

AFS Differences political not personal

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need for an organization to represent them.

Wright feels it is necessary to have a regional organization due to the political structure in this area. "Anyone who thinks individual councils can deal with government more adequately than a unified body, doesn't understand the situation."

There have been troubles before . . .

In November 1976 student representatives decided that the loosely structured AFS of that day was ineffective. They understood the necessity for a strong regional organization to approach government. They concluded that when student unions approach governments individually it allows the governments to play the councils off against the other. A unified group can accomplish much more.

These students realized their aims could not be achieved without a sound financial base, a full-time staffperson, and a regional office. At the special plenary, hosted by Mount Allison, they instituted the per-capita fee levy.

In view of government cutbacks to education, regionally coordinated policy decisions were necessary to lobby government. AFS looked to the student unions for participation as well as financial and moral support.

Last year was to be the first solid year in AFS's history, but internal problems held the organization back. Institutions decided to withhold fees to AFS because of its "financial instability". AFS had suffered from organizational setbacks in the summer with the resignation of its staffperson and delays in determining an accurate financial statement.

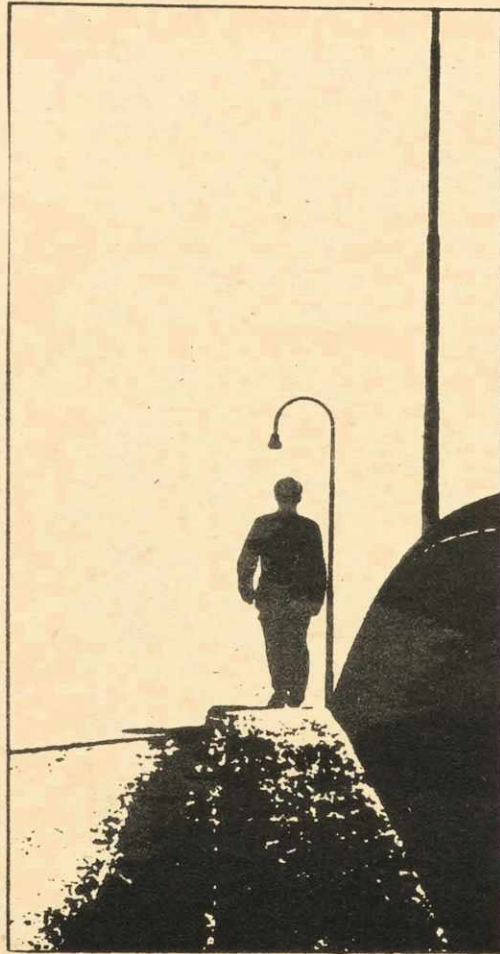
Following an autumn of internal dissension the organization finally appeared to be getting it together and at a December meeting the representatives shelved many of their arguments and instead, discussed issues.

In the spring AFS coordinated protests of government cutbacks for post-secondary education, and worked towards representation on the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC).

Frustration . . .

Student unions are not hesitant to admit that political differences with the executive and staff have been a major problem. Steve Berube, student president at UNB Fredericton, a non-member of AFS, is reluctant to support the organization. "Our philosophical base is different from some of the dominant personalities in AFS. For instance, people tell us to have demonstrations. The time for demonstrations has passed in this province."

UNB is a member of the New Brunswick Coalition of Students which was formed last February during an AFS caucus meeting. Mount Allison,



the councils' grievances.

Bashinski accused the executive of a lack of leadership while Kelly believed, due to other personal commitments, Bashinski had become more of an observer than a participant within the executive.

But few people who were in Wolfville when Bashinski was elected treasurer could doubt his enthusiasm and interest in working with AFS.

This summer Kelly applied for the only fulltime staffperson position with the federation. A move by Dalhousie and Mount Allison tried to prevent Kelly from getting the job. However, due to procedural irregularities, a second vote of the executive took place and Kelly was hired.

Much of the personal antagonism towards the organization appears to be directed at Kelly's continuing presence in a position of influence. "As staffperson I'm not the principle person in terms of policy," Kelly explains. "I'm mainly a resource person who can suggest ways to deal with issues."

also a member of NBCS, had joined AFS around the same time. The New Brunswick students felt there was a need to be organized but didn't want to do it through AFS. They felt AFS hadn't done enough for their province.

"We've been working in the interests of students," says Kelly, "although they don't always agree with us." "We would have to create a more political understanding of the problems we face before we discover what students

on campus think."

"I was willing to work with AFS but I became too frustrated", said Berube. "Perhaps it is a personality clash but I've seen the same frustrations with other people."

Frustration from working with the executive led to the resignation this summer of Howard Bashinski, the organization's treasurer. His letter of resignation and the subsequent reply from Tony Kelly, then secretary-coordinator, became ammunition for

A viable alternative?

At the August meeting the council executives made plans for a "communications network" to replace AFS. The network would consist of a "rotating chair" for 2 months who would collect and distribute information.

Members seemed confused as to whether the network should be regional or provincial and if it should be service-oriented or political. "The communications network is not designed to function on a regular basis", Power later explained. "Information is sent to the chair who distributes copies. It's an information exchange only, not a political body."

"The councillors can coordinate activities", said Power. "They'll respect themselves if they can do something and have power. They need respect." Power is concerned about the image the press portrays of student councils and would like to better their reputation.

Roberge says the student councils could have sent communications around through AFS if they had wanted to. "One problem with AFS is that people never send anything."

"The rotating chair idea has problems", she explained. "For instance, even if they wanted to block-book bands it would be hard to do without a central office."

Roberge points to the logistical problems inherent in the proposed communication network. "There are three filing cabinets in the AFS office. It's not feasible to ship them around", she said.

Wright said MSVU would have no part of a communications network. "We are fully supportive of AFS", she said. "Our council unanimously passed a motion in support of the organization and also agreed we wouldn't participate in any group which undermines or destroys AFS."

"We need something to deal with political problems", she said. "Exchanging ideas is fine for services only."

Lots of work to be done . . .

While internal hassles continue in AFS, the issues are still there. Government funding to post-secondary education has not been close to the amounts requested for two successive years. This year tuition

increased at St. Francis Xavier University, St. Thomas in Fredericton, UPEI, and Mount Allison. Serious cutbacks are affecting institutions and on-campus research is being coordinated by provincial organizations across the country.

Roberge is worried about having to spend time defending the organization rather than working on the issues. "Running a referendum means time, energy, and money, so students won't make decisions in a vacuum. A referendum drains our resources. I hope we won't have to spend our time countering anti-AFS information."

Dalhousie has decided to hold a referendum in late October and the Acadia executive will be approaching its council with the same proposal. "We're just wasting our money", says Acadia's Arsenault.

The UPEI executive members tried to get their council to approve a referendum for that campus, but the proposal did not get by. Kelly, who recently visited UPEI, was pleased with the concern shown to issues such as cutbacks. "They are anxious to get work done", he said.

"There are measures we can take and things we can talk about," Kelly said. "They are talking about the need for direct election of conference delegates from student populations rather than councils. That's something we should all discuss."

Wright believes if AFS can make it through the October referenda and through its regional conference, the organization will survive. "If the referenda passes, people will show support to the organization."

"I know the executive at times has antagonized people, but if the membership participated more, AFS would not have its present problems", she said.

"Some student unions have made an honest effort to work within the federation", Roberge believes. "But, more attention is needed on the important issues."

UNB's Berube admits student unions are as much to blame as AFS but, "it's too late now to work things out."

Gene Long, Atlantic Fieldworker for the National Union of Students, said he hopes students still plan to continue with the national cutbacks campaign. "Efforts are being made by the AFS staff and executive. There is a widespread disenchantment in the region. If the councils won't turn around it'll be hard to get a cohesive campaign off the ground."

Long believes council people are conscious of the severity of the issues. "The position of students has become more crucial and people realize it."

"It would be easier if AFS was in a solid state but I hope people will participate no matter how traumatic a time AFS is having."

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