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33rd Quebec Federation of Labour Convention
Interviews with Convention Delegates



FTQ Convention recognizes those unions involved in labour disputes, January 19, 2023.

- **Sylvie Thomassin, President, Private Seniors' Residences Division, Quebec Union of Service Employees**
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Interviews with Delegates at Quebec Federation of Labour Convention
Sylvie Thomassin, President, Private Seniors'
Residences Division, Quebec Union of
Service Employees

In this issue, Workers' Forum continues its coverage of the 33rd Convention of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), held from January 16 to 19 under the theme "The FTQ in the Lead -- The Future of the Trade Union Movement," with interviews conducted with various delegates. For prior coverage, see [Workers' Forum, March 13, 2023 - No. 12.](#)

Below is an interview with Sylvie Thomassin, who works in a Chartwell Group Home.



For those of us working in private seniors' residences (RPAs), one very serious problem is the lack of personnel and of listening on the government's part. We are currently fighting to get a ruling from the government that provides basic standards in term of working conditions for everyone working in RPAs. [*Called a collective agreement ruling, such a ruling extends a collective agreement reached in one workplace to all workplaces in a sector, in terms of the working conditions, whether the workers are unionized or not -- WF Ed. Note.*] In May, the employer came to see us at the union because, in certain trades, we had lost our government bonuses. They came to see the union to have our wage scale readjusted, which was an improvement at that time, but is still far from the conditions that exist in the public sector, even though our people are just as qualified. Our nurses have the same diplomas, our attendants have taken the same courses. Our cooks are certified. We have maintenance people who have been there for many years.

We made a request for such a government ruling. Our leaders went to the government with a collective agreement that had been signed in one of our residences and the government told us that we were asking too much. We are asking for too much, supposedly, when what we are asking for is to be paid the same as those in the public sector because we are doing the same job. We are taking care of the generation that built Quebec. We're not taking care of stray dogs on the street, although they are treated better than we are.

I had the opportunity to speak to Chartwell's president and he asked me what it would take for us to improve our conditions. I told him that there had been a breakthrough last May when Chartwell readjusted the pay scales, but that there is still a long way to go. I told him that as an employer, Chartwell is unattractive. We have no drug prescription coverage, no pension fund, no benefits. You can't sort out the staffing shortage with those conditions.

The employer is trying to attract personnel while at the same time, in the name of staff optimization, is cutting the hours of our kitchen helpers. The union executive, of which I am the president, was met with. Right off the bat, Chartwell's human resources manager said they were thinking of cutting my position. What a way to start the day! The general manager of the residence where I work came to my defence because his is the only Chartwell facility with five cooks on staff. He saved my job but they cut the kitchen helpers' hours. I am left alone at my workstation without a cook's helper. Chartwell doesn't show us any respect.

Yet during the pandemic -- just like in the public sector -- we held our residences together. I saw co-workers fall in the battle three or four times because of COVID. We continue to have outbreaks. I still have co-workers who become ill because they have contracted COVID. We have to keep on insisting with the employer that we are in an outbreak and that they have to put these people on the Labour Standards, Pay Equity and Workplace Health and Safety Board (CNESST). They want to

send my members home for 10 days without paying them. Who are they to send my members home without pay?

We need a ruling that establishes decent basic conditions in all RPAs. The government needs to wake up, get these big private residence owners to sit down, and the government has to take responsibility for our conditions.

Chartwell is the largest private residence owner in Quebec and in Canada. They renovated the reception hall at our home. They have money to improve the building, but we have to keep fighting so that their employees, who are there full time and keep the residence going against all odds, are given decent wages. Three-quarters of our members work below the poverty line. We have cases where a woman, who is a single parent, has the difficult choice between paying her rent and feeding her children. What kind of choice is that? In 2023! I have dishwashers working for minimum wage. Unionized dishwashers!

We have an employer who doesn't care about their workers. They think about their shareholders before they think about the people on the floor running their residences.

I still love my job, I still love what I do. I've been fighting for RPAs and my people in RPAs for seven years, and will continue to do so for as long as I keep breathing.

(Translated from the original French by Workers' Forum.)



Hugo Desgagné, Responsible for Occupational Health and Safety Issues for Unifor-Québec

In October 2021, Bill 59, *an Act to modernize the occupational health and safety regime*, was adopted. It modified the provisions contained within the compensation and consolidation system with regard to work-related accidents as well as its health and safety component.



In the context of that reform, the government should have extended the mechanisms relating to health and safety and worker participation, just as they were provided for in the former law for priority groups 1 and 2, the high-risk industries. It decided instead to relegate this to the Labour Standards, Pay Equity and Workplace Health and Safety Board (CNESST).

As a result, a regulatory committee was created, with employer and union participation, whereby we are required to negotiate with employers, to develop a regulation with them. Not surprisingly, it's clear that there will not be any agreement. There's a deadline, as the law stipulates that the CNESST must adopt the regulation by October 2024, otherwise the government will take charge of the issue. So, we have to discuss the matter

with our employers.

In terms of prevention, our positions are diametrically opposed. They're at odds on the number of workers' representatives on health and safety committees; the hours of release for workplace health

and safety representatives (HSRs -- i.e., those who carry out workplace inspections, accompany workers, etc.); and the training of people who participate in health and safety committees and HSRs.

There's no agreement on the training they should receive or the number of hours of training required. Employers say that three hours of training per video should be enough to train health and safety committee members to do their job. Obviously this is not enough. We argue that there should be 40 hours of training for these people, in addition to specific training for HSRs. Also, who will give the training, who will elaborate the training program?

The union's position is that we are the ones with the expertise and we also want to keep some control over the information that will be released. We're able to provide the training, we have the representatives, the people who are trained and who have the expertise to go and train those in the field.

All these aspects are problematic.

As well, the employers want the modified prevention and participation mechanisms to be established according to compensation statistics. For us, from a union perspective, it doesn't make sense because it doesn't take into account the level of those not reporting workplace injuries and illnesses. It doesn't take into account the real risks and risk analyses at the workplace. It also doesn't factor in emerging risks, new risks, because we're only going to be looking at preconceived or traditional risks in certain settings.

What's required is to also take into account the psychosocial risks, the psychological risks, which in the new version of the law are recognized and that is positive. But they must be provided for in the risk analysis. If we simply base ourselves on the statistical data in terms of compensation, we're missing the point.

Employers look at the issue from the point of view of reducing their costs. Moreover, if a company really does have less accidents and fewer fatalities, it means that the prevention mechanisms are working and therefore need to be reinforced.

There cannot be any agreement with the employer on the basis of what they are putting forward.

The spirit of the resolution that was adopted on the Convention floor is that we did a lot of work at the time regarding political and union action on Bill 59 [*which became chapter 27 after its adoption*]. This mobilization must continue and the FTQ Health and Safety Committee must be given the mandate -- which was adopted -- to develop a mobilization plan, an action plan, with budgets allocated to this work, to conduct a vast campaign to put pressure on the CNESST and the government, as well as on employers, for a real modernization of the occupational health and safety system.

For the CAQ government, modernization and improvement do not go hand in hand. We want a system with real prevention mechanisms and effective and active participation, and ownership, within a joint context where employers take up their responsibilities.

In 2021, there were 207 work-related deaths in Quebec. One workplace death is one too many and the way to reduce that number is through prevention, through workers taking charge of health and safety in their workplaces.

(Translated from the original French by Workers' Forum.)



Cédric Joly, Prevention Representative, United Steelworkers Local 7493, Rio Tinto Iron and Titanium, Metal Powders in Sorel-Tracy



United Steelworkers delegation at FTQ convention.

My main concern right now is about reaching out to young workers. We have spoken about it here at the Convention and in several places. It's a union issue. I was on the Quebec Steelworkers' Youth Committee when I was younger. I'm also active in recruiting them in my plant. We want youth delegates in our structure in order to reach out to other youth at our plant. It's something to be concerned about. We need them. We need to continue the discussions on this subject.

The labour shortage doesn't help because young people do not necessarily stay with us for long. They come and go and are not necessarily attached to the workplace.

Young people do not necessarily have the same goals as older workers. We have good conditions at our plant. At Rio Tinto we're in an industrial setting, we have good wages. The issues are not the same. The aim of young people is not to earn \$50 an hour. They don't want to be working overtime all the time. Work-life balance is super important to them. Often youth do not complete the interview process because they're not interested in rotating shifts in maintenance or weekend shifts. Family life is very important to them. If it means \$12 less an hour working somewhere else, they're willing to accept that.

We have to find a way to involve them. At the Youth Committee and during the Steelworkers' Youth Forum, young people need a say and feel that they are contributing, that they're important, that their work is useful. At the end of the day, they need to feel good about what they've done. They think green, they think about their health and happiness.

Young people are there, they want to get involved, they have the courage to assert and express themselves. Many young people at the Youth Forum had never spoken at the microphone. Lots of them spoke and passed the microphone around.

They need to talk, they need concrete things. They want to know what we can bring them as a union. It's a big issue and it's up to us to find out how to appeal to them. We may not have the magic formula yet. The communication channel is not the same as before. We have to work differently, adapt to them. I'm glad we're talking about this, at Steelworkers' conferences, at the FTQ, everywhere.

There are obstacles to this. First of all, as a union, we don't have enough time. We're busy with issues at work, with labour relations. Also, what's going on in society right now is creating a lot of things that keep us busy. It's not obvious how we should respond to everything that's going on.

Another issue, and we experience this a lot in our company and in others that are close to ours, is with employers who do as they please, who no longer communicate with the union. We discuss this a lot amongst ourselves. They no longer want to do things jointly with us, they do things on the floor without talking to us as a union. Rather than work with us and see the union as a partner in solving problems, they want to push us aside.

There are a lot of changes in health and safety, labour relations, technological changes. A lot of people are changing places, schedules, jobs, their lives are changing. This affects our workers a lot, and we have a lot of issues to manage as a result.

We have to accept that we are two parties, but that we have to be able to work together.

We will also have to have more time to deal with the youth and involve them. We need young people. With these multinationals, we need all the involvement we can get. We need to keep our strength as a union.

At present, the employer is managing everything as an emergency and is spending millions of dollars on training, but young people are leaving. Sometimes on weekends, we don't have enough people on the floor to make up a shift. Some people are there, but not enough to do the job.

Labour relations must be looked after as if you're a maintenance worker. You have to take action in advance, predict what is going to happen. You have to manage in an organized way, ahead of time, rather than in disaster response mode.

(Translated from the original French by Workers' Forum.)



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