



en Action

Special Convention
June 4, 2003

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Adopting the means

To continue

OUR ACTION

After saluting the delegates added to the Federal Council, the President of the FIIQ declared the Special Convention on finances open. The following is the essential idea of her message.

"Yesterday (Tuesday, June 3), I was wondering what I would have to say that was new or different from what has already been said, at previous meetings, about the FIIQ's financial position. Finally, I told myself that the debate we are beginning today on union finances is much more than a debate about money. First and foremost, it is a debate to ensure that the FIIQ has the capacity to intervene in all of our fields of activity. This also means protecting and developing services that guarantee nurses that we stand for respect for their rights as workers, as health professionals and as citizens.

"In 2000, we began a wide-ranging debate on the appropriateness of affiliating to a central union organization. This led us to examine all the services we provided both to our union reps and to the nurses, a process that resulted in a Convention in 2001. This debate led us to conclude that we had to strengthen our organization where it was necessary to do so. I think that the last two days of the Federal Council have allowed us to see and understand the importance of the issues in which we play a leading role. These are very substantial issues that have enormous consequences for our future as nurses and the future of the health-care network.

"Whether we are talking about NAFTA or the FTAA, privatization or partnership with the private sector, we are now all convinced that this reality is at our gates. At the 1998 Convention, when we discussed globalization, very few of us were able to make the connection between the international negotiations among governments and big multinational corporations, and our everyday lives as health-care workers.

"The second day of the Federal Council, Ms. Martinez spoke to us about her country, Argentina, where the situation has deteriorated dramatically, with the result that today there is no more middle class and all services are being called into question. Yet a few years ago, Argentina had one of the highest standards of living in Latin America. During this day, we also heard a summary explaining the scope of NAFTA and the FTAA and a report on our participation at the first international conference, held in the Dominican Republic, regarding the rights for people to health-care. After hearing this information, we can only conclude that we cannot disregard such issues without compromising our future ability to deliver quality services in sufficient quantity and in the places required to meet the public's needs.

"Closer to home, in our own organization, we presented a tool to you yesterday, a Guide for initiating safety audits in your institutions to prevent violent situations. Some of you told us that with instruments like this one, you can continue your reflection and convince nurses of the need to act, to break the silence.

"We also received a report on the workforce planning exercise carried out in CLSC Orléans. The consultant gave us an explanation of everything that was done in that institution. He told us that this exercise required nine days of meetings, not counting the work that he personally did with the local union reps and the nurses.

"If we can't count on sufficient financial resources to support us, how much longer will we be able to keep up this pace and respond to the nurses' needs?

"Reducing this issue to a discussion of money denies the importance of defending our members' interests. In each of your institutions, look at the flood of salary insurance cases contested by the employer, or contested by the insurance company, and the number of refusals of reinstatement. Cases claiming a day of work are increasingly rare – we almost never see them any more. Instead we have cases that go to arbitration, essentially cases that directly challenge the nurses' relationship of employment. How will they be able to support themselves if they have no more job, if they have no more salary insurance or disability insurance? What will become of them? Yet cases of this kind are phenomenally expensive. Last week I was told about the case of a nurse we are trying to have reinstated. In the first three days of hearings – and it's not over yet – we had to engage a psychiatrist full-time to listen to what the employer's expert was saying and testify about our worker's real condition. At \$3,000 a day, \$1,500 a half-day, we have already invested \$12,000, just for a doctor to prove that our nurse can return to work. We have dozens of cases like this.

"Because nurses are getting sick, because nurses increasingly are wearing out their health, we have the obligation to defend them. Who will pay for this tomorrow? I'm asking you the question because very few union organizations in Quebec cover expert fees. Some offer \$1,000 and for the rest it's up to the worker to find the money.

"This is the way things are done in most, if not all union organizations. But when we pay a contribution in dues to the FIIQ, we are also sharing the risks. Tomorrow you may be the person who gets sick and the employer may try to get rid of you. Tomorrow you may need expert services because you had an accident on the job and they want to throw you away like an old shoe... Nobody here can claim that they'll never need the FIIQ's support...

"When we talk about the FIIQ's situation, we're not only talking about cases, but about basic mandates. I'm thinking about arbitration and grievance cases, occupational health and safety cases, cases pleaded before the OIIQ. Every day you see how widely the employers apply double penalties, suspensions or even dismissals. If they aren't sure of winning a case, they simply appear before the Ordre des Infirmières to have it take away a nurse's licence to practice. This solves their problem at the source. The FIIQ has chosen to defend these cases. This means that all nurses share the burden.

"In the past few months there has been a lot of discussion about the FIIQ's future. What should the FIIQ become? How should we build it in the years ahead? Should we strengthen it? One of the major elements we have adopted, that we have shared and discussed together, is union education – how to equip yourself to deal with situations that clearly aren't the same as they used to be.





“When I started as a union rep over 26 years ago, we handled a grievance from time to time. Today, you have to deal with a large number of cases and fields of intervention (violence, nursing workforce planning, organization of work). One of the objectives of FIIQ TOMORROW is to equip you to meet your members’ demand for services.

“Without its basic services, without the issues we defend in health-care, the status of women, health and safety and the organization of work, the FIIQ certainly wouldn’t be what it is today: a respected organization, an organization called on whenever health-care is questioned, an organization that is asked for its opinion when changes occur in health-care, a credible organization. This is because, over time, we built an organization that not only spoke out but had solid thinking based on concrete actions. We don’t just talk – our statements are based on substantial analysis.

“We hear a lot of talk in the health-care network and in the private sector that we have to do more with less. We’ve been doing more with less for several years. We’ve been doing more with less to such an extent that this has affected the organization. There are many situations where employees have gone on sick leave – we can’t ask more of them.

“We can’t ask our employees to work a double load. If it’s not possible for you, it’s not possible for our employees either.

“Nor can we sacrifice issues like the status of women, violence, discrimination or occupational health and safety and the defence of public services. Clearly, without these interventions, the FIIQ will no longer be the FIIQ. Certainly we could eliminate all this tomorrow morning and focus on labour relations and the negotiations. But in such a context, what will the FIIQ look like tomorrow? We won’t need to see each other at Federal Councils any more – this could save us a million dollars a year. If we concentrated strictly on labour relations issues and grievances, we could save over a million dollars. But would the union life of the FIIQ, the unions and the members be the same without our ability to defend these issues ...

“As members of the Executive, we believe that the FIIQ’s financial base must be reviewed and that this base must be increased. You know our proposal and we firmly believe that together we have to decide what is best for the FIIQ, what is desirable for Quebec nurses and how we can maintain and improve high-quality services for the 45,500 nurses we all represent.

“I wish you a day of fruitful discussion with the hope that this Federation lives, grows and is even more capable tomorrow of meeting the needs of all Quebec nurses.”»

Together Solid in solidarity

Applause was the delegates’ spontaneous response to their decision to increase the dues that the unions must pay to the FIIQ. The FIIQ’s finances and the increase in FIIQ dues were discussed on the third day of the Convention.

After the President’s opening message, Treasurer Lise Martel shared the FIIQ’s financial position with the delegates. She began with a reminder of the importance of this debate for the organization’s future: *“Not only the organization’s future but its credibility depend on it. For us as Executive members, increasing the FIIQ’s revenues is essential and crucial. We began this debate at the March Federal Council. Since then, we have each pushed and fuelled our reflection with documents and discussions. It’s now up to us to make the best decision for all of the nurses represented by the FIIQ.”*

This decision should allow the organization to pursue its mission of defending the rights and working and living conditions of nurses. Nor will the FIIQ forget its mission of taking part in the great social debates and being among those who intervene and fight to protect such fundamental rights as the right to health-care, education and work.

Thus, after debating for a few hours, after exchanging their points of view and weighing the arguments for and against, the vast majority of the delegates decided that the annual dues paid by the FIIQ’s affiliated unions will increase from \$384.85 to \$486.66. Thus, effective January 1, 2004, the federal dues will represent 1.2% of Grade 6.

For the delegates, the increase in the FIIQ’s revenue has become necessary. It was necessary to act on several levels:

- changes to the equalization formula were necessary to make support for union life more equitable for all unions;
- necessary adjustments in the application of the policy on reimbursement of meeting and training expenses;
- short-term correction of the budget estimates for 2003 due to maintenance of the interventions and services to be provided;
- adoption and implementation of the FIIQ TOMORROW action plan and the follow-up plan;

- the FIIQ’s responsibility as an employer: pay equity and renewal of the collective agreements;
- stabilization of the negotiation reserve fund.

These are the reasons, among others, that impelled the delegates to give a very broad endorsement to the Executive Committee’s recommendation.

Also, it was unthinkable for many to cut or reduce some direct services to members. They were particularly concerned about the constantly rising costs of defending members in occupational health and safety, dismissal and salary insurance cases. Since 1998, we have seen the number of OHS cases triple. The fees paid to physicians to defend nurses in grievance and occupational health and safety cases or OHS complaints increased from \$150,000 to over \$300,000 in 2002. Two examples : the total cost of defending a nurse regarding a salary insurance case for a 6 week period without leave is 11 000 \$. Most of this amount is only for medical expert services. Regarding an occupational health and safety case, we will pay an average of 5 000 \$ for expert and witness fees.

To ensure the organization’s sustainability and enable it to remain the nurses’ collective instrument, the delegates at this Convention gave themselves the financial means to support their decisions, positions, orientations and actions. They told themselves that to have and preserve a FIIQ that is *“solid in solidarity”*, it was imperative to adopt financial resources commensurate with our choices.

A lot of delegates also noted how important, if not fundamental, it was to leave to future union members an organization just as it has always been: solid, strong, determined, credible and where members can have a sense of belonging: *“It is our responsibility to take adequate measures and collectively give ourselves the means to keep up the fight”*



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