

THE NIGHT THE STUDENT PRESS BURNED DOWN

CUP reaffirms itself as Canada's other student movement

BY RICK JANSON

They all looked like walking wounded. Some are drunk. Some are tripping on LSD. Some are just plain tired.

We were assembled in a small lodge in back of the hotel New Year's Eve. About 60 members of the student press were in a small room quietly listening to a candidate for national executive of Canadian University Press. A lit fire in the center of the room made the gathering seem more like a social event than a business meeting. Suddenly the lights went out. There was a bit of nervous laughter. After a delay of a few minutes the candidate decided she would continue her screening by the minimal light the fire provided. Slowly the room started filling up with people as she continued. At one point there must have been over 100 delegates in the room. The noise at the back increased. After being beckoned to hold it down several times, someone at the back said the hotel was on fire.

The screening abruptly ended as candles were handed out and delegates told to stay put. The hotel management opened up the bar and within half an hour free drinks were being passed out.

Meanwhile a huddle of CUP staff people and conference organizers met in a corner of the lodge to quickly decide on the future of CUP's 47th annual meeting held this year in North Bay, Ontario.

The lodge continued to fill up with more than 130 conference delegates as well as numerous others who had been dining in the hotel restaurant that evening. Some had dashed the 30 metres from the hotel to the lodge without coats or shoes. The place was wild with excitement. In our corner we screamed at each other in order to be heard. CUP 47 had to go on. There was too much at stake to let a hotel electrical fire stop the organization.

The co-operative of Canadian student newspapers has come a long way from its emotionally charged beginnings in December 1937. CUP directly employs 10 staff members across the country to write, edit and transmit news and features to the organization's 53 member newspapers. It maintains bureaus in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax in addition to its national office in Ottawa.

As well as keeping the news moving, these people also act as consultants to the papers helping them with organizational, editor-

ial, political or business problems.

The organization also owns a \$1 million a year national advertising agency which provides the papers with a substantial portion of their budgeted revenue.

In the Ottawa office there is a print shop which is co-owned by CUP and the Canadian Federation of Students. It is here CUP's print services are produced. Each week member newspapers get a package of national news, features and graphics to supplement their own editorial efforts.

The annual national conferences are the only opportunity members from across the country get to meet and decide on the future of the organization. It is here services are planned, budgets drafted, new members accepted, national office staff elected and political direction set.

Four in the morning New Year's Day CUP staff and organizers are crowded into a room at another hotel three kilometres away. The manager of the hotel is describing the facilities available.

The delegates had been brought in from the previous hotel throughout the night. They look like walking wounded. Some are drunk. Some are tripping on LSD. Some are just plain tired.

The Ramada Inn is somewhat of a shocker from the darkness of the Pinewood Park Hotel. Long

gloomy corridors and a pretentious chandelier hanging in the foyer are a contrast to the pre-fire comforts of the original hotel. Obnoxious New Year's revellers stagger throughout the halls with drinks in hand making offensive remarks to the CUP refugees. The CUP delegates respond in kind. But at least there is electricity and there are meeting rooms. The show will go on.

Throughout the night exhausted people work on re-establishing a conference that had previously taken a year to plan. Equipment is retrieved from the Pinewood. Meeting rooms have to be allocated and set up. A newsletter has to be produced and distributed under the doors of sleeping delegates.

Much of the debate at this conference had been ideological in nature. Although services and finances produced a few heated moments on the plenary floor, the political struggles take on a charged emotional quality that spills beyond the confines of the meetings and into the corridors.

Much of the political focus surrounds CUP's statement of principles. At CUP 47 a special commission was struck during the conference to look into the controversial document.

The key source of aggravation for some delegates is the clause in the statement that calls on student newspapers to function as "agents of social change."

The clause was born out of the analysis of the "new journalism" founded in the '60s, recognizing that the press plays a role in shaping society. This clause has challenged the organization to put an emphasis on human issues and get away from an exclusive diet of dry bulletin board coverage of campus events.

As a logical extension of that philosophy, it also has made the organization look inwards at its own political orientation.

During the late '70s and into the '80s CUP placed particular importance on the struggle of women for equality in society. It also noticed that many of those papers that put emphasis on these rights at conferences also had predominantly male hierarchies on staff and sent male delegates to represent their papers at conferences.

The battle soon became internalized and very personal. Trying to cope with this problem, those who wanted to change the status quo came up against squishy liberals who agreed change was

necessary but felt entrapped by the measures to cope with it.

This year was no exception, as squishy liberals labelled those for change "radicals" and the radicals called the squishy liberals "agents of Bambi." The only difference was this year there were fewer Bambis than in the recent past.

In the end a new statement of principles was drafted borrowing heavily from the previous one. Most importantly, CUP papers reaffirmed they were to be "agents of social change."

New Year's day the conference gets back on its feet. Screenings for national office candidates continue through the afternoon while commissions dealing with various elements of the organization meet to draft motions and hash-out last minute ideas. Meanwhile the Ramada scurries to cope with an unexpected 130 guests.

Organizers in Tilden vans spend the afternoon taking small groups of delegates back to the Pinewood Park Hotel to retrieve their belongings left in the rooms.

That night the final plenary begins. Rushed commissions present numerous motions on the conference floor for debate. Earlier in the day candidates for national office had repeatedly stated that CUP had become the student movement in Canada—a reflection on the recent swing to the right by the Canadian Federation of Students. A sense of perseverance existed on the floor as the nuts and bolts of our student movement were hashed out.

A little after 5 a.m. January 3 CUP 47 finished. Those who were still awake left the plenary room and headed across the hall to dance.

The veterans of CUP's recently tumultuous past breathed a sigh of relief seeing the organization had made it through another year principles intact.

At noon the buses came to take the delegates back to Toronto where they would disperse back across the country. In the hotel foyer under the tacky chandelier delegates from diverse regions hugged each other and said their good-byes. I, like many, promised to see them again at next year's national conference. CUP is like that.

Rick Janson is a former Atlantic bureau chief and national vice-president of Canadian University Press.

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