

Don Walmsley: A Teacher's Legacy

Don was a pioneer in the area of collective agreements and a mentor to so many teachers in the Fraser-Cascade School District. In the early 1980's, at a time when teachers were only allowed to bargain salaries and benefits, Don was able to get the Hope collective agreement out in front of the game. He insisted that teachers should make the extra effort to ensure that their input into Board Policy developed language that supported the rights of teachers and enhanced the employer-employee relationship. Don then set in motion a strategy to have the clauses that dealt with teachers attached to the collective agreement.

In those early years of the Restraint Programme, Don insisted that those clauses be stapled after the signatory page of the agreement. As it turned out, when the Board attempted to amend one of those clauses and the Association objected, it went to a grievance. The arbitrator ruled that by attaching those parts of Board Policy, those clauses did in fact have the effect of being part of the collective agreement and so could not be amended without approval of the Association.

Fast-forward a couple of years and the government gave teachers the right to full collective bargaining. While other associations around the province were basically starting from scratch, with their four page documents, Hope teachers had over thirty pages that included clauses like Natural Justice and important wording related to professional development. The latter was of particular importance to Don. He insisted that by working cooperatively with the Board, we could incrementally develop language that would be the envy of the province.

The first rounds of bargaining were tough throughout the province and in Hope. That first provincial strike vote, that we took in Hope, caught the Board's attention. Others in the province were holding to the age-old bargaining strategy of taking many more items to the table than needed with the idea that many of the lesser items were "traders". When the Board understood that our much smaller list was about tweaking the current clauses attached to the CA and then addressing areas of teacher concern, they agreed to expedite things. Two on two sessions, with fewer full bargaining meetings, produced an agreement that would have been first in the province. In order to spare any negative reaction towards the Board, we agreed to pace negotiations and in the end Hope was eleventh on the list. So much of those first rounds of bargaining reflected Don's wish to develop a more open relationship with the employer.

While we still had a couple of significant grievances in the early 1990's, it was approached by both parties with the attitude that a particular impasse sometimes needed outside adjudication in order to let the parties know how best to resolve the differences. Once again it was Don's perspective and it led to both parties agreeing that money could be saved if the Board and the Association would simply sit at the table and find ways to problem-solve areas of concern. That of course precipitated the formation of the Labour Enhancement committee and many years of a grievance free relationship. Challenges have always been a part of education in BC, but through collaborative efforts, teachers Hope and Agassiz were able to successfully amalgamate—many districts had collective agreements imposed—to form the FCTA. In the struggle to overturn the illegal stripping of bargaining language by the

government, the FCTA was able to work with Board to find the ways to circumvent the worst of what was over a decade of hardship for teachers and education in general.

Don Walmsley' legacy is really about having the patience to implement the "long game". History documents how changes in government policy towards teacher bargaining, changes to attitudes on the school board and subsequently changes to district administration, resulted in challenges for teachers. One of Don's lasting lessons for those of us in bargaining, during the early years, was about how to view change. If you think of the changes as what was lost, you are already defeated. Instead, always view change as a "new opportunity". During that time, arguments and discussions will potentially produce a number of options and then will come the time to make a choice. Instead of dwelling on which is the best or right option, focus on one and then work collectively to make it "right".

Teachers are again facing challenges that threaten the very nature of education. Don's message would still be the same. As in the past, not every member will be affected the same and so some may feel like bigger losers. It is so important to be proactive problem-solvers, be supportive and find a collective voice.