information. Employees must be involved in the decisions that directly affect their jobs and the conditions under which they work. For example, government assistance for worker training should mandate the use of a joint labour-management approach for defining needs, implementing training programs and following-up on them.

The CSN has long called for greater economic transparency and worker participation in the organization of work. The proliferation of public aid measures during the post-COVID recovery period offers an opportunity we must seize. As the fight against climate change is one of the greatest challenges of this century, we must also remind the government of the importance of linking public assistance to companies with the needs of a just transition.

Expand Internet Access

During the pre-convention consultation, unions reported problems with Internet access in many regions and localities. The pandemic quickly made it apparent that Internet access is an essential service.

Internet access problems don't just affect only union life. Without reliable and affordable access, telework, online teaching, e-commerce and even virtual social gatherings become difficult. Uneven access is also a factor in inequalities that exist in income levels, skill levels in the use of modern networking technologies and geographic location.

The CSN will join its voice to those already calling for the Internet to be considered an essential service and will bring political pressure to bear on the government to accelerate the development of infrastructures so that everyone who wants it can access a reliable, affordable service as soon as possible.

ORIENTATIONS

Fight any attempt to revert to fiscal austerity by putting forward our demands regarding the management of public finances and explaining the negative impacts austerity has on the quality and accessibility of public services, and the working conditions of workers.

Pursue our efforts to strengthen public services, particularly by improving working conditions in the public sector.

Lobby to make the government's financial support for business—especially for job training, investments in technology and the ecological transition—consistent with the principles of a just transition and conditional on financial transparency, worker participation and a recognition of unions as necessary stakeholders.

Lobby the federal and provincial governments to recognize high-speed Internet as an essential service that should be available to everyone.

**As we approach
the 100th anniversary
of the CSN,
our history has confirmed
that it is possible
to take action
for a better future.**

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