

Conference preview

Crucial for Atlantic students

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As Atlantic students face the grim prospect of higher tuition fees next year, and probably in the following few years, delegates at the sixth conference of the Atlantic Federation of Students will find the organization at a crucial turning point when they meet at Mount St. Vincent University this weekend.

Tormented recently by internal dissension and a lack of funds, the federation will have to unite and develop concrete strategy to deal with issues concerning students, or lose all credibility and fade into oblivion, taking with it any organized resistance to the economic difficulties affecting Atlantic students.

However, the tension between student council representatives and the AFS executive which has been characteristic of the organization since September, is considerably less obvious when each is called upon to outline the issues concerning the federation and post secondary students in the region.

Don Soucy, secretary coordinator of AFS, says the executive will be explicit in the report it presents to the conference. The executive has been researching during the summer, he says, and will give the conference a clear position on what course the federation should pursue.

"If we are going to fight fee increases, then let's not pretend to fight them," Soucy says, adding the fight against fee increases will be difficult, requiring militant action from all students. The executive will present its position to the membership to either accept or reject it, but they will want a clear mandate from students. Soucy hinted the executive will have serious doubts about the future of AFS if that position is not strong.

Marc Allain, chairperson of the Nova Scotia caucus of AFS, shares Soucy's views, and is adamant the federation will have to come up with a solid united policy to confront problems facing Atlantic students, particularly cutbacks in education and social services.

Allain maintains if there is no such policy, the organization is almost useless. "Right now AFS is limited to a few people doing a lot of work. The organization will have to adopt some sort of direction."

He points out that individual students and student unions do not have the resources within their power to effectively oppose government on the issues. However, he says, "AFS provides students with a structure to organize in response to government actions."

Allain believes students must realize their power rests in the collective. He said the problems facing students are regional, but the Nova Scotia caucus is not getting support from the other provinces in the region and if it continues he will have to question whether the Atlantic Federation is worthwhile.

While the executive is determined to extract some clear direction from the membership, student council representatives seem more interested in approving a constitution and formalizing structure. Although few dispute the nature of the issues affecting students, the councils are more concerned with the organization's bureaucracy and developing a low key lobby approach with government.

Terry Morrison, Vice-president

external for the Acadia Student Union, believes AFS needs this conference: "We don't have a formal structure or a constitution." He says the organizational, constitutional and financial matters within the federation should be straightened out before AFS starts lobbying government.

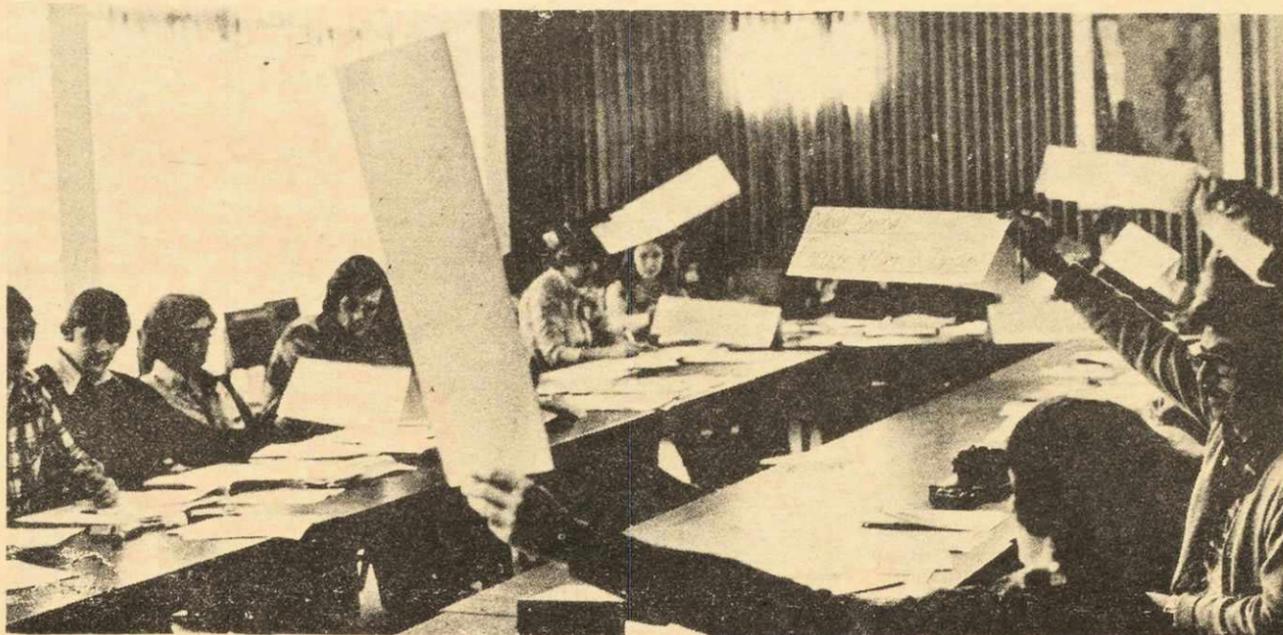
Morrison thinks AFS has a great potential but claims the lack of structure as he sees it deters from the organization's credibility. The

of a formal structure will provide a guideline for the organization and illustrate the real and valuable basis of AFS for non-members.

Craighead probably represents the most pessimistic viewpoint anywhere within the Atlantic student group. He wonders whether AFS, as a concept in practise, can do anything to affect policy decisions at the level from where it will eventually affect students. He does, however, want to see a united

federation was left virtually where it began: an Atlantic federation in name only with the work of a few committed volunteers carrying the weight of the rest of the region.

The breakdown between the local campus student unions and the regional body is presently a breakdown in practice, since the unions are responsible for the appointments of AFS representatives at the regional conferences and the provincial caucus meetings. Through



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major focus for an organization such as AFS is to lobby government on unemployment and educational cutbacks he says, and the best way to do this is to become a "legitimate" voice for the students.

Morrison says a traditional lobby approach is the best way to address government and achieve results, a notion echoed by Robert Sampson, president of the Dalhousie student union. Sampson, who gained some notoriety this year as the leader of a move to withhold student union funding from the regional body, contends AFS should "find out what the students really want", before pressuring government.

Sampson accuses certain groups within the organization of slowing the initial progress of the federation by taking action that is too extreme. "The march last year on province house was a stepping stone. It played its part." He thinks the organization should follow up the tuition demonstration with lobbying: "there is no point throwing rocks and asking questions later."

He admits the move to withhold students' fees from AFS, initiated by the Dalhousie student council in early October, could have caused the federation serious damage, but feels people are now more conscientious about paying for the organization and are willing to consider forming a solid structure.

The major issue confronting AFS in the near future, according to Sampson, is the impending tuition fee increases next year and the MPHEC stand before the Council of Maritime premiers in its recently released report. "The governments have little to play with," he says, adding the federation has a great potential to ensure the students' position is not forgotten in the meantime.

Like Morrison, and John Craighead, president of the Mount Allison Student Union, Sampson considers the approval of the constitution a major priority for the conference. He thinks the adoption

organization with a firm structure result from this conference, which in his opinion is a develop or decline point for AFS.

The most readily manifested differences between Student Union representatives and the present executive, appears on the surface at least, to be a question of strategy and tactic in dealing with government. Even then the differences are lost over to an acknowledgement of the advantages of the different methods each use to confront government: Sampson, Morrison, and Craighead all agree the AFS-NUS march on province house here last year was extremely effective, and is a tool that could be used again; whereas Soucy and Allain say they see certain merits to meeting with government and its representatives within the context of continuing work on student concerns.

The real basis for conflict between the AFS executive and the individual student councils is most likely inherent in the structure of the federation. There is likely to be a certain distance between the local origin of an alliance such as AFS and the regional group itself. That kind of gap, which is usually overcome by simple communication, widened out of proportion in AFS as the organization rushed headlong into a setup it was not adequately prepared to support.

This academic year was to be the first real year of operation of the reformed AFS. With greater financial resources and a full-time staffperson the membership hoped to move into greater coordination among the region's institutions leading to combined greater confrontation on the issues.

However, poor financial preparation for the summer lull, and a tacit mistrust of the organization by individual student councils resulting in no income, all but shattered what continuity and credibility AFS had won during the initial organizing thrust of last winter. The

their voting right to determine policy at the conferences and executive members at the caucus meetings, the student unions have in theory the ability to democratically represent the students of their campus to the regional organization.

Yet, for some reason, many of the student unions have managed to perceive themselves as something apart from AFS, leaving the regional executive with much of the task of discharging policy, let alone developing policy for the organization in the first place.

The executive, Soucy says, has some very concrete ideas and plans for AFS policy that it will present to the conference. He feels the executive has developed policy and proposals for effective work that could provide an excellent guideline for AFS in the near future.

There will be suggestions, he says, for systematic coordinated opposition to looming fee increases next year, ways for AFS to monitor changes in student aid plans that will lead to more centralized systems of deciding and distributing student aid, a cooperative approach to organizing unemployed students and workers, and proposals for a consolidated structure including a draft constitution from a committee appointed at the May conference in Sydney.

Soucy and the remainder of the executive want a decision on their position from the AFS membership: "We are going to put it on the table so they can discuss it and vote on it, we don't want any backrooming bullshit." Other members of the executive are apparently in full support of Soucy's position, Allain to the point of suggesting he and others will resign unless the executive report is considered in good faith.

"We want and encourage all students to come to this conference," Soucy says, adding vehemently, "but we want real students, not student bureaucrats."