

CUPE National's University Workers Meeting in Montreal
Report to the Executive Committee of CUPE 2626
By Fereshteh Modarresi

CUPE held its first ever university workers meeting in Montreal on October 12-14. The conference hosted groups of workers in the university from different provinces of the country calling for national coordination to take measures against unfair, unjust, and at times extremely prejudicial working conditions for contractual staff at universities across Canada or in a broader perspective across North America.

The keynote speaker of the opening session, Bruno Julliard, President of *l'Union nationale des étudiants de France* (l'UNEF) gave an inspiring account of how he and some one million fellow young workers in France rose up against the hugely discriminatory "First Employment Contract" legislation and scored a magnificent victory against the Chirac-Villepin administration, forcing it to withdraw the legislation that enables employers to fire young employees whenever they choose to without justification – one of the summer's most electrifying international labour disputes.

An estimated 1,500,000 people people took to the streets in 160 events across France to protest the legislation that would treat young workers differently than older workers. The *Contrat de première embauche* was to allow employers to sack any worker under the age of 26 without justification during the first two years of employment.

The conference workshops on Friday focused on discussing concrete steps to create new organizational structures at the local, provincial, and national level, so that isolated, disparate, and sometimes small groups of workers in other provinces can benefit from the huge improvements in working conditions elsewhere, such as those recently won in British Columbia's university sector. The victories in British Columbia were also taken as a model of coordinated bargaining, one of the conference's main themes.

The conference also called for developing common strategies for a national or even provincial coordinated bargaining to strengthen the locals to gain in some key areas, including greater job security, wages, benefits, protection against tuition fee increases, and decreasing excessive workload.

Luc Dupuy of the University of Montreal's CUPE local and Michel Ducharme, President of the Montreal Labour Council, shared their existing concerns and historical battles. The conference ended following lectures by Paul Moist, President of CUPE National, and Claude Genereux, Secretary-Treasurer of CUPE National.

Overall the conference was very inspiring and was an opportunity to underscore urgent employees' needs, protection of their rights, improving working conditions across the country, solidarity among the delegates, convincing powerful decision makers to bring education at the forefront of the elections campaigns, and that education is a right and not a privilege.