

## BECOMING AND REMAINING AN INDEPENDENT UNION: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF TWO UNIVERSITY FACULTY UNIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Although workplace unions have many options when it comes to affiliating with a central labour body, some unions decide to remain independent or to disaffiliate after an experience of affiliation. To our knowledge, the literature has not widely examined the reasons behind the decision of some unions to remain independent. Based on a comparative case study of two university faculty unions in Quebec, this article aims to partly fill this gap in analysis. The results show that the particularities of the work of professors and the types of expertise needed to perform their duties influence their choice for union independence.

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### INTRODUCTION

Although central labour bodies are structured in relatively similar ways, they have their own ideologies and operating modes. The role of these bodies does not merely involve providing support to associations in defending employees' interests through collective bargaining. These bodies also play an important coordinating role, provide services to associations and actively participating in political, economic and social life. Although unions have many options when it comes to affiliating with a central labour body, and can choose a body that is adapted to their specific realities, some unions decide to remain independent or to disaffiliate after an experience of affiliation.

This article aims, based on a comparative case study of two university faculty unions, to identify and describe the reasons why the latter opted for independence. The literature has not widely examined the reasons why some unions choose this path. This article aims to partly fill this gap in analysis. This

issue appears to be all the more relevant since, according to the most recent data, approximately 200,000 Canadian workers are represented by 257 independent local organizations (Human Resource and Skills Development Canada 2013). This article thus focuses on the reasons why some university professors in the Quebec context choose union independence.

The unions' decision to remain independent will be the main theme of our examination, which will first describe the unionization of professionals and then review the history of faculty unionism. We will then present the methodological approach and discuss the results.

## **FACULTY UNIONISM AND PROFESSIONALS**

Hodson and Sullivan (1995) define the concept of a profession as "a high-status, knowledge-based occupation that is characterized by 1) abstract, specialized knowledge, 2) autonomy, 3) authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups, and 4) a certain degree of altruism." As a corollary, the process of professionalization includes a degree of standardization of the knowledge and skills needed to practise the profession.

Eaton and Voss (2004) have highlighted the collective potential of professionals. Since the latter enjoy a degree of autonomy in their work, which is often performed alone, and have diverse professional opportunities, they tend to challenge the legitimacy of trade unionism, and thus turn to alternative forms of collective representation, most often professional associations (Eaton and Voss 2004; Hecksher 1996; Milton 2003). These non-union associations are different insofar as they put the specific needs of their represented members, such as skills and career development, training and psychological support, at the forefront of concerns (Bergeron and Renaud 2000; Eaton and Voss 2004; Healy 1999; Hecksher 2001; Milton 2003). Eaton and Voss (2004) have also emphasized the differences between professional associations and the union movement in terms of political involvement. Like unions, professional associations participate in political life and political debates but the interests they defend are those of the profession in the broadest sense, as well as those of their members, without taking a stance on major social issues or public debates. In general, they do not represent the members with their employer (Eaton and Voss 2004).

Milton's study (2003) of the identity dimension of high-tech workers and their propensity to unionize sheds interesting light on the unionization of professionals. Based on image theory (Beach and Mitchell 1990), Milton suggests that workers will be inclined to unionize if they believe that this decision is compatible with the way they perceive themselves and their profession. They will also compare their conception of themselves and of their profession with their perceptions of unionized workers to determine whether they have anything in common with them and whether they want to be associated with them (Milton

2003). Professionals, who believe that they have nothing in common with unionized workers, cannot see themselves as such (Milton 2003). Moreover, in their view, the path of unionization fails to address and solve their problems and needs (e.g., burnout, ongoing pressure to perform and specialize in order to keep up to date) in accordance with their identity (Beutell and Biggs 1984; Milton 2003). Furthermore, they think that unionism is better able to solve problems related to the working conditions of blue-collar workers (Milton 2003).

Since the traditional role of unions is to protect jobs and improve working conditions, the professions' interests and the identity aspect have tended to be neglected (Healy 1999; Hecksher 2001; Milton 2003). An effective system of representation would thus benefit from combining the attributes and advantages of current unionism with those of professional associations (Hecksher 1996: 177-187).

## **THE WORK OF PROFESSORS AND FACULTY UNIONISM**

The work of professors involves three types of activities: teaching, research and administrative duties, such as the directorship of programs or departments, and services provided to the community. Moreover, professional autonomy is central to the professors' sense of identity with regard to work and academic freedom constitutes a fundamental aspect of the profession, giving faculty members the freedom to think, speak, teach and maintain a critical view and distance with regard to society (Nixon 1996). Given the nature of the role of professors, individualistic behaviour is common. Of course, there is collaboration, but the focus on developing their own career paths and enriching their curriculum vitae makes for a competitive environment in which each professor tries to stay ahead, and this logic sometimes overshadows the opportunities for social cohesion (Walker 2009). Nevertheless, according to a recent study, university professors are in favour of unionization and collective bargaining (Katchanovski et al. 2011).

In Quebec, union organizing among professors first developed in the 1960s in the form of voluntary associations with no legal status, and this type of association became the most common (Chung 1973). During the 1970s and 1980s, faculty unionism was consolidated, giving professors access to bargaining power and the right to strike, although at first, reservations of an ideological nature were expressed about unionism, since it was associated with the working class and thought to be incompatible with the academic profession (Ponak et al. 1992). Nevertheless, professors soon realized that effective representation and counter power to university administrators were only possible through this path (Chung 1973; Martinello 2009; Ponak et al. 1992).

At first, the linkage between unionism and other mechanisms of governance specific to the university system was a major concern when it came to identifying

the themes for bargaining. Professors appeared to be in favour of bargaining as long as it was limited to the concerns “traditionally” reserved for the union field. On the other hand, issues related to academic freedom, teaching evaluation, and research support were perceived not to be appropriate for collective bargaining and as being more suitably addressed by other bodies (Ponak and Thompson 1979).

The breakthrough of unionism into the academic community, where union density is close to 80 percent (Dobbie and Robinson 2008), led to the creation of associations that bring together various university faculty unions. These associations, which are different from central labour bodies, are responsible for promoting the interests of professors through the publication of studies or briefs aimed at the governments, rather than focusing on aspects related to industrial relations.

In Quebec, this role is played by the *Fédération québécoise des professeures et des professeurs d’université* (FQPPU, Quebec federation of university professors). Founded in 1991, the FQPPU brings together 15 faculty unions and associations in the province. Its mission involves promoting and defending the interests of members and universities. To remain members of the FQPPU, the unions and associations contribute .14 percent of the annual wage bill of the professors in the university. The FQPPU is responsible, among other things, for representing professors with various government authorities and organizations, as well as in parliamentary commissions. It also has the duty to inform the public regarding various issues and policy measures concerning academic life. It conducts and disseminates studies on academic concerns. Information relating to these different issues is also transmitted through training sessions, colloquiums, conferences and seminars. In addition to promoting the interests of professors, the FQPPU has created a professional defence fund for members in the event of a strike. This is the only service provided that relates to industrial relations.

Currently, there are 17 certified faculty unions in Quebec. They include only faculty members, with the exception of one union that also represents sessional lecturers. Fourteen (14) of these unions are independent while two are affiliated with the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and one with the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN, Confederation of National Trade Unions). There are also two non-union professional associations, one for professors and the other also representing librarians.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This exploratory study was based on a comparative case study conducted in 2013, involving two university faculty unions in Quebec that were once affiliated with the same central labour body and had since disaffiliated. Like most Quebec university faculty unions, these organizations were independent.

The case study method required that data be collected from multiple sources so that a large amount of data could be gathered (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2009). The data collection strategy used in this study involved an iterative interview process and the analysis of documents.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 members and former members of the union executives of the two selected unions. Former faculty representatives were interviewed because they were directly involved in the disaffiliation process. Members of the current union executives were interviewed in order to understand the reasons their unions chose to remain independent several years after disaffiliation. Union executive members were chosen because they were key actors in these decisions and were in a position to mobilize members behind them (Hege et al. 2011; Le Capitaine et al. 2013, Murray et al. 2013).

A semi-structured interview guide focusing on the three themes examined (affiliation, disaffiliation and the decision to remain independent) was used to allow the participants some latitude in freely expressing their views. A total of 13 questions were put to the participants during meetings that lasted from two and a quarter to three hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo was used for content coding.

The analysis of documents corroborated the data collected through the interviews (Yin 2009). A substantial body of material composed of internal documents, statutes and regulations of internal governance and records, such as the minutes of general assembly meetings during which disaffiliation was voted for, were made available to the researchers. The analysis of these documents shed light on the realities of the unions under study and their particular context, since context is a key element of case study methodology (Yin 2009).

#### **AFFILIATION: THE COST-SERVICE-TIME TRILOGY AND THE DESIRE FOR AUTONOMY INHERENT TO THE PROFESSION**

The two unions under study were first created as voluntary associations before being certified in the 1970s and were subsequently affiliated with the same central labour body during that decade. This central labour body included workers employed in different workplaces and various industry sectors (i.e., manufacturing, construction, trade, public services, education, health, etc.). As a militant organization, it took a stance on different economic, political, social and union issues. It participated in public debates and popular struggles for equality, justice and democracy.

This central labour body was composed of different federations that included local unions on a sector or occupational basis. Like the central labour body, each of these federations took a stance on issues that specifically concerned them.

When the two unions under study were affiliated, they were included in an education-related federation. It should be noted that, in addition to including university professors, this federation also represented teachers from other non-university institutions and members of other professions.

The central labour body, at times through the federations, provided some services to support the unions in their different activities. Union representatives were made available to local organizations to give them advice and train them in the area of industrial relations. A legal department provided them with expert advice to solve legal problems. Lastly, the central labour body supported mobilization at the local, regional or national level to help achieve members' union goals.

Since Union 1 did not have legal services, its affiliation with the central labour body thus allowed it to use the central labour body's expertise in this area. As for Union 2, a raid initiated by the central labour body during a strike won over the professors and led to affiliation, which provided them with a strike fund. During this period of momentous social upheaval, affiliation fostered a sense of belonging to a union culture that was also associated with social change. In addition, the delegates saw this affiliation as giving them access to social and political awareness of work-related problems nationally through participation in various boards of the central labour body.

Affiliation also played a significant educational role. The union executive members of Union 2 learned much from the advisors in the central labour body, in particular in the area of collective bargaining, and came to understand the extent of the work of unions, as pointed out by a former president who was in office at the time of the affiliation:

After the disaffiliation, we saw how organized we had to be to negotiate a collective agreement and we went to get services. [Affiliation] played an educational role, although we must have seemed pretty opportunistic in the eyes of the central labour body [...] (Union 2) (trans.).

However, the support provided by the central labour body to Union 1 in the area of bargaining was deficient. Affiliation nevertheless allowed them to connect with other faculty unions that helped each other during bargaining periods, as attested by the comments of this former president:

When we needed expertise, we didn't find it at the central labour body, we found it at the [name of another union]. So we aligned ourselves with them to negotiate. We got their conditions, but not through the advisor (Union 1) (trans.).

Although relations with the central labour body were generally harmonious, both unions under study were soon irked by some irritating aspects which called into question the *raison d'être* of affiliation and their need for it.

First, the financial aspect constituted a considerable disadvantage, especially since it limited opportunities for autonomy. Since they cherished autonomy in their profession (Eaton and Voss 2004; Hecksher 1996; Milton 2003; Nixon 1996), the professors sought this same autonomy at the union level. The respondents pointed out that the fee structure did not leave the organization enough room to manoeuvre at the local level. A former president described this irritation as follows:

We wanted [to develop] more autonomous services, but we could clearly see that the money wasn't there to pay for everything we wanted (Union 1) (trans.).

Another irritation related to services and representation, which were deemed to be inadequate. In terms of expertise, the members interviewed stated that they had obtained better information when they communicated with the union executive members in other faculty unions or with their own members since, as professionals, the latter had specialized knowledge (Hodson and Sullivan 1995). For example, opinions were sought from members who were professors of accounting or law. Moreover, the most disappointing aspect was the poor quality of the legal services provided by the central labour body, as pointed out by this former president:

I expected a few results, but we never got any results. Or, we got some, but they were never satisfactory. We lost almost every time, so we had absolutely no credibility vis-à-vis the employer (Union 2) (trans.).

It was also found that the services, which were already limited, were not adapted to the realities of the university, as reflected by the ideological reservations brought out in the literature to the effect that traditional unionism, as represented by the central labour bodies, is associated with the working class and incompatible with the academic profession (Milton 2003; Ponak et al. 1992). This incompatibility was seen, in particular, during various board meetings of the central labour body, where there was little interest in academic issues. Although the themes debated in the meetings held by the federation related to education, they tended to be far removed from the specific concerns stemming from the realities of universities, giving rise to a feeling of inequity. A former member explained this disadvantage as follows:

We spent the day talking about others and it was difficult to get a brief 15 minutes at the end to talk about universities. I went to the board meetings several times. I felt like an outsider since the issues didn't have much to do with us" (Union 1) (trans.).

Frustrations were exacerbated by the amount of time outside of work that had to be invested to sit on the different boards of the central labour body, given the small number of locally elected delegates. The latter talked about the number of hours they had invested in evenings and on weekends to participate in all these board meetings.

### **INDEPENDENCE: A CONSCIOUS CHOICE**

Insufficient financial latitude combined with a lack of adequate services and fatigue among the delegates led to disaffiliation a few years later. Since the rate of union dues was not a problem in itself, these dues were maintained after disaffiliation and allowed for the creation of a fund for the defence of professional interests that amounted to almost \$2M and \$4M, respectively. The greatest advantage of union independence was perceived to be the ability to mobilize internal delegates and have latitude in using these funds. A president who was currently in office stated that:

We choose what to do with our money. This also allows us to have a union executive at the local level that is quite strong since we pay the university for them to be released from some of their courses. This frees them up to work on and devote themselves to their union duties (Union 1) (trans.).

As professionals, the professors enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in their work (Eaton and Voss 2004; Hecksher 1996; Milton 2003; Nixon 1996), which needed to be reflected in the union. Disaffiliation made it possible to legitimize collective representation by giving this autonomy back to the local unions.

The interviews revealed that this local independence was facilitated by the extensive and specialized knowledge (Hodson and Sullivan 1995) held by the professors as professionals, since the union executive counted among its ranks an actuary, an accountant, a lawyer and an industrial relations expert. This wealth of knowledge reduced the need for the ad hoc use of external services, and the quality of these internal services was ensured by experts who were knowledgeable about the academic community, as explained by a current member:

With our prosecutor, we are well served since he has been part of the academic world for over 30 years. If we were with a central labour body, there would be nobody with such leading-edge expertise (Union 2) (trans.).

This financial autonomy afforded real advantages in terms of bargaining power as both unions stated that, in the event of a strike, they would have been able to give each professor the equivalent of his/her real salary. Moreover, this fund was seen as a strong point when it came to winning arbitrations, as explained by this former president:

To the employer, we never hid the fact that we were rich, we could have gone to the Supreme Court a dozen times over. I thought that was great! (Union 1) (trans.).

This autonomy also conferred on the union its status as an interlocutor and official counterpart to university administrators, a status that was cherished by the local union executive members who would not have wanted to see this role devolved to an external representative.

Furthermore, the respondents explained that the professors did not consider themselves to be employees and this was a crucial point when it came to decisions concerning union life. They became unwilling to be grouped under a central labour body that included employees from other types of occupations. Their view of their profession thus influenced their choice for independence. A former president explained this dimension as follows:

As professors, we aren't manual workers, we're different. Several profs have made this argument. They tend to identify themselves with political leaders rather than with workers and the people. Profs have a hard time seeing themselves as employees, much less as unionized members of a workers' union (Union 2) (trans.).

Again, the literature suggesting that unionism is associated with the working class and incompatible with the academic profession echoes these feelings (Milton 2003; Ponak et al. 1992).

The particularities of academic life also appeared to have been poorly understood in the past by the central labour bodies, and still today, the union executive members interviewed were convinced that the traditional central labour bodies could not grasp the complexity of the profession, which consists of teaching, research and administrative duties (Goldey et al. 2010). The respondents shared the view that the central labour bodies could not grasp these particular realities and defend the specific interests and concerns of this profession, such as teaching quality and development, research, academic freedom, intellectual property, and participation in boards, as pointed out by this current member:

For those aspects, we do it better ourselves because the central labour bodies are not used to [dealing with] these things (Union 1) (trans.).

Defending members' occupationally specific interests and needs, as is the case with associational unionism (Hecksher 1996), was thus central to this desire for independence from central labour bodies. These results are thus consistent with studies suggesting that professionals wish to be represented on aspects that specifically relate to their careers (Bergeron and Renaud 2000; Eaton and Voss 2004; Healy 1999; Hecksher 2001; Milton 2003).

Paradoxically, the interviews revealed that the unions did not see themselves as being independent. Both unions were affiliated with the FQPPU. A former president emphasized the need for this affiliation:

If this association did not exist, in my view, an independent union like ours would be quite isolated. It's good to be an independent union, but there needs to be a national voice....In my mind, being affiliated with this association is not being independent (Union 1) (trans.).

For a contribution of 1.4 percent of the annual wage bill of professors, the association provided a solid structure that was deemed to be less constraining than the structure of central labour bodies. A current member had this to say:

The association has advantages for us, we feel better represented, masters of our own destiny; it costs far less and allows us to keep our funds for professional defence (Union 1) (trans.).

The FQPPU thus provided a system of representation that combined traditional unionism and other associative forms (Hecksher 1996).

According to the interviewees, what distinguished this association from a central labour body was that the intellectual allegiance of professors was not threatened. This aspect was strongly expressed by the members of both unions under study, who emphasized that within this association, they were "among themselves" and could discuss issues that were inherent to their profession, such as intellectual property, research funding, teaching and administrative duties. In their view, only their peers could take account of the particularities pertaining to academic life, and the FQPPU was exclusively composed of professors who were entirely devoted to the academic community. A current member illustrated this dimension as follows:

Our colleagues believe in what the representatives of this association say because it publishes studies on funding and intellectual property, and collects and compares statistics. The political role it plays with the government is essential in order to make our voice heard. It's a place where we're among ourselves and can

talk about our problems and challenges, rather than the problems of workers in another region or social action (Union 2) (trans.).

The FQPPU was thus favoured by the faculty unions because its agenda specifically focused on issues pertaining to the realities and particularities of professors (Heckscher 1996) while taking into account the dimensions of an academic career (Bergeron and Renaud 2000; Eaton and Voss 2004; Healy 1999; Milton 2003). The professors' professional identity was thus crucial in this regard (Beutell and Biggs 1984; Nixon 1996; Milton 2003).

The respondents highlighted the importance of a political role, but one that was centred exclusively on the concerns of the academic community, stating that the ideology conveyed by the central labour bodies did not resonate with their colleagues. A current member stated:

The political component of central labour bodies does not work for a university professor, a creature who wants to explain and show things to others himself. There is a resistance to being regimented by an association (Union 2) (trans.).

Autonomy and the freedom to think and criticize, so cherished by professors (Nixon 1996), appeared to be threatened by membership in a central labour body that took a public stance on some social issues with which the professors could not agree (Eaton and Voss 2004). Lastly, in both unions under study, the professors appeared to be satisfied with their autonomous operating method, as the idea of affiliation had never been raised again since.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main contribution of this article was to identify the reasons prompting the two university faculty unions under study to disaffiliate and remain independent, which makes it possible to draw some conclusions and initiate a discussion for other categories of professionals. In Quebec, some professionals—for example, lawyers, physicians and economists—are members of non-union associations. Like the FQPPU, these organizations, bringing together workers on the basis of their profession, beyond workplace boundaries, mainly focus on defending professional interests.

Currently, a mismatch appears to exist between the needs of professionals and the operating mode, structure and services provided by the central labour bodies, prompting university faculty unions to turn to the FQPPU. It would certainly be to the central labour bodies' advantage to establish a structure that allows them to bring in and include professions such as the academic profession where the need for local autonomy is great, given the particularity of the work. The central labour bodies should thus keep in mind the particular needs of these

professions, apart from working conditions, such as career development and the social issues that concern them specifically. Thus, there is a need to adjust the operating modes and services provided by the central labour bodies to the specific realities of professionals. In Quebec, hundreds of university professors are represented by unions, and many of them are represented by independent unions. Moreover, thousands of professionals are still represented by non-union associations. Thus, there is a high potential in terms of membership for central labour bodies that would adapt to the realities of this particular category of workers.

In this respect, previous experiences of affiliation have not been positive for the unions under study and reveal a lack of adjustment on the part of the central labour bodies. When the unions were affiliated, they came up against a fee structure that left them little financial latitude to set up a minimum operating structure. In both cases, there was a need for financial independence in order to establish a union executive—by freeing up some members, given the extent of the professor's workload (Goldey et al. 2010)—and to empower them vis-à-vis university administrators, in terms of arbitration or bargaining. The time spent in various board meetings at the central labour body combined with frustration due to a lack of interest in and space given to issues linked to the academic profession generated fatigue and disappointment among the local delegates. The respondents also mentioned the inadequate knowledge of the academic community and the working conditions of professors on the part of the union officials from the central labour bodies. On the other hand, the results revealed a need to participate in a non-union association made up exclusively of professors whose main concern related to the profession and its links to the academic institution in terms of governance, research and intellectual property.

Furthermore, the combination of different types of expertise held by members and delegates allowed the union to achieve this independence. This situation was undoubtedly specific to the academic community in which numerous competencies co-exist and partly explained the lack of a need for affiliation, which was compensated by the use of external services on an ad hoc basis.

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