

# DU PAIN ET DES ROSES

## *A Profile of Nycole Turmel*

NYCOLE TURMEL RETIRED LAST YEAR AFTER six years at the helm of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, representing 160,000 members, the majority of whom are employed by the federal government. As president she moved the union ahead on equity issues and took tough stands in bargaining, overseeing a difficult strike in 2001. The first woman to hold the position of PSAC president, Turmel doesn't regret a thing. "Being president of the PSAC was the best experience of my life," she says. "I loved my job. Every day I was meeting members, listening to their concerns, and doing something about them."

In 1977, Turmel was hired by the federal government to work as an employment counsellor assistant (a "CR4") in Alma, Quebec. She was a member of the Canada Employment and Immigration Union, a component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. "I got involved in the union because of the injustices I was seeing," says Turmel.

"The employer was manipulating the staffing process and wasn't being fair to employees. When I compared the different collective agreements I saw that the CRs — clerical and regulatory employees, most of whom were women — were not being treated fairly. For example, the overtime reimbursement for meals was less for the CRs than for the male-dominated groups. And coming from a family where respect and justice was a big thing, I could not stand silently by. My father was an employer but I knew he didn't treat his employees like this. So, I worked to change this."

Turmel's parents ran a small dairy farm business in Ste. Marie de Beauce, about 30 kilometres south of Quebec City, producing and delivering milk, cream and ice cream, "with employees sharing the table with us."

"I am not from a union background," says Turmel. "But I was raised in a family with strong social justice values and beliefs. My family has a history of political involvement. My father was a city coun-



"I am not from a union background," says Nycole Turmel (centre), retired national president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. "But I was raised in a family with strong social justice beliefs and values." Here, she celebrates on July 29, 1998, the day when the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal issued its decision supporting the union's pay equity complaint against the federal government.

**By Christine Hayvice**

cillor, as was one of my brothers. I've always understood the need to accept others, and take action to try and make a difference."

Turmel got involved in her union in 1978 and was soon elected vice-president of CEIU/PSAC Local 10424. She remembers that "it wasn't easy for women to participate in the union, but there were a few women who mentored each other." One in particular, Susan Giampietri, a former PSAC vice-president for Ontario, helped her get involved at the national level. Networking within CEIU was difficult in Quebec because connections with the English-speaking side of the union were hard to make, but Turmel reached out and the solidarity of sisterhood enabled the women to work together.

The federal workers' frustration about workplace injustice boiled over in 1980 and, during a difficult round of collective bargaining, the 40,000 CR members struck the employer without the sanction of the national union executive. "Women workers were being told by our union not to take strike action against an unfair employer," recalls Turmel. "The male-dominated leadership at the time was out of touch with the reality faced by CRs in our workplaces. We were outraged by the way the union was treating us, but we were even more outraged at the employer. We took them both on, and we became leaders overnight."

"To drive our message home, we sent funeral wreaths and cactuses to the union's leadership. But we did a lot more than that in the workplace: we organized and we had fun! We would dress up in all

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On May 3, 2006, Nycole Turmel (front, right) marched in Toronto in support of the PSAC members, many of whom are aboriginal, who work at the Ekati diamond mine in the Northwest Territories. They were on strike against their employer, BHP Billiton. While she was national president, Turmel oversaw the establishment of the National Aboriginal, Inuit and Métis Network (NAIM).

sorts of costumes to greet our clients, and, at key moments, we would all toot our whistles, which would cause quite a storm."

At the time, Turmel was a single parent with three children: two teenagers and a nine-year-old. She remembers the strike as a huge challenge. "We had to organize ourselves. Most of us had kids so we had to provide child care, along with mobilizing the membership. And there were communication problems as there was no Internet then, and even telephone communication was limited. But the women were determined." Wages for the CRs had fallen too far behind other government workers, and they wanted justice.

It was the first big strike in the federal government. The workers were predominantly female, with many struggling to support a family on meagre pay. The women pulled together. "We helped out other offices as some did not have enough members to picket," says Turmel. "Some of the workers inside the office tried to help us. The receptionist would put everyone on hold, but sometimes that included us when we phoned in for information. We laughed about that."

Finally, the union leadership accepted the situation. The strike continued for 15 days and ended with the workers winning wage increases, bonus payments and improved parental and family care leave.

After that strike Turmel got further involved in her union and was elected president of her local in 1981. She later moved on to the district level and

then to the regional level of the CEIU.

One of Turmel's first political fights was around the closure of the military base at Mount Apica in 1989. "It had a big impact economically for Saguenay Lac St-Jean region," says Turmel. "Many of the workers were from that region. It was not like today where it is common to transfer because of a job or if your spouse gets work in another city. It was not easy to find another job in the region. So, I worked on the campaign to try and save the base, and when that was impossible I helped to ensure that employees got a job somewhere else without losing their benefits."

In 1990 she made the decision to run for a national elected position. She was successful, becoming the alternate to the national president of the CEIU and moving to Ottawa.

"I was not fully bilingual, my network was in Quebec and even though my children were grown up it was still difficult," says Turmel. Still, she adds, "I never regretted it and my family was great. They always considered my availability when planning parties or other activities."

Equity issues were a passion for Turmel. She pushed for change with the employer and also within the union. "In concert with a group of women members and staff at the 1996 national women's conference, we decided to change the way we were conducting the conference," recalls Turmel. "We wanted it more inclusive and with a vision, a plan of action including being more involved in political

action and politics. There was a lot of backlash and I came close to being defeated at the PSAC convention in 1997 over this. But it was the right decision."

Pay equity was a major issue in the PSAC. In 1984, the first human rights complaint against the federal government was filed. "I worked a lot on our pay equity struggle," says Turmel. "I was on the executive when we decided not to accept the government's offer to settle and to wait for the court decisions. Many members were really upset at us. Years later we won the big fight and a lot of money for federal employees. This came with a recognition — long overdue — of the value of their work."

Turmel's decision to run for national president of her union came after some brainstorming sessions with colleagues. President Daryl Bean was retiring and Turmel felt the timing was right for her to run, although she was aware that some of the national-level leaders were not entirely behind her. Turmel credits Nancy Riche, retired vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress, as one of several mentors who helped her reach her goal.

Says Riche, "The first word that comes to mind when I think of Nycole is strength. Her word is her bond. Nycole made a difference in her union, in the labour movement and in the New Democratic Party. She will never know how many lives she influenced."

Turmel wasn't parochial when it came to battles for improving workers' rights, and inclusiveness. For instance, says Riche, "When a group of women got together to make sure we elected two women officers at the CLC, Nycole was there, even though neither of the women was from the PSAC. Unlike many male leaders, Nycole thought of the bigger movement, not just her union."

Says Turmel: "I wanted equity seeking groups to be recognized and for women to have a place in the labour movement. I wanted more inclusion, and I wanted to find ways for the union to go back to the grassroots." She also wanted more respect for federal workers.

The union's relationship with the federal government as both employer and legislator is complex regardless of which political party is in power. In collective bargaining the Treasury Board has a representative at the table, but it still has to go to the Finance Department to get approval of any agreement, and ultimately to Cabinet.

"During the 2001 strike the bargaining teams were in town and ready to work, but nothing was moving," recalls Turmel. "They agreed that I should meet with the Treasury Board president to push the envelope. We finally got a proposal. I knew that many members wanted to go back to work. I knew as well that it was the best we could get and, without a membership vote, the government would pass back-to-work legislation."

"We were on strike when 9/11 happened, I took the decision to call off the strike and hold the vote. Our members were very committed to their jobs

## TELLING TRIBUTES

“ Nycole can only be described as a great leader. She is compassionate, determined, and above all respectful. She never shied away from making the hard decisions. She led by example with dignity and integrity. She is best described as a class act — always dignified, yet she maintained a sense of grassroots. She mentored many and her best advice was to always hear — and listen to — your members. ”

**Robyn Benson, PSAC Regional Executive  
Vice-President, Prairies**

“ The very first time I ever heard of Nycole Turmel was in Montreal. I was brand new to the union, and I became amazed by this woman. When she spoke, people listened. She had words of wisdom, she brought hope and she had a vision. Nycole always had a way of bringing sunshine into a room. If you asked me what Nycole has shown me as a leader in the labour movement, it is to be patient and be gracious. ”

**Jeannie Baldwin, PSAC Regional Executive  
Vice-President, Atlantic Region**

“ Nycole was a tireless leader who travelled extensively to keep in constant contact with the membership through conferences and meetings throughout Canada. Although the PSAC has been successful with numerous pay equity, human rights, as well as equity group cases, Nycole recognized the need to continue the battle to improve the rights and protections achieved. She was instrumental in establishing the PSAC Social Justice Fund, which has financially assisted national and international workers. Nycole recognized the need to constantly fight to improve the working lives of workers not only in Canada, but within the global world. ”

**Daryl Bean, past National President, PSAC**

## I got involved in the union because of the injustices I was seeing

and this was about the security of the country. We knew as well that the public would not stay behind us if we didn't drop the picket lines. I believe that it was the right decision."

"The bargaining teams were not happy. They did not want the members to vote on what they considered to be an unacceptable offer. They finally agreed to present it to the membership with a recommendation to reject the offer. In the end, the



"I wanted equity seeking groups to be recognized and for women to have a place in the labour movement," says Nycole Turmel.

members voted in favour of the offer."

Out of that dispute, the union obtained an agreement to create a joint union-management learning program to focus on issues such as equity, understanding the collective agreement, and harassment. A joint union-management study was also undertaken on term (temporary) employees, resulting in an increase in the number of permanent positions.

"I was responsible for bargaining with the Canada Revenue Agency, and they have a lot of term employees — seasonal, on-call employees," says Turmel. "When the government implemented cutbacks, they used this method to reduce the number of permanent employees. What we won during the 2001 round of bargaining allows 'terms' to get holidays and pay increases based on the time they've worked. Many also got permanent status. Most of them are women."

In addition, Turmel is very happy the union won two additional days of leave for each employee: a personal day off and a volunteer day. She sees the volunteer day as important to the community. Turmel has been an activist for the United Way since 1992 in the Ottawa/Gatineau area and, since

## Coming from a family where respect and justice was a big thing, I could not stand silently by

her retirement, she has participated in the United Way Retiree Committee. "I was involved in the Government of Canada Workplace Charitable Campaign," says Turmel.

In 2006 Turmel received the "Mitchell Sharp Award for Meritorious Service." Jo-Anne Poirier, CEO of the workplace charitable campaign, says, "The award is granted to meritorious retirees who have shown and continue to show support for their community. Nycole is extremely focussed on the community and showed great leadership throughout the years, making herself available at all times to lend support and advice. We attribute our successful campaigns to her strong leadership."

Turmel is proud of the union executive's decision to establish a social justice fund in 2003, with a start-up fund of \$750,000 followed by successful inclusion into some collective agreements. "The social justice fund is dedicated to emergency relief here in Canada and around the world," says Turmel. "Contributions were made following the Manitoba floods, a major storm in Newfoundland, forest fires in B.C., and the tsunamis in Southeast Asia and Africa in December 2004. We also support international aid projects in developing countries, and worker-to-worker exchanges so that our members can make the North-South connections first-hand."

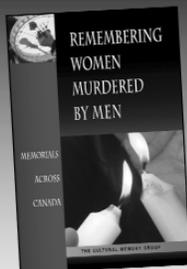
International affairs are an important part of the global union movement and Turmel enthusiastically embraced her role in the Public Services International (PSI), which brings together public sector workers from all over the world to share expertise and strategies, and to defend quality public services on the international scene. Says Turmel, "I learned about government downsizing in Australia and New Zealand, where they did considerable harm to

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public services and to unions. I learned about the struggles to defend the right to water in South Africa and Bolivia."

Women in PSI form a strong network. Diane Wood retired secretary-treasurer of the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) worked closely with Turmel from the early '90s at the CLC and PSI. "She was always an advocate for the full participation of women in PSI and worked tirelessly to change the structure of PSI to ensure that women were truly represented at all levels," recalls Wood. "The constitution was amended to provide for at least 50 per cent of women on the executive board, committees, attendance at conferences, educationals and congress itself. She was fearless on this issue." Says Wood, "We were a force to be reckoned with and we had a great time working together, and with many other women (and men with a 'feminist' heart) to effect required changes. 'Never give up' was our mantra."

Along with women's issues, Turmel determinedly steered her union towards active recognition of other equity-seeking groups within the union as well, including workers with disabilities, and aboriginal workers. Turmel says proudly that her's was the first union to hold a conference for workers with disabilities. An equal opportunities committee was formed along with the election of the first aboriginal executive officer, and openly gay and lesbian executive officers.

Turmel wanted the union to reach out more effectively to its aboriginal, Métis and Inuit workers, particularly in northern Canada. "We learned that there was a different way to work. There's a strong respect for elders and different ways of making decisions. Many such members work for their own people in band councils, as well as for governments and the private sector in the territories." One in three workers in the northern territories is a member of the PSAC.

Turmel oversaw the establishment of the National Aboriginal, Inuit and Métis Network (NAIM). She sat as co-chair of the network and, as a result of the committee's work, the union adopted a policy to hold conferences for these members. Under Turmel, the union also began providing funds for interpretation into Inuktitut at national union events, something that PSAC members in Nunavut are particularly proud of.

During Turmel's tenure the union reached a ground-breaking agreement with the Dene Nation to jointly explore work-related and labour-relations issues facing Dene workers. More than 10 collective agreements now contain provisions for harvesting, hunting and fishing in the northern territories.

One of Turmel's toughest challenges was to grapple with the union's structure. "It's not easy to change," she says. There are 160,000 members divided into 17 components loosely based on the structure of federal government departments, she explains. And govern-

ment cuts and reorganization resulted in workers performing identical work scattered across different components, which led to some confusion and some inconsistencies. "I had many questions from members regarding our structure, and which component represented them in the workplace."

One-stop 'Service Canada' offices were created by the government across Canada to provide services like passports, unemployment insurance, income security, and immigration. And now, although they're represented by different components, "every front-line worker has to be able to respond to a variety of questions on a wide range of government programs." A special committee was formed to come up with recommendations "to try to fix things."

The government cuts also caused a financial crisis within the union, which responded by reducing programs like union education. "That decision was a big mistake," says Turmel, who, as president,

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Sumona Roy teaches in Hamilton. She is one of 70,000 ETFO members who work every day to help close the gap between student potential and student achievement.

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worked hard to increase and improve the quality of union education for the membership and leadership.

The union also began to reach out into the private sector and has organized new groups of workers such as those at women's shelters, universities, security agencies and casinos. "Bringing in private sector workers was a positive thing," Turmel says. "Their experiences were very different and we learned a lot from sharing knowledge between the public and private sector workers."

Looking back over her years as a union activist, Turmel says that if she could have done anything differently, it would have been "to start younger. I would have liked to have done more for equity groups and education within the union." She sees many issues that should entice younger members, "such as social justice and the environment. Unions need to figure out how to appeal to youth to ensure that new activists take up the torch, because they're just not there."

Turmel is passionate about the responsibility unions have to take a stand on social justice issues. "Our fight for public medicare remains a big one. We must keep pushing to ensure we have this for future generations." She is also passionate about unions not raiding each other. "I like the campaign against Wal-Mart. Unions agreed that these workers, if unionized, would belong to UFCW Canada."

Turmel strongly urges union members to get involved in their community. "If we're not part of

the decision-making then we have to accept what others decide for us. There should be more women in public office, and the municipal level is a good place to be involved. There should be a priority to elect people who believe in our values. That's where you can make changes."

"The new legislation restricting political donations forces unions to rethink their way of working. Now it is the members who have to get involved. The job for the unions is to give them the tools to do this. We also need to find ways to reach out to immigrants, as they are the future. It means putting aside our prejudices and working together to ensure immigrants are included and can fully participate in making Canada a better place for everyone."

When Turmel takes time out to relax she knows how to enjoy herself. "I skate, walk, cross-country ski, snowshoe, garden and cycle a lot. I also travel. Last year, after I retired, I spent time in Greece. I try to stay connected with my children. I've asked a lot of them over the years." She also has a cottage to retreat to up north.

She looks back on her experience with a touch of nostalgia. "I miss the politics, the people and the intrigue." But, she concludes, "now I can contribute in a different way." And she will.

Vancouver-based freelance writer Christine Hayvice is a labour activist and former communications coordinator for Canadian Auto Workers Local 2002.

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