

# **Austerity as an opportunity for union revival: Québec public school teachers**

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## **Abstract**

This article proposes an account of how two teachers' labour federations have been reacting to austerity measures in public education. Current austerity measures have coincided with the renewal of collective agreements, thus allowing the study of how unions link bargaining stances to wider issues of service quality and accessibility. Union responses are the result of at least three influences: the institutional framework for public sector collective bargaining and worker representation, the previous orientation of members and their organisations towards social and work relations, and ongoing innovations for renewal and member engagement. We posit that union responses can contribute to renewal if they are guided by concerns to redefine union purpose, union organisation and building capacities. Under these conditions, unions are able to engage members and push forward an alternative agenda to that of the government. In doing so, they may be able to forge temporary alliances with outside stakeholders, namely parents. Analysis of union responses should consider the dialectic between union renewal effort and the opportunities and constraints of the institutional framework for public sector collective bargaining. The challenge for these two labour federations is in sustaining member engagement and activism beyond the current context of collective bargaining.

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**Introduction**

In many advanced industrial democracies, the employment and income security of public sector workers, and in some cases the security of their unions, have been under attack by governments seeking to eradicate budget deficits (Albo and Evans, 2011). The apparent failure of organised labour to build effective opposition to these austerity measures has sparked debate (Collombat, 2014; Gindin, 2013). Unions face a dilemma. Do they remain on the defensive and seek only to protect their members' immediate interests until the economic landscape is more favourable? Or do they adopt a more militant stance and actively oppose austerity? A better understanding of public sector union responses is possible by taking into account at least three influences. First, public sector union responses are conditioned by the features of the institutional framework for collective bargaining and the extent to which it allows for union voice and the right to engage industrial action (Bach and Bordogna, 2013; Eurofound, 2014; European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), 2010). Second, unions in the same institutional framework may adopt, for a variety of reasons, different responses towards austerity (Leisink and Bach, 2014; Ross, 2013). Not all public sector unions are alike and they have space to strategise even in centralised collective bargaining regimes. Finally, many unions are engaged in reviewing internal practices and the way they relate to members (Fairbrother et al., 2012; Kumar and Murray, 2003; Le Capitaine et al., 2011), and their responses to austerity represent an opportunity for them to renew their practices and actions.

This article describes and explains how two teachers' labour federations<sup>1</sup> are reacting to funding cuts and attempts to restructure the labour process in public education. We analyse the conditions under which austerity has contributed to ongoing efforts at revival and organisational change within the two labour federations. The empirical data are drawn from government and union publications, reports submitted by associations and research centres, newspaper articles and interviews with top union officials. An overview of the literature regarding austerity and union responses in the public sector is used to develop an analytical framework. We then use this framework to analyse ongoing events in the Québec public education sector and the responses of the two labour federations. The discussion evaluates union responses in light of three reciprocal dimensions of renewal: union purpose, internal organisation and capacity building (Fairbrother, 2015; Lévesque and Murray, 2010).

**Austerity and public sector unions**

The dominant themes in recent discussion of public sector industrial relations are governments' austerity policies, their impact on services and workers, and union responses. It is apparent that governments have opted for a quick return to balanced budgets even in the context of sluggish economic growth (Albo and Evans, 2011; Eurofound, 2015; European

Trade Union Institute (ETUI), 2010; Fortin, 2014). Concessions made by public sector unions and workers have been most visible in wages and compensation and in staffing levels (Bach and Bordogna, 2013), but governments have also renewed efforts at restructuring the public sector labour process (Peters, 2011). While cuts in services and working conditions have been the focus of media attention, austerity has provided an opportunity or pretext for renewed efforts to restructure services and reorganise work (Fairbrother et al., 2012; Grenier and Jalette, 2011; Jalette et al., 2012; Peters, 2013).

Definitions of austerity generally focus on expenditure reductions, either in terms of overall budget outlays or relative to GDP (Fortin, 2014; Gobin and Colombat, 2015). In this article, we are concerned with the processes and effects of cost-cutting: the means that governments use to introduce austerity measures and the effects in relation to their employees and the unions that represent them. Some governments have acted swiftly, while others have moved more cautiously and accepted social dialogue and compromises (ETUI, 2010). This latter option would seem, however, to depend on the financial and economic situation of the country or region, as well as the ideological bent of the party in office. Governments already committed to the neoliberal agenda have usually persevered in introducing changes in a heavy-handed way, even when confronted by popular protests such as in Great Britain. In the United States, for example, the crisis has provided state-level governments with an opportunity to renew attacks on public sector workers, especially teachers and municipal workers, seen as the last bastion of unionism in the country (Cantin, 2012).

One assessment is that public sector unions have failed to take advantage of popular protest movements such as Occupy (Gindin, 2013) or in the case of Québec, the Maple Spring of 2012 (Collombat, 2014). The general view is, however, that public sector unions have necessarily adopted defensive strategies and attempted to preserve working conditions in a very unfavourable political climate (ETUI, 2010). Nevertheless, their relative failure in promoting a larger agenda for change is considered by some as an indicator of political weakness and, given the size of the public sector workforce, of declining influence of the labour movement as a whole (ETUI, 2010). Such appraisals seem somewhat severe, minimising as they do the complexity of union responses for at least three reasons.

First, unions develop their responses in relation to immediate context, including the degree of activism among the rank and file and the opportunities and constraints offered by the formal institutional framework for collective bargaining (Bach and Bordogna, 2013; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Leisink and Bach, 2014). Union responses, and strategies more generally, depend to a large extent on the degree of centralisation of collective bargaining, on the breadth and width of the issues open for consultation or collective bargaining and on the type of industrial action permitted by national legislation and statutes (ETUI, 2010; Frege and Kelly, 2003). From this perspective, centralised frameworks pave the way for politicisation of public sector industrial relations, a feature made sharper in the context of austerity.

Second, public sector unions differ widely in the way they view social and work relations: some adopt a business-like approach, others prefer quiet diplomacy, and others still favour a more militant and social union or social movement inspired orientation (Camfield, 2007; Ross, 2013). Most Canadian public sector unions are generally seen as

embracing some form of social unionism, but that is not always the case and the outcomes are varied (Camfield, 2013; Evans, 2013; Kumar and Murray, 2003; Ross, 2013). Social unionism offers no guarantee that workers will engage in mobilisation and actively support the union agenda. Public school teachers, for example, may subscribe to a social unionism approach but show reluctance to support strikes and boycotts unless issues at stake are related to quality and accessibility of public education (Grenier and Bettache, 2012; Hanson, 2013). When they do mobilise, however, the results may be variable, depending on the economic and political context of each province (Slinn and Sweetman, 2012). Examples are the recent teachers' strike in British Columbia and, in the United States, the widely publicised story of teachers in the Chicago School Districts who, against the advice of their national leadership, were able to mobilise the community by framing demands in terms of accessibility to a quality education (Weiner, 2012).

Third, many public sector unions have engaged efforts at revival of their membership base. Some have decentralised decision-making, others have centralised strategic functions and decision-making (Fairbrother, 2008), others still have sought a new balance between central coordination and local autonomy (Bach and Givan, 2008; Heery, 2002). Fairbrother et al. (2012) make a case that unions in the civil service of Great Britain and of Australia have reinforced workplace representation and developed decentralised approaches to member engagement all the while providing for central direction and coordination. Roles et al. (2012) illustrate how the Australian Community and Public Services Union developed innovative means of member engagement and mobilisation. So it is important to explore cases where public sector austerity has helped or hindered union revival and to understand the forces at play.

## Analytical framework

The analytical framework used in this article is mainly based on concepts and tools drawn from the recent literature on union renewal and revival (for an overview see the December 2015 issue of *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*). Analysis, however, must take particular account of the ways in which unions can take advantage of the opportunities of the institutional framework for public sector collective bargaining, as well as the particular constraints it may impose upon union initiatives. The ways unions respond are also likely to reflect ongoing efforts at renewal or revitalisation, and analysis must unveil this dialectic with the institutional context.

We take union renewal to mean ongoing efforts at defining an agenda around which members can rally, changes in internal organisation to foster member engagement and activism, and the development of alliances with outside stakeholders (Fairbrother, 2015; Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Fairbrother (2015) proposes an analytical framework according to which member engagement is the result of the reciprocal relationship between union purpose, union organisation and union capacities.

Union purpose refers to the pursuit of two sets of interests. Vested interests are closely associated with traditional collective bargaining issues and the wage-effort bargain. The second set of interests lay beyond the workplace and requires involvement in political and social debate. The challenge, as noted by Fairbrother (2015), is to define union purpose in ways that expose the relationship between both sets of interests. As mentioned

earlier, Canadian public school teachers' unions have promoted the idea that members' vested interests are closely related to issues of quality and accessibility of education. Success has often been associated with the ability to frame workplace issues in terms of the interests of pupils and outside stakeholders and increased funding for schools (Grenier and Bettache, 2012; Slinn and Sweetman, 2012).

Union organisation refers to internal structures and processes of decision-making and member participation in union affairs. While the usual debate is between the value of the organisational model versus the servicing model, in the context of the public sector the issue can be formulated in terms of the respective strengths and weaknesses of decentralisation, centralisation or a hybrid model (Bach and Givan, 2008; Heery, 2002). Analysis must be set against the changing structures of the state, the organisation of public services and the framework for worker representation and collective bargaining in the public sector (Fairbrother et al., 2012). When, for example, service organisation and management are decentralised but collective bargaining remains centralised, a hybrid model may provide a balance between local union autonomy and central coordination of strategies that allows effective intervention at upper levels of the bargaining structure and in the political arena. That is, union federations may have to foster local union autonomy, all the while preserving their capacity to intervene where strategic decisions are made.

Capacities are defined as the ability to mobilise power resources available to unions. Before being mobilised, however, capacities need to be developed through training and education programmes, leadership and other infrastructural resources. A final means of building capacity is the use of union discourses that frame issues in terms of threats to members' vested interests and the broader community (Fairbrother, 2015; Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Union discourse must also put forward the union agenda as a solution to potential threats and, in the context of austerity, as viable alternatives to government measures. As noted by Fairbrother (2015), the reciprocal relationship between organisation and purpose is central to capacity building. Union members must identify with union goals and purpose prior to engaging in activism and mobilisation. In short, members must support the union agenda, believe they can achieve goals collectively and that the pursuit of their own interests are not in contradiction with those of users. Finally, in the context of the public sector and public education, capacities are also linked to support from outside stakeholders. This means union purpose, agenda and goals are framed in a way that meets the expectations and aspirations of users, mainly parents.

## **Québec public school teachers and austerity**

Canada and Québec initially responded to the economic crisis through public infrastructure projects and development in the mining, extraction and natural resources industries. From 2011 onwards, however, the Québec government reverted to balanced-budget policies and limited spending growth to below forecast cost increases (including labour costs), with education taking the brunt of the hit (Pépin-Tremblay, 2015). In 2014, the newly elected Liberal government accelerated the pace of spending constraint and vowed a balanced budget by the 2015–2016 fiscal year, as well as lower income taxes by 2018, an electoral year (Fortin, 2014). The government project, however, has gone beyond balancing the year-to-year budget and funding cuts have exceeded projected deficits. The

current crisis comes after years of public sector modernisation – an offensive to reduce employment levels across the public sector through attrition and restructuring of the labour process. This previous effort contributed to a decline in job quality and met strong opposition from unions and some outside stakeholders (Grenier and Jalette, 2011; Jalette et al., 2012; Le Capitaine et al., 2011).

This time, the political narrative has been that deficits are caused by recurrent imbalances between spending and revenues, and permanent solutions require a rupture from the governance model inherited from the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. This means shrinking the State. Specified targets include shedding the public sector labour force by 3%, increasing sub-contracting and other alternative forms of service delivery, reducing the weight of labour costs and increasing user fees (Hurteau and Fortier, 2015). Basic education has been a target since 2010 and the newest round brings recurrent cost savings to CAD1.3 billion over an estimated CAD15 billion budget (Institut de Recherche et d'Information Socio-économique (IRIS), 2015). The government's official line of argument is that funding cuts can be achieved without consequences for service quality and accessibility – a claim strongly disputed by various stakeholders, including the parents' federation, the school boards' federation and the school management association (Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec (FCSQ) and Association des directions générales des commissions scolaires du Québec (ADIGECS), 2015). In short, the austerity drive has been legitimised by reference to the recurrent budget deficits, with public sector workers asked to sacrifice working conditions on the altar of responsible financial management. Analysis suggests that another storyline is equally credible. The government programme goes beyond a fiscal crisis and aims at more permanent restructuring, with the goal of a smaller government sector relying on contributions from the private sector.

## **Collective bargaining under austerity**

Collective bargaining for teachers is part of a centralised institutional framework that sets conditions for 480,000 unionised government employees (Boivin and Grenier, 2011). This three-tier framework divides bargaining between a central cross-sector forum for compensation (pay, benefits, retirement plans, regional disparities and parental rights) and sector-level forums for work organisation and normative issues (e.g. seniority and seniority rights, personnel movement, sick leave provisions, promotions, demotions and discipline). At both tiers, the right to strike is limited, subjected to essential services legislation, and Québec has a long history of harsh back-to-work legislation and government decrees establishing work conditions (Boivin and Grenier, 2011; Fontaine, 2008; Panitch and Swartz, 2013). The third tier is local bargaining over a restricted number of issues, and local unions and school board management are mostly involved in enforcement of the sector-level collective agreement.

The direct employers of teachers are regional school boards, and union formation follows the general rules set out by the Wagner model. Union recognition and certification are achieved for each school board. At the time of writing, 54 local unions represented teachers employed by the 72 school boards. Because collective bargaining takes place at

sector-level forums, local unions affiliate with labour federations and there are three such federations for public school teachers.

In the current round of negotiations that started in March 2014 the government offered a 3% salary increase over 5 years, in exchange for reduced retirement entitlements and a pushing back of the retirement age from 60 to 62 years, weakened parental and sick leave entitlements, less generous cost of living allowances for workers in remote areas and poorer work conditions for non-permanent staff who represent close to 40% of teachers in public schools. The government made two justifications: inability to pay and the need to align work conditions with those in the private sector.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of writing, work organisation and classroom conditions are the subject of negotiation by the representatives of each respective bargaining agent at the sector-level provincial forum for teachers. The recurrent theme has been flexibility and the need to do more with less. The two labour federations discussed in this article consider that the government is attempting to claw back progress made over more than 20 years of struggle for the recognition of teachers' work and professional autonomy, and that it is denying the importance of professional services for pupils with special needs and learning disabilities.<sup>3</sup> The government agenda calls for extended work time including after-hours extracurricular activities without compensation, more flexibility in task assignment outside of teaching, reinforced teacher evaluations, greater individual accountability and removal of caps on class sizes.<sup>4</sup> Restructuring is about flexibility, increased workloads and, more generally, doing more with less. Both federations estimate that these changes will lead to 3000 job losses in teaching and nearly 2000 among support and professional staff.<sup>5</sup> This claim has not been contested by government officials.

## Cross-sector bargaining strategy

The two federations that form our case study are the *Federations des syndicats de l'enseignement* (FSE) and the *Fédération autonome de l'enseignement* (FAE). The FSE is affiliated to the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), a peak council; the FAE is autonomous and not affiliated to a broader labour organisation. In this section, we analyse the choices each federation made with regard to the institutional framework for collective bargaining over compensation.<sup>6</sup>

In Québec, individual unions and labour federations may operate alone, but most have either formed Common Fronts or alliances with other organisations. In any event, the government package was the same for all groups. The FSE strategy is tied to that of its parent body, the CSQ. The CSQ is part of a Common Front with four other large peak organisations that represent workers in the public sector. At the time of writing, the Common Front had held 2 days of protests, one on 30 March and the other on 3 October 2015, that drew considerable support from members, and rotating regional strikes were planned for November and December 2015. These strikes brought together government employees, health care and social service workers (other than nurses represented by the Nurses Federation), and school and college personnel (other than those affiliated to the FAE) in 1-day stoppages.

The centralised institutional structure and process raised an important dilemma for the FAE. Going alone might come at the expense of being ignored by government

representatives who favour discussions with large union bodies. Joining the Common Front or an alliance with the FSE meant, however, going against the desire for autonomy and, in the view of federation officials, having its hands tied in terms of strategies. After intense debates with component local unions, the FAE decided on an uncommon and unlikely alliance with the Nurses Federation (FIQ) which shares the same will to remain autonomous from peak union organisations and has a reputation for militant industrial action. The reasoning among FAE officials was that this alliance would provide access to key strategic information without locking the FAE into strategies imposed by other organisations. For instance, the FAE had already secured strike mandates (over 3 days) in March 2015, a mandate it began to exercise when its members walked off the job for 1 day on 28 September 2015 and participated in a mass protest on the same day. Our reading is this choice was motivated by a concern to avoid isolation while allowing a degree of freedom in deciding bargaining strategies at the sector-level bargaining forum for teachers.

### **Sector-level bargaining: Creating purpose, renewing organisation and building capacity**

The FSE is the largest and oldest of the two federations discussed here. It represents 35 local affiliates and a total of 65,000 members outside of Montréal and Gatineau regions. Membership is dispersed over a large geographical area, local circumstances vary greatly and coordination is a considerable challenge. The FSE has gone through various stances towards collective bargaining, from strong militancy in the 1960s and 1970s to a more subdued corporatist approach in the 1990s. In 2005, it experienced internal dissent and growing dissatisfaction from local unions over its top-down approach to mobilisation and organisation.

In 2011, the Federation initiated a programme of renewal with the goal of providing more local autonomy and fostering member engagement and activism. The same year, it also launched a mass media campaign called *Enseigner, Ma Fierté* (Teaching, My Pride), and an extensive members' education programme with emphasis on the history of the teachers' labour movement and progress made in work and classroom conditions over the past 40 years. This process of building discursive capacities among members was part of a larger agenda for organisational change and union renewal which also included a review of the capacities and role of local union organisation. Extensive discussion with local unions identified a serious weakness in the union's support for local organisations and workplace delegates (Le Capitaine et al., 2011). A special education programme was set up for these key players, and local union officials began visiting schools and meeting directly with teachers.

Solidarity and mobilisation were promoted through a series of activities inspired by results of the consultations held in 2011. Activities that met teachers' preferences and enhanced their public image and reached out to stakeholders such as parents were organised on an ongoing basis. These included marathons and other sporting events, barbecues, cultural events and gatherings at local sporting events. Teams of teachers, called *Commandos*, were organised in each region with the mission to intervene at public and political events to discuss the consequences of austerity measures for schools and pupils.

For example, the current government organises Summits on the future of public education from which teachers are strangely excluded. The FSE has been able to infiltrate these events and force debates in the media over its agenda for public education.

Since 2014, federation officials and the *Commandos* have organised various events that have also provided opportunities to frame issues in a favourable way. An example is the ongoing campaign named *L'École à Bout de Bras* (Holding it Together) that has captured attention in the media and, more importantly, drawn support from stakeholders in local communities. These initiatives have proven very effective in framing the political debate and forcing the government into a defensive mode. The FSE has been successful in pushing forward a narrative that public school teachers are defending the interests of parents and pupils, and that cuts in funding and government demands for concessions in work conditions will only make matters worse for these stakeholders.

In what way has the federation taken into account the desire for local autonomy? First, the strategy, the calendar and the various mobilisation activities have been developed in consultation with representatives of local unions and individual members. Rather than a one-size-fits-all model, local unions could access six mobilisation packages and adapt activities, slogans and material to local preferences and circumstances. The federation used social media to stimulate emulation between local unions. For example, a local union held a *Day of Marking and Preparation* on a Saturday in a local shopping mall. The participation of teachers was beyond expectations. The event went viral on the web and was soon taken up everywhere in the province. A complete list of all initiatives is beyond the limitations of this article, but between March 2014 and September 2015 more than 290 local activities had been held with considerable success in terms of member participation and support from stakeholders and parents.

While it is too soon to draw conclusions, it appears that the FSE has been able to influence the popular and political debate over austerity in public education. In terms of our analytical framework, the FSE has taken advantage of government measures to bridge the gap between the vested interests of teachers and those of parents and the broader community. The government's austerity agenda also offers a window to revive member engagement and provides a testing ground for a hybrid form of organisation based on greater local autonomy. That is, the federation is in the process of moving from an organisation in which initiatives are decided at the top and relayed to local unions to a hybrid form that preserves strategic and coordination functions at the top, while local unions can exercise discretion and autonomy over the kind of actions they will undertake according to their own timetable. The federation provides resources and expertise for local initiatives. This decentralised approach also seems to motivate member participation in traditional union affairs and General Assemblies are attended in record numbers.<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, strike votes, which must be held in each local union, have garnered record support hovering above 80%, even if most union affiliates do not have a strike fund and members have been told that the end result will probably be back-to-work legislation and a government decree.

The FAE regrouped eight local unions representing 35,000 teachers. It was formed following a split from the FSE in 2006 over its top-down approach to mobilisation and organisation. Component unions have long been considered the most militant and autonomous factions of the teachers' labour movement in Québec. Important founding principles were local union autonomy on all matters other than the process of collective

bargaining (which in any case is centralised), the autonomy of the federation council and assembly from its executive board, and rejection of corporatism in favour of active militancy. As the federation's president stated, local autonomy, anti-corporatism and militancy are part of its DNA. Local union autonomy can be appreciated in the decision taken by three component unions of the FAE to join the strike movement initiated by the Common Front, the competing umbrella organisation, on 3 October 2015 even though the FAE was not on strike that day.

As indicated, the FAE was formed out of opposition to the top-down approach to bargaining and organisation that characterised the FSE. As the federation president and vice-president both put it in interviews, mistrust of federative rules and regulations is strong and many local unions view the federation as both a service organisation and a political voice. Our research has thus unveiled two challenges informing current initiatives for organisational change. The organisational challenge is building cohesiveness among local unions and between local unions and the FAE. Creating and defining purpose means the FAE must move forward, from an organisation built out of opposition to another, to an organisation that has its own purpose and goals.<sup>9</sup>

To address both challenges of organisation and purpose, a review commission was set up in early 2013 with the mandate to propose improvements to internal participation processes and coordination within the ranks of the FAE.<sup>10</sup> Proposals called for changing internal decision-making and participation processes, improvements in the conduct of debates among union delegates at federation councils and clearer definition of the role of the FAE in terms of political representation, collective bargaining and province-wide mobilisation. Moving from a bottom-up organisation is considered risky (in the opinion of national leadership) given that component unions formed the FAE in opposition to what was viewed as top-down control within the FSE. Current austerity measures may provide a window of opportunity to redefine a role for the federation and ease the process of change towards a hybrid model of coordination between the federation and its component unions.

Many of the initiatives undertaken by the FAE share similarities with those developed by the FSE. The federation has intervened in public debates and confronted elected government officials over various issues related to education and austerity. Perhaps because of its smaller size and smaller geographical spread, *Shock Troops* of the same kind as the FSE's *Commandos* have been formed out of federation political personnel and local union militants. These *Shock Troops* have proven effective in disturbing political gatherings organised by the governing party, school board and school management meetings and other gatherings where education policy and management are discussed. They have also been very active in confronting local school officials over cuts in services and have attracted media coverage. Creative media campaigns have not only denounced government policies but also put forward alternatives to change the narrative over public education. Examples are the campaign against marketisation of schools called *L'École Bon Marché* (Low-cost School) and the campaign against government demands over workloads and teacher autonomy named *Prof-automatic*. These, according to union officials, have provided a basis from which teachers and union officials engage various stakeholders.

Local union responses have varied widely because of the strong degree of autonomy, but they have included boycotts of student and extracurricular activities and refusal to

work beyond contract. Local union officials have intervened at school board meetings and union school delegates have done the same in various school committees and with parent associations. In short, the context of austerity provides the FAE with an opportunity to ease the transition from a bottom-up to a hybrid form of organisation and experiment with a division of responsibilities that respects local autonomy all the while promoting a stronger presence for the federation.

The efforts deployed by both federations at developing new capacities have not excluded more traditional forms of industrial action. While many teachers are ambivalent over any type of action that may damage the image of public education and penalise pupils, most have actively or passively supported boycotts of administrative tasks that fall outside the terms of the contract and of extracurricular activities. Teachers have adhered to a work-to-rule campaign and refused to work beyond contract. They have also supported, sometimes reluctantly, initiatives such as demanding that school management sign petitions and declarations opposed to cuts in funding. Workplace delegates and teacher representatives on various committees with outside stakeholders have voiced their concerns over the impact of austerity measures and the future of public education. At the time of writing, FAE and the FSE have organised their own short-term strikes – the difference being that the FAE has acted first and on its own, while the FSE parent peak organisation (the CSQ) has joined other public sector unions in days of protests and rotating strikes throughout the province.

While our research results do not allow identification of any causal relations between events, it is worth noting that other stakeholders have also organised protests against austerity measures in public education. Since the start of the school year in September 2015, the *Federation of Parents Associations* has initiated a movement named *Je Protège mon École* (Protecting our Schools). On a rotating basis and at a fixed day in the month, parents and their children join teachers and other school personnel in forming human body shields around samples of 200 public schools. Even more surprising has been the involvement of the *Federation of School Managers* and the *Federation of School Boards* who have initiated a coalition with the *Federation of Parents Associations* called *Unis pour l'Éducation Publique* (United for Public Education). This kind of temporary alliance with other stakeholders – parents and management representatives – is unknown in recent history and both federations decided to actively support this protest movement.

In summary, both labour federations have responded to austerity measures in public education according to their own history and internal challenges. While the public sector collective bargaining regime calls for centralised bargaining, both federations have turned to local unions to mount what appears to be an effective opposition. Opposition and industrial action have been supported and, to some extent, driven by local members and organisation.

## Discussion and conclusion

Austerity measures imposed by the Québec government were not as harsh as experienced elsewhere, but the size of the cuts outpaced the current deficit and it appears that a more comprehensive attack on public services has been underway. If one considers only government demands over compensation issues, the logical conclusion is that the

current government has been pursuing an already established trend of declining purchasing power for public sector workers (Grenier, 2010, 2014), and we have been witnessing the usual political dynamics and process of union-management relations in the Québec public sector (Boivin and Grenier, 2011; Grenier, 2014). When we consider change at the workplace and the cuts in funding, the picture becomes more complicated but points to an agenda that goes beyond economic and fiscal recovery and the usual jostling over wages and compensation. If our reading is correct, then, austerity measures and policies have aimed at introducing more permanent changes to the public sector workplace, and at restructuring work and services in line with the goal of a smaller government sector offering less services and a more demanding work environment (Fairbrother et al., 2012).

In the case of public education at least, restructuring of the labour process has been at the heart of the government programme. Our cases illustrate how austerity may provide a cover and legitimacy for policies meant to shrink the State and entrench principles of flexibility, doing more with less and increased management control that have accompanied many such offensives elsewhere since the late 1980s and 1990s (Peters, 2011). It would also seem that the most recent austerity drive has aimed to accomplish the programme initiated in the early 21st century that had stalled because of resistance and mobilisation from a wide-range of political organisations, citizens groups and unions. Back then, however, the government agenda had resulted in a cost-cutting exercise and a partial restructuring of the public sector labour process (Jalette et al., 2012). This time, the government would seem to have extended this programme to teachers and public education.

This observation raises issues regarding union strategic responses, and especially how they attempt to mobilise their own members and public support in opposition to the government agenda. Our research results suggest that austerity measures provided favourable ground for the development of renewed union capacities, reaffirming union purpose and the role of both federations. They also suggest that the union narrative over the consequences of cuts in funding has succeeded in bridging the gap between the vested interests of teachers and those of the broader community (Fairbrother, 2015; Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Efforts invested in promoting the image of teachers have paved the way for increased engagement of members and new-found activism. Both federations developed media campaigns that raised awareness about the consequences of austerity measures, contributed to a positive public image of teachers, put forward an alternative agenda and, in the end, changed the narrative over austerity. This reminds us that public sector unions can act in ways that politicise public sector restructuring (Fairbrother et al., 2012) and counter government policies with their own narratives.

Our answer to the initial question, as the account presented above shows, is that public sector unions are not condemned to defensive strategies and can adopt a more militant stance and actively oppose austerity. Our cases propose, however, that building an effective opposition to austerity requires that they work on the three union renewal dimensions. First, they must frame demands and proposals in terms of the interests of users and the general public and put forward alternatives to the government agenda. Both federations combined building internal capacities with forging alliances with a strategic user group: parents. Second, the case of the FSE illustrates how centralised coordination need not run counter to local union autonomy in terms of mobilisation. Public school teachers

usually shy away from traditional forms of industrial action (Hanson, 2013) and this could have become a serious weakness in the current austerity context. Both federations have been able to overcome member reluctance by gradually bringing members to participate in industrial action that, to some extent, withholds services to pupils. They have framed mobilisation as a means of promoting an alternative agenda. They have not only called for mobilisation against cuts in funding and in working conditions but as a vehicle for promoting teachers' view of education. In short, they mobilised not only against an adversary but in favour of a project for an accessible quality public education.

One may argue that the main driver here is the austerity agenda and the consequences of funding cuts for classroom conditions, on the one hand, and for student services, on the other. It should be kept in mind, however, that without the intervention of both federations, links between the respective interests of teachers and users might not have been made apparent. Parents could have remained passive by-standers of a struggle between teachers and the party in office. Parents and their associations may also have mobilised against teachers and pressured the government to put an end to the turmoil. They have rather sided with teachers, for the moment at least. Thus, the narrative developed by the two federations – that they were pursuing a larger purpose – contributed to favourable grounds for an alliance with other stakeholders.

We started out by asking whether and how austerity measures could provide a favourable context for union revival effort. We also noted that many public sector unions have engaged reviews of their internal processes and structures with the goal of stimulating member engagement. One view is that restructuring of the labour process does provide an opportunity for revival if unions accept to decentralise power and resources to local organisations (Fairbrother, 2008). Another is more critical of decentralisation and views centralisation as essential to the development of cohesive responses across various local unions (Heery, 2002). Bach and Givan (2008) propose a middle ground and a more hybrid form of organisation. It is worth noting that this hybrid form of organisation is coherent with the centralised institutional framework for collective bargaining and the decentralisation of services and management in public education. Both cases studied here provide support for this last thesis in that the two federations are moving towards such a hybrid model of union organisation. While austerity does not explain choices, it did provide a context conducive to experimenting new forms of organisation, developing a narrative that connected with members, and engaged members and local organisations in active forms of participation. While the institutional framework does constrain union choices in terms of collective bargaining per se, they can turn to mobilisation and creative means of member engagement and public support. Thus, as noted by Frege and Kelly (2003) and by Leisink and Bach (2014), collective bargaining regimes and the framework for worker representation do influence union choices but they do not determine the course of action. What seems crucial is the willingness of leadership and organisation to innovate and engage members with a clear agenda that is a reflection of their own aspirations and views of the world, support for local representatives and education programmes and infrastructure support for local organisation (Lévesque and Murray, 2010).

While the events reported here are still unfolding and we cannot therefore offer a definite assessment of outcomes, it does appear unions have taken advantage of austerity

measures to engage their members and change how they relate to workplace organisation. In that sense, the experience of Québec public school teachers and their unions offers a reminder that difficult circumstances may hide opportunities to revive union power if, and only if, union organisations are willing to adopt a critical view of their own organisation. The next challenge for both federations is sustaining member engagement and activism beyond the current collective bargaining context.

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### Notes

1. There are three Labour federations representing teachers in public education: the largest is the *Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement* (FSE-CSQ), the *Fédération autonome de l'enseignement* (FAE), and the Québec provincial association of teachers (QPAT) representing 8000 teachers in the Anglophone School Boards.
2. See Government of Québec Treasury media release, Portail Québec (n.d.).
3. Interviews with a long-time FSE representative at the provincial bargaining table, 20 August 2015.
4. Comité Patronal de Négociations pour les Commissions Scolaires Francophones. 2014. Propositions Patronales en vue du Renouvellement de l'Entente E1. Québec, Québec. 25 pages. Interview with representatives of the FSE at the Sector-level Forum for Teachers, 20 August 2015. Interview with representative of the FAE at the Sector-level Forum for Teachers, 15 June 2015.
5. Interviews with the representatives and the FSE and of the FAE at the sector bargaining table.
6. Basic public education, that is grade school, high school, adult education centres and professional and technical trades centres employ a total of 110,000 teachers of which 64,000 hold full-time permanent jobs, 20,000 hold full-time yearly contracts and another 25,000 are casuals and on call.
7. <https://www.facebook.com/Syndicat-de-l'enseignement-de-la-région-de-Québec>
8. One of the authors attended 15 local union assemblies to verify this assertion. Not only was attendance strong, but younger teachers formed a considerable proportion of attendees.
9. Interviews with the president and vice-president of the FAE, 14 May 2015.
10. One of the authors has been associated with this process as an external expert.

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