



report

Component Organizers' Videoconference

February 23, 2021

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 390,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is situated on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg people and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities.

We recognize and acknowledge the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done.

And, we dedicate ourselves, as a union, to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous Peoples in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Larry Brown, President

Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer

**Component Organizers' Videoconference
February 23, 2021**

PARTICIPANTS

BCGEU/NUPGE	Kari Michaels	Laarni de los Reyes
HSABC/NUPGE	Janice Davis Miriam Sobrino Bobby Chavarie Benson Ho	Katie Riecken Nat Lowe Jaime Matten
HSAA/NUPGE	Hijal De Sarkar Jerry Toews	Amanda Freistadt Tammy Sale
SGEU/NUPGE	Taylor Bendig Dipa Bharadwaj	Don Regel
MGEU/NUPGE	Breigh Kusmack	
NBU/NUPGE	Susie Proulx-Daigle Andrew McGilligan	Leigh Sprague
NSGEU/NUPGE	Jason MacLean David MacKenzie	Lori Smith
PEI UPSE/NUPGE	Karen Jackson	Melissa Bruce
NUPGE	Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer Len Bush, Managing Director (Office of the President) Nadia Ibrahim, National Representative Deb Duffy, National Representative Diane Fowles, Administrative Representative	

1. Land Acknowledgment and Anti-harassment Statement

Chair Len Bush welcomed the participants to the first National Union meeting of Component Organizers. This was an important meeting, as the current pandemic has quickly accelerated the use of many of the digital tools that are available. There have also been some important major campaigns lately, and it is thought that we should take time to learn from each other as much as possible.

Brother Bush then provided the land acknowledgment for the office of the National Union. Participants were encouraged to post their own land acknowledgments in the chat function, or read them as they introduced themselves.

The National Union's anti-harassment statement was included in the package of meeting materials and participants were referred to the statement.

2. Introductions

Brother Bush started by providing a short overview of the day. He mentioned that, while many had attended the meeting with representatives from PSI the previous day, the package of materials from that meeting was available to everyone. In addition, when the report from that meeting is prepared, it will be shared with them.

Len then asked the NUPGE staff to introduce themselves, which was followed by having all participants introduce themselves by Component.

It was then explained that the members of CUBGW were locked out on Saturday, February 20, 2021. Brother Bush reviewed some of the major sticking points in bargaining (pensions, 2-tier wages, and work schedule). It was decided that, during the break, participants would create signs that we would screen capture on Zoom to share with the members of CUBGW.

3. Agenda

All participants had been provided the agenda and participants list via email. There were no changes made to the agenda, and it was approved.

4. National Report

NUPGE Secretary-Treasurer Bert Blundon provided the report from the National Union.

He began his comments by discussing the meeting he'd been in the day before with some US counterparts. It was quite fruitful and provided quite a few good ideas on

tactics and techniques. However, he felt that the greater value was in showing us what to be wary of in government policy, and how to best prepare ourselves in Canada. Unfortunately, many of the anti-union measures introduced south of our border tend to come to Canada eventually.

Bert provided an overview of his background with NAPE and at the Newfoundland Federation of Labour. He felt that this gives him a unique perspective on organizing.

While not everyone in the union may be a formal organizer, it is important to consider all of ourselves as organizers, whether activists, staff, or elected officers. All pieces of the union need to work together to enhance our collective ability to organize.

He was reflecting on the message from the previous day of the importance of organizing “the organized”—organizing and working with our members to ensure they are aware of what you are doing on their behalf. A strong union with an active and engaged membership can be the best organizing tool.

However, most of the attention on organizing is focused on reaching out to those not organized to help them change the conditions of their working life. That is, to give them strength with their employers, with the goal to increase wages and benefits and help them find a voice with the employer.

We must not forget, though, the third aspect of organizing is engaging public opinion. This involves our efforts to influence public policy through membership engagement and public awareness. All this is done with the goal of improving the lives of the many over against the power of the rich and elite.

All these are important pieces of organizing. Each aspect supplements the other. In the same way, the different parts of the union play an important role in organizing.

And this is where the role of the Secretary-Treasurer is important. It helps to find the necessary resources for all these departments to operate and be effective.

Bert then turned his comments to look at the challenges ahead. Most of us expect that, when we come out of the pandemic, provinces will quickly resurrect the old deficit arguments again. Our unions will need the financial resources to push back.

He also reminded participants that this will mean that Components will need to be engaged with the broader community. Our members, our unions, are also members of that broader community. He highlighted recent ads by NAPE, the NSGEU, and HSAA that are effective tools for reaching out.

But once again, ads are expensive but important to bring another element of the union into focus, making our own members feel good, and showing how we embrace the

community. We want to demonstrate that we are allies and not a self-interest group concerned just about our own wages and benefits.

A recent partnership between Components and the National Union is an example of this. NUPGE worked with Components to match funds (up to 50¢ per member) to make a contribution to an important community organization. This both helps these important organizations and shows that the union movement cares.

Of course, much can be said about the importance of having a strike and defence fund. Again, all this shows the importance of our unions being financially stable, founded on a stable dues base, in order to work on behalf of our members and others.

Bert wrapped up his comments by discussing the upcoming CLC Convention. There is broad recognition among NUPGE Components about the need for fundamental change at the CLC. One of the biggest issues is how to be a voting delegate at convention. There needs to be a balance proportionally to the union represented. NUPGE has a resolution going to convention to deal with this. Participants will most likely be hearing more about this in the months to come.

5. Organizing in a Pandemic

A couple of themes became apparent from the participants' discussion.

The onset of the pandemic interrupted some organizing campaigns people were working on. There was a distinct period where very little was happening as members and organizers adapted to the new situation.

The pandemic has quickly accelerated the adoption of many digital communications tools, though all Components had been already moving in this direction. However, the public health restrictions and changes in working conditions (e.g., working from home) seriously impacted traditional communications methods. It was vital that unions quickly shifted focus to those tools that would allow their work to continue.

This shift to online and digital tools was not without its hiccups but has proven quite effective. While many were looking to return to many of the traditional tools in the organizer's kits, all recognized that these new digital tools are here to stay.

There is also an increased acceptance of some of these digital methods by labour boards and employers. Participants reported an increase in the use of electronic filing of cards for certification. Also more use of digital communications when engaged in bargaining or grievance handling.

Participant also reported an increased focus on internal and member organizing. This included communications, as well as online education and training programs and efforts to strengthen contact networks.

Some of this shift, spurred on by the pandemic, saw a renewed interest in unions determining what members need and want. There was a broadening out from what is seen as traditional union matters to look at what members need and want, and engaging in that. There was a reference to the concept of whole-member organizing or whole-person organizing; that is, looking at members as having a wider range of interests and concerns than just the workplace.

While most mentioned that there was not as much organizing going on now as there was pre-pandemic, most noted an increased interest in joining a union, like the case in the US. It was thought that this was a result of the public seeing unions fighting for members' safety, such as in health care, retail, or meat packing.

There was also the public profile of unions arguing for protecting seniors, wage subsidies for workers, employment insurance supports, protection for those experiencing domestic violence, and the need for child care. Most participants expected an even further increase in interest post-pandemic.

Most participants discussed the ongoing need for training and education for organizers. With the explosion of new tools and techniques, many were scrambling to keep up. In addition, there was very little training for many organizers when they took the position in their Components. While all had extensive practical experience, many felt that some formal training would have been beneficial.

6. Use of Communications Technologies

The session started with HSAA providing an overview of their recent member-to-member engagement campaign and the use of many of the new communications tool.

HSAA discussed how they looked to campaigns in the US and in British Columbia and borrowed many of their tools and ideas. They used 6 major tools, 3 of which were relatively familiar and accessible to their activists and members. The others involved a learning curve, but were adopted relatively quickly.

More familiar tools were email, websites, and Zoom. The others were the database Action Builder, the texting platform Hustle, and CallHub for phone calls. It was felt that the campaign was only possible through the use of these tools.

A couple of the participants discussed being part of the broader NUPGE activist base that participated. There was a general discussion of what worked well. They mentioned in particular the importance of ongoing efforts to keep activists engaged and supported.

All Components had started working with many of the tools. During the reports, it became clear that there were a few tools that were being extensively used across Components. The appendix is a chart listing many of these tools.

The BCGEU raised a caution, shared by many participants, that the tools shouldn't interfere with the relationship building with a member. Occasionally, the requirements of the tool would distract the activist or engager from the discussion. The BCGEU also highlighted the importance of reviewing the tools being used. To adapt them to what is actually needed on the ground and not try to push organizing into the existing digital framework.

While discussing the importance of activist support, HSAA and a number of Components highlighted the use of breakout rooms in Zoom. It allowed them to bring smaller groups together to chat and focus the discussion. This also applied during membership engagement.

The role of booking off member engagers was discussed. It has proven a highly beneficial practice for many Components. However, it was pointed out that this also required staff resources for training and ongoing support.

A couple of Components, most notably the MGEU, have been engaged in polling members on their access to the internet and related devices. The limitations presented by reaching rural and northern communities were acknowledged by everyone. Some Components rely on booking rooms in some communities where members can go to access broadband internet. However, this was not seen as ideal.

This also extended to the challenges faced by Components in collecting contact information and keeping it current. The role of databases has become increasingly important in the work.

It was also mentioned by a few Components that they have been working on creating toolkits and training modules for leadership and activists on the new tools. A number had web-based portals for stewards and leadership to assist with sharing information and tracking (e.g., grievances).

7. Use of Electronic Cards and Voting

A few provinces were allowing the submission of electronic cards for organizing. The most advanced appeared to be British Columbia, where the labour board accepts pdf versions of the electronic cards.

For signing the cards, the BCGEU uses Adobe Sign and HSABC uses DocuSign. Both Components talked about the importance of following up with members once the cards are received. The value of a physical card was seen as the ability to engage the individual in the process. Both were looking at combing the process.

The MGEU is moving towards electronic cards, and in the process, updating them using Zoho and mock forms for the development.

For most Components, it was a form of blended process. While an electronic copy of the card could be submitted to the labour board, there still needed to be a physical, signed card provided.

It was mixed across the country how much electronic voting on a contract was allowed by the labour board. In some provinces, this continues to be a source of frustration.

8. Working with Members and Staff

Participants reflected on the question on how we build unity and a solidarity movement in this environment. The foundation of the labour movement is to try to create a sense of *We* among people with a common employer, threat, and source of disadvantage.

All participants recognized this as a struggle but were trying their best. Engaging members from the beginning was seen as essential to building buy-in to their campaigns. Too often the members are left out of the process, and this doesn't allow for full engagement. This is why booking off members to be involved can be beneficial.

While there have been limitations, most participants recognized that the use of the new technologies have proven more effective than originally imagined. However, some consideration still needs to be made for those members who are not as familiar with the technology.

It has allowed many members to engage from home or in more comfortable settings. The tools have also allowed unions to play with the timing of meetings to be more convenient for members.

Also, unlike for many union staff, for some members, there is a novelty to being able to take part online. There has been a notable increase in participation in meetings and educational programs. Indeed, it has provided a sense of empowerment and increased feelings of ownership for many members.

A couple participants pointed out that the fundamental principle is to look for opportunities to make a connection with members. Whether it is in person, or through one of these tools, the goal is still to connect.

Echoing the earlier discussion, it was also highlighted how important it was to recognize that members have a broad range of concerns and that the union did want to limit itself to focusing exclusively on bargaining and benefits. A few Components provided examples of how campaigns against racism, or for affordable housing, have brought new members and activists into their unions.

Finally, while some participants admitted to finding the ice-breaker activities and engagement games not necessarily their cup of tea, it was recognized that these tools played a role. Members are giving up their valuable time, so it is important to be respectful, but also make it a fun and engaging activity.

9. Wrap-up

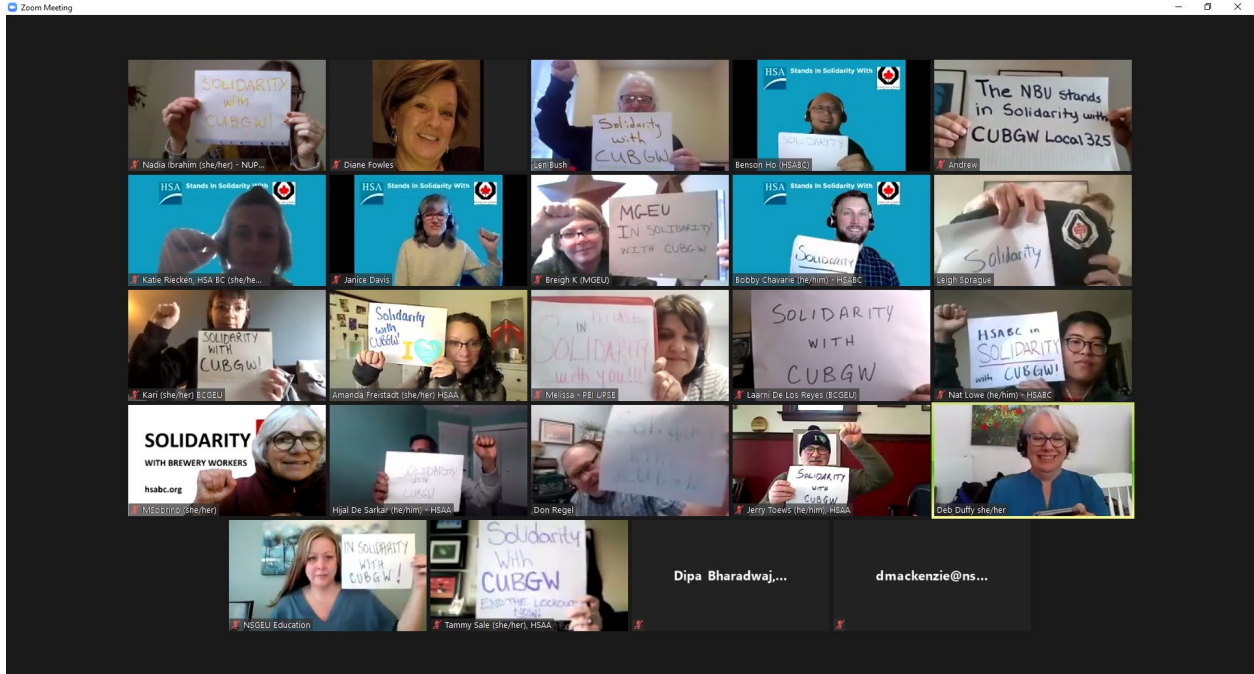
Secretary-Treasurer Blundon provided some closing thoughts for the meeting. He wanted to emphasize how much of the discussion looked at the importance of engaging our members.

He reflected that much of the discussion has also been reflected in the pandemic response by NUPGE. It was broadly seen that we have had more contact with members than in the past. The tools have allowed us to connect in a deeper way than in the past.

There has been far more engagement with activists than in a normal year. While normally we have 5 or 6 working groups a year, we have almost lost count how many we have had over the past 11 months.

While he understood the feeling of being tired of Zoom videoconferences, he feels that, even when we are able to return to in-person gatherings, we shouldn't lose this forum. It provides a lot of members with opportunities that were denied them in the past due to cost.

The response to the meeting suggests that this is a group that the National Executive Board should consider reconvening in the future.



Appendix—Digital tools being used

	BCGEU	HSABC	HSAA	SGEU	MGEU	NBU	PEI UPSE	NSGEU
Video	Zoom	Zoom Webex	Zoom	Zoom Webex	Webex	Zoom	Zoom	Zoom
Database	Nation Builder	Nation Builder	Action Builder	UnionWare	UnionWare		UnionWare	Internal
Texting	Hustle	Prompt	Hustle		UnionWare			
Phone calls	CallHub	CallHub	CallHub					
Other		Slack Steward Access Portal Simply Voting	MS Teams	MS Teams Steward Access Portal	Data on the Spot Simply Voting			MS Teams Union Digital



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

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