

take it back to the students OR the key to CUS survival

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PORT ARTHUR — Last August, in a widely-misreported speech, then-incoming CUS president Peter Warrian told delegates to the Canadian Union of Students congress "this is the year to take it to the people."

Somehow, it didn't happen, and CUS finished the year with fewer members, bigger travel bills incurred through flitting around the country fighting referenda, and the same problems.

The student councillors who attended that convention found that the people on their campuses didn't like what CUS was saying in its policy resolutions, possibly because nobody was quite sure how the reality of Canadian problems related to rousing choruses of "Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh!", red and black flags, and dimly understood rhetoric about American imperialism and the evils of capitalism.

This year, at the Lakehead CUS congress, Warrian tried again.

"At the last Congress," he said in his opening State of the Union address, "We made a positive breakthrough towards building a relevant national student union in English-speaking Canada."

"However, the victory we won there was largely a rhetorical victory. Against the backdrop of Columbia, France and Chicago, we generated a revolutionary rhetoric and the beginnings of a framework for critically analyzing Canadian society."

"Our greatest shortcoming," he added, "was a lack of programmatic content."

He urged a reappraisal of CUS as a union; asked whether the unions' present structure could be a basic tool in coping with the problems of Canadian society; and called for alternative structures that would take CUS and the student councils "back to the people."

This should have been the crucial debating point during the rest of the congress. Instead, too many delegates channeled their efforts, not into understanding the rhetoric, but in rewording it to appeal to their more moderate constituencies.

For example, in one resolution, the term "American imperialism" was reworded to something like "American control of Canadian industry."

The fundamental struggle over the structure of the union was carried on by the left and the right-wing elements at the conference.

Conservatives' proposed federation dies for lack of support

Conservative delegates from four universities, noting that CUS is not a union or even a movement, wanted to turn the clock backward several years by turning CUS into a voluntary federation.

Gests Abols, president of the University of Toronto student council, noted that "attempts to build a mass movement out of an organization which lacks all the characteristics have created a dynamic which this static structure can't cope with."

Abols' proposed solution, the federation, would unfortunately change only one aspect of the contradiction he outlines by retreating to what he called "an embryonic stage of the new status quo, in effect, a liberal organization."

And this is, in effect, no solution. It merely counsels students to incur some sort of collective amnesia, to deny what they have learned about the role and structure of the university within Canadian society; a society dominated by American corporate capitalism. It counsels students to avoid seeking answers to their problems — in fact, to deny they have problems.

The congress delegates recognized this fact, and the federation proposal died on the Plenary floor for lack of a seconder.

That left two alternatives: a smashed CUS — "belly-up at Christmas" some called it — with another string of referendum defeats in the fall term; or a new CUS.

"We cannot be back," Warrian told the congress. "We don't smash CUS, but we do smash through the limitations of the structures of present student unionism."

In an interview after the congress, incoming president Martin Loney appeared to recognize what kinds of changes were needed, although he was occasionally bitterly attacked by some delegates for adopting a line that was too "moderate."

"As student councils become involved in political actions on campus, and are not just concerned with administering student services," Loney said, "they have to move from small elitist groups to involving as many students as possible."

"It becomes the responsibility of the council to take all political decisions to the campus, to mass meetings. They have to devote a large part of their resources to those political actions, to bringing in outside speakers, putting out course critiques, etc."

"And they have to get the university members involved in their own departments in classroom organizing. The first step in democratization of the university is democratizing the students union."

"We have a policy which is meaningful," Loney said, referring to CUS, "and given those structural changes, student councils can be effective in getting a lot of that policy into the campus, and action taken on them."

If this taking it to the people work is to be done, however, the councils are going to have to lay themselves down on the line much as CUS has done in the past year.

Warrian demands structural changes in student governments

"We're going to need a new kind of student unionism," says Warrian.

"Student governments are going to have to recognize that their structures isolate them from students, and that these structures must be changed."

"And given the anti-political culture of the university, student councillors are going to have to go out on a limb. They are going to have to be prepared to be impeached in some cases, and this will pose a difficult decision for some whose identities are closely tied to their positions on the councils."

Besides the right wing, the left elements at the congress tried to draw delegates into fundamental debate on the nature of CUS.

On the second last day the radical Waterloo delegation tried to focus on the issue of unionism with a motion that CUS join the Wobblies, the Industrial Workers of the World. This union was effectively smashed during the 20's for its radical stand on workers' rights, and was an effectively Marxist organization.

But somehow the relevant debate never congealed, and the next night Barry McPeake, chairman of the CUS plenary for six days, stepped out of the chair because he felt his position was "smothering many of the contradictions inherent in this structure."

McPeake spoke about the goals of CUS, and the impossibility of reaching those goals through CUS's essentially parliamentary structure. He noted the "oppressive" atmosphere of the Plenary itself, with its square formation of tables, fragmented debate through microphones, and the meaninglessness of much of what came out of the congress to what is happening in the real world.

He angered many delegates who wanted to get on with the business of passing policy statements and resolutions in the waning hours of the congress.

McPeake's argument said that the resolutions were meaningless in themselves, that they only had meaning if the delegates took them back to the campuses, and that the debate must revolve around the kind of structures that will make these policies a real issue at the home campuses.

This debate, too, appeared to be left hanging about 6 am when the congress got back to "business" — passing a resolution to delete two lines from the Declaration of the Canadian Student.

CUS survival depends on new involvement with students

Did any of it stick? The answer to this determines whether CUS dies at Christmas, or gets reborn through a new relationship of student councils and their constituencies, and the councils to CUS.

Already there is evidence that some delegates have taken up the problem seriously.

Members of at least one large university student council have already begun to discuss creating a real union style of student government. Initially this would mean mass meetings instead of council meetings, with everyone who attended having the right to vote. Hopefully, this would be further carried into political action.

CUS can survive — perhaps can only survive — in this kind of structure if it wants to be part of a student movement.

And CUS can be important, not because CUS can bring into effect the programs it passes at the congresses, but because the congress allows students to come together to discuss and hammer out an analysis of what is wrong in the university, and what can be done about it. Those students will then return to the campuses where they can talk to and work with students not at the congress.

And CUS is important, not because through the publishing and distribution of resolutions and fighting referenda it can convince students of the need for social change in the university, but because it has the resources to do research and distribute its findings, the resources to provide information on issues and provide communication among local councils about what's happening on other campuses.

The CUS resolutions are nothing in themselves.

The confrontations must still come, not in the student council meetings, or even in mass policy meetings. It must come in the classroom with students joining together to struggle towards an understanding of what the content of the courses is, challenging the lecturer, the examination system, doing course critiques, setting up parallel courses and course unions.

Taking it back to the students — successfully — may be the only cure for the disease infecting CUS and the student councils.