TOGETHER FOR EACH OTHER

PRESIDENT'S REMARKS

Opening Address CSN 66th Convention

Brothers and Sisters,
Delegates, staff,
members of the Executive Committee,

Seldom since the founding of the CSN in 1921 have the unions in our Confederation seen a social and economic crisis of the magnitude we are experiencing today.

And rarely in our history have the unions in the CSN been more committed to the values of mutual aid and solidarity that have permeated every struggle we have waged over these past 100 years.

Mutual Aid and Solidarity Are at the Heart of Our Movement

WE ARE FACING AN UNPRECEDENTED PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS.

Some 250,000 Quebecers have been infected with the coronavirus to date.

The people who have contracted the disease are our members, our loved ones.

In many workplaces, including the health and social services system in which thousands of our members work, outbreaks continue to threaten our members.

Unfortunately, some have lost their lives.

Others are feeling intense pressure from the intense disarray of our public institutions, after years of exhausting work in chronically underfunded institutions.

WE ARE ALSO FACING A SERIOUS ECONOMIC CRISIS.

It cannot be said often enough that it is the working class that has borne the brunt of the economic fallout.

While the stock markets have rebounded in the space of a quarter, thousands of CSN members, particularly in the tourism and cultural industries, are still without income—and without the sense of purpose that work can provide.

Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost.

As in every crisis, and even more so in this one, the most vulnerable are hardest hit:

Women, the first victims of income losses and increased domestic and psychological burdens;

Low-wage earners and workers in precarious employment;

Non-unionized and self-employed workers, for whom the lack of minimal protections has been brutally laid bare;

Visible minorities, Indigenous communities, immigrant communities and undocumented workers without status.

IT MUST ALSO BE RECOGNIZED THAT WE ARE EXPERIENCING AN UNPRECEDENTED MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS.

From the outset, the pandemic has disrupted the human relationships that form the very foundations of our society, as well as the basis of work and of our union actions.

The lockdown we've had to live with in order to contain the spread of the virus has caused many people to feel isolated, abandoned and powerless.

The adjustments that had to be made in the blink of an eye in all our workplaces—to health measures or telework—have led to overwork, burnout and psychological distress.

Many of us are also contending with the stress and pressure of financial problems for ourselves and our loved ones, not to mention the closing of schools and the responsibility of having children at home while teleworking.

THE PANDEMIC HAS AFFECTED THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH OF DIFFERENT INDIVIDUALS IN DIFFERENT WAYS. BUT NONE OF US CAN DENY THE INCREASE IN AMBIENT STRESS.

In November 2020, I and the other members of the CSN Executive Committee toured all of the central council general meetings.

I witnessed the extent of the distress being experienced by many union activists, who must respond day after day to the multiple concerns of the members we represent. Our members :

Have lost their jobs;

Have contracted the disease;

Don't have adequate PPE, even in CHSLDs;

Have lost income because they've had to isolate as a result of COVID.

Many executive committee members have had to abandon their union duties after falling in combat.

Many of our members have a good deal on their plates besides participating in union activities—something we can all readily understand at this time.

We've had to fulfill our union duties even as access to the workplace is restricted and it has become impossible to hold a normal general meeting, union council or even a meeting of the executive.

None of us would say that it's been business as usual for union activities over the past few months.

WE HAVE A RIGHT AND INDEED AN OBLIGATION TO LOOK AFTER OURSELVES IF OUR UNION ORGANIZATIONS ARE NOT TO BE UNDERMINED FOR MONTHS TO COME.

This is something the Convention will need to address.

* * * * *

For too long, public debate has been poisoned by attacks against the role of trade unions.

Since March 13, 2020, unions have demonstrated just how valuable they are.

First of all, we had to make our workplaces safe. Our union organizations played a vital role in reinforcing the health rules, requiring disinfection of workstations, overhauling work schedules to limit contact, and doggedly pursuing bosses who were dragging their feet, from small private companies to the largest public and parapublic corporations.

WE HAD TO ACCOMPANY THOUSANDS OF MEMBERS THROUGH THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTING THE EMERGENCY MEASURES INTRODUCED BY VARIOUS LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT.

WE CALLED THE ATTENTION OF GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES, PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE CNESST TO THE PRESSING PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY OUR MEMBERS.

When it was clear that conditions in our workplaces posed a risk to our members or to society as a whole, we appealed directly to the public.

Our cooperation with news professionals—journalists, researchers and technicians working in media—played a crucial role in holding the government to account for the many shortcomings we've seen during this crisis—and well before the crisis.

I have personally witnessed the combativeness, courage and resilience of CSN unions every single day for almost a full year now, as Québec passes one of the most difficult periods in its history.

OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, YOU HAVE PROVIDED A GLOWING DEMONSTRATION OF WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO BE *TOGETHER FOR EACH OTHER*.

Never has there been a finer illustration of the values of mutual aid and solidarity that animated our brothers and sisters at the beginning of the 20th century, when the CSN was founded.

Heightened Contradictions

THE CRISIS WE ARE EXPERIENCING HAS LAID BARE OUR SYSTEM'S CONTRADICTIONS, AGGRAVATING THE DREADFUL FLAWS WE HAVE LONG BEEN FIGHTING TO CORRECT.

We have been saying for years that our health care system is collapsing;

That the highly centralizing effects of the Barrette reform would lead to the government abdicating its responsibility to users of the health care system;

That underfunded facilities for seniors had become unlivable;

That the labour shortage in the public sector is real and that low wages are the main cause, in social services, education and daycare alike.

For years, we have been saying that low wages in general are undermining the productive capacity of many economic sectors while keeping the working class mired in poverty;

That the gaping holes in EI need to be closed in order to protect unemployed workers;

That the number of CNESST inspectors falls far short of what is needed to protect our workplaces;

And that any bump in the road...

Well, we have seen what has happened, although we would've preferred not to.

* * * * *

ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL FRONT, COVID-19 HAS UNFORTUNATELY CHECKED THE TREMENDOUS SOCIAL MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE.

But it has also raised awareness of the close, intrinsic relationship between the risk of a global pandemic and the foundations of a global economic system based on fossil fuels, declining biodiversity, burgeoning long-distance trade and, of course, the exploitation of the working class on every continent.

The fact that global economies are increasingly intertwined explains how a virus that appeared in China's Wuhan region was able to spread so far and wide in just a few weeks.

In 2018, after intensive work, broad consultation and extensive coalition-building with environmental groups, the CSN adopted its *Environmental Charter*.

That Charter has guided our work as a union in the many workplaces confronted by the challenges of a just energy transition.

THE PRINCIPLES IT SETS OUT HAVE PROMPTED US TO TAKE TO THE STREETS.

The vigorous environmental movement of which we are a part brought out half a million people in Montréal and across Québec when Greta Thunberg was here a little over a year ago.

Based on the principles in our Charter, we slammed the Legault government's feeble environmental efforts, particularly the lack of rigour, consistency and resolve in its *Plan for a Green Economy*, tabled by the Minister of the Environment in November.

CLEARLY, THE JUST TRANSITION WE DEMAND IS A BATTLE THAT HAS YET TO BE WON.

If the current situation shows one thing, it is the depth of the contradictions in a fossil fuel-based economy—and the fragility of the world we inhabit.

We cannot afford to capitulate on this front.

Understanding that many businesses will be accessing various forms of government financial assistance to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, based on ill-defined targets, and knowing the failings and laxness of government business support programs, we must demand greater transparency for the granting of government subsidies and union participation in developing measures that support a healthy transition for workers and for society as a whole.

I ask that this Convention address this issue on the basis of the principles contained in our *Environmental Charter*.

No Democracy Without Rights

IN TIMES OF CRISIS—WAR, DEPRESSION, PANDEMIC—THE FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES REGULARLY COME UNDER ATTACK.

We see it happening now.

Around the world, movements driven by fear and ignorance have sprung up.

They are challenging the very foundations on which our shared civic life is built, namely our responsibilities as citizens.

The conspiracy theorists are denying that the virus is dangerous and undermining our collective public health efforts.

They wrap themselves in false claims, which in this specific case they present as individual rights.

The same false claims lie behind the arguments for the right to bear arms, to increase border security and to negate free, independent and accurate news.

These developments are not unrelated to efforts by the powerful and the wealthy to disavow any responsibility to those they regard as their inferiors.

Unfortunately, that's not fake news.

The repercussions of forsaking the working class, the poor and immigrants can be seen in the crisis of American society today.

We welcome the ejection of Donald Trump by the democratic will of the American people, while holding our breath until Biden is sworn in on Wednesday.

But the deep rifts opened by Trump's presidency—four years of concerted effort to undermine U.S. democratic institutions, science, the courts and, most importantly, the media—are undeniable.

In the midst of the worst crisis the world has seen since World War II, Donald Trump has done everything in his power to destroy even the American people's confidence in their own democracy.

In the current state of turmoil, right-wing co-optations of impoverished and misinformed working classes is a fearsome prospect.

While we can consider ourselves lucky that the conspiracy movement and far right in Québec have so far failed to wreak as much havoc as they may have perhaps wanted, we cannot let our guard fall.

We must remain vigilant and continue defending a vision of democratic rights in which the common good and the rights of minorities and the most vulnerable take precedence over a too-often egocentric vision based on individual rights.

And we can be proud of the work the CSN has done in this area.

During the past three-year period, we've stepped up our efforts to support electoral reform in Québec. For example, we have been involved with the *Mouvement démocratie nouvelle* and the *Coalition pour la réforme électorale maintenant!*

These efforts have borne fruit and the National Assembly is expected to pass the electoral reform bill this winter.

Clearly, the proportional representation system proposed by the government is far from perfect. But the bill's flaws should not obscure the progress that has been made, progress that seemed impossible not so long ago. When viewed in perspective, the bill is a significant step forward.

WE HAVE SEEN OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS HOW THE STRUGGLE FOR THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF MANY OF OUR FELLOW CITIZENS IS FAR FROM WON.

This is true for Indigenous communities, as they struggle every day to escape the poverty in which they have been trapped for decades;

To fight the unwillingness of different levels of government to consider the impact of money-making projects on their land and their communities (think for example of the struggle waged by the Wet'suwet'en community in British Columbia);

To fight the systemic racism that exists in Québec, so tragically illustrated by the death of Joyce Echaquan.

SYSTEMIC RACISM IS AN INSIDIOUS SCOURGE.

It is invisible to some but all too real for thousands of Québec workers, including CSN members.

In order to combat systemic racism, we must support the full inclusion of all people in our society, institutions and workplaces.

Inclusion means entitlement to the same rights and equal access to the social safety net and public services we have collectively built.

THE PANDEMIC HAS OPENED OUR EYES TO THE PLIGHT OF THOUSANDS OF ESSENTIAL WORKERS WHO, THOUGH THEY ARE SUPPOSEDLY ILLEGAL, DID NOT HESITATE TO STEP UP WHEN THE NEED WAS GREATEST.

Our collective denial of thousands of undocumented workers allows them to be mercilessly exploited by personnel placement agencies whose business plans boil down to the unscrupulous exploitation of their precarious workforces.

Ottawa and Québec City must find solutions to regularize their status.

A SOCIETY BUILT ON RIGHTS MUST REST ON EQUAL ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR ALL AND ON THE FULL RECOGNITION OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS FOR ALL.

No one wants a society in which people take justice into their own hands, or in which justice is at the mercy of the whims of public opinion.

But given our system's inability to uphold equality before the law in so many cases of sexual assault and harassment, a dispassionate analysis can only conclude that the waves of public denunciation of abusive behaviour have yielded social progress. Not without cause have they destroyed the false reputations and celebrity lives of the abusers, whether rich and powerful or not.

I salute the incredible efforts of one of our members, Annick Charrette, who had long kept her secret to herself, and who found a shining victory in bitter defeat.

It was a hard and personal battle for you, but one that was liberating for many women and oppressed individuals who are often alone in their silence. I personally thank you, Annick.

* * * * *

IN TIMES OF CRISIS, BULWARKS AGAINST DISINFORMATION ARE CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT.

Since day 1 of the pandemic, the media have shown how important they are to our society.

Day after day, they have held the feet of the Premier and his inner circle to the fire.

They have voiced our cries of alarm. They have informed the public about the tragedy in the seniors' residences and the lack of PPE in the health care network, in schools and in workplaces.

They have done it even as they suffer the effects of a dramatic and years-long decline in the revenues they need to operate.

The situation in the media remains of grave concern, despite the gains our unions have made in the press and media industry.

Payroll tax credits for news workers were won from both Québec City and Ottawa.

However, their introduction is far too slow to ensure the survival of all media outlets, hard hit by the loss of revenues from their major advertisers.

WE SHOULD ALSO MENTION THE INCREDIBLE VICTORY OF THE CSN UNIONS AT *LE SOLEIL*, *LA VOIX DE L'EST*, *LE NOUVELLISTE*, *LA TRIBUNE*, *LE DROIT* AND *LE QUOTIDIEN DU SAGUENAY*.

Without the enormous effort required to form an independent Québec news co-op, without the support of our collective instruments—Fondaction, MCE Conseils, the Caisse d'économie solidaire—and our natural partners, the Fonds de solidarité and Desjardins, and without the support of thousands of Quebecers, Québec would have lost almost all of its local news sources.

We would have liked to be able to rejoice that all six dailies had been saved, but our celebrations were tempered by the sad fate of their pensioners.

This is a truly deplorable situation, the responsibility for which lies entirely with Power Corporation, its subsidiary Gesca and the shell company called Capitales médias. Even if it hadn't been taken over by the workers' cooperative, the result would have been the same.

* * * * *

Nor should the crisis make us forget the vital work done by CSN unions before the arrival of the pandemic.

For example, we did extensive work on the EI issue in many regions of Québec.

The speed with which the federal government introduced the CERB and changes to EI was widely noted.

At a time when the union movement does not appear to be making immediate gains, we may well ask whether the federal government's measures would have been of the same magnitude without the role played by the labour movement.

IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, WE MUST ENSURE THAT EI REFORM IS ENTRENCHED FOR YEARS TO COME, NOT JUST LONG ENOUGH TO GET THROUGH THE CURRENT CRISIS.

There has also been progress on minimum labour standards.

All workers in Québec are now entitled to two days of paid family leave. It's a start, and Ottawa is also moving on this issue.

OF COURSE, THE CAQ GOVERNMENT CONTINUES TO IGNORE OUR CALL FOR A $15 MINIMUM WAGE, EVEN THOUGH THE CURRENT CRISIS HAS AMPLY DEMONSTRATED ITS NEED.

It has certainly been galling to see how employers unilaterally decide when, to whom and how they will grant a "COVID premium."

This can be seen with each of the major grocery chains, and even in the Québec government's treatment of its own employees.

WHEN IT COMES TO WAGE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN, WE HAVE FORCED MAJOR CHANGES TO THE *PAY EQUITY ACT*.

And we continue to fight the government in the courts to end those forms of discrimination against women that still persist, despite our repeated demands.

With regard to the right to strike, we forced the government to rewrite its legislation on essential services over this past three-year period. This is the result of legal action initially brought by four CSN unions in the health care system, in the wake of the Saskatchewan decision.

The pandemic has overcome much of the resistance to working from home. However, force of circumstance has imposed telework on millions of Québec workers without the establishment of any ground rules or a collective discussion on the matter.

We need to address this issue swiftly—and I can tell you this is already being done by our bargaining teams and confederal services.

For example, we actively participated in developing an opinion issued by the Québec government's labour and workforce advisory committee.

The discussion will have to be continued at the bargaining table.

This Convention must address these issues, in addition to the wide-ranging technological and digital transformations that can be expected in our workplaces.

* * * * *

I cannot leave unmentioned the circumstances under which our last Convention was held.

We had emerged, weakened, from the union allegiance votes brought on by the Barrette reform in the health care system.

WE COULD NOT STAND IDLE AFTER THE LOSS OF MORE THAN 20,000 MEMBERS.

As I said at the opening of that Convention, we had to take a hard look at ourselves; we needed to question our own practices, our structures, our services to the unions, while remaining true to our union confederation's fundamental values.

After a broad consultation and reflection process, involving all of our components—unions, central councils, federations and CSN staff—we were able to come up with a number of diagnoses aimed at improving our practices and invigorating union life.

Since then, an operationalization plan has been implemented with a hundred recommendations to improve our services to the unions.

Much of that work has already been accomplished.

Always Moving Forward

SOME MIGHT SAY THAT, IN THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT, WE HAVE TO GO BACK TO SQUARE 1.

Our last Convention made strengthening union life its top priority.

It is difficult to maintain union activities when people are working from home, when it is impossible to hold a general meeting with actual people, let alone a Convention; when human contact must be reduced to the strict minimum.

And, quite frankly, it's hard to maintain robust union activities when our members are understandably attending to their many vital concerns outside union affairs.

OUR UNIONS AND WORKING TEAMS DIDN'T WAIT FOR THIS CONVENTION OR FOR THE END OF THE PANDEMIC TO SWING INTO ACTION.

During our pre-Convention tour, many of you told us that the pandemic has overcome past resistance to using virtual platforms for our democratic processes.

Many of you also told us that, despite the pitfalls, there can be no going back to the way things were; That new faces are being seen and new voices are being heard at our meetings;

That *virtual democracy* doesn't mean we will be *virtually democratic*.

But while there are opportunities here, the constraints must not be overlooked.

For one thing, issues with Internet access in outlying regions are an obstacle to participation in union democracy, not to mention Québec's social and economic development.

Our unions must be supported, equipped and backed by our working teams to help them make necessary adjustments to keep their organizations healthy during and after this crisis.

Similar work needs to be done with respect to mobilization, which has also been affected by the health measures.

This is an important issue for the Convention to consider.

The last Convention mandated the Executive Committee to make changes to our Professional Defence Fund to increase our bargaining power.

We are very pleased to be able to submit proposals to this Convention that increase the strike and lockout benefits and expand access to them.

Hopefully, the proposals before this Convention will support our unions to more effectively they take on the struggles that must be waged.

The proposed budget to support our actions during the next three-year period will also be submitted to you for study.

For the unions that make up our Confederation, every CSN Convention is an opportunity to debate our general policy orientations for the next three years.

The CSN's 66th Convention is no exception.

But we cannot disregard the significant constraints created by the unfortunate need to conduct this Convention in a virtual setting.

Two important choices had to be made.

First of all, as there are generally 2,000 attendees at a CSN Convention, it would have been impossible to hold our deliberative assembly as usual.

Therefore, based on recommendations by the CSN Executive Committee and the 66th Convention Committee, the Confederal Bureau and Confederal Council have suspended certain provisions of our Constitution and By-laws in order to make this Convention possible, as an essential meeting in the pursuit of our activities.

Second, given the special circumstances under which we are operating, the Pre-Convention Committee felt it would be appropriate to establish priorities.

The proposals that will be submitted to you will therefore focus on:

The health and safety of our members and our union teams;

Union life and mobilization;

Labour rights;

Post-COVID recovery.

We can all agree that immense challenges lie ahead for Québec.

First of all, the Québec government will have to come up with a genuine recovery plan and stop presenting us with piecemeal micro-measures.

ONE MAJOR UPCOMING EVENT WILL BE THE QUÉBEC BUDGET, WHICH IS OF A DECISIVE IMPORTANCE.

The current budgetary strategy, inherited from the Bouchard government in the late 1990s, amounts to a policy of permanent austerity. It cannot be said too often that this is a policy which Québec must renounce.

This fiscal strategy, unchanged for 25 years, will hobble our economic and social recovery.

The need for Québec to break away from the dogma of payments to the Generations Fund, zero deficit and hasty budget rebalancing is urgent.

WE MUST ALSO MEET THE CHALLENGE OF REFORMING OUR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY LAWS. BILL 59 IS CURRENTLY UNDER CONSIDERATION IN QUÉBEC CITY.

Unfortunately, setbacks in certain sectors cast a shadow over the real progress in other workplaces.

Together, we must continue to put pressure on Québec City for an occupational health and safety law reform that truly protects everyone.

We can do it.

ANOTHER VERY IMPORTANT EVENT FOR OUR MOVEMENT WILL BE THE PUBLIC SECTOR BARGAINING TALKS.

In April 2020, François Legault said that reaching an agreement was a matter of urgency, but he has preferred to unilaterally modify our members' working conditions and sow division by granting pay premiums to some and imposing ministerial orders across the board.

This approach to addressing problems in our public services, which have been decimated by years of chronic underfunding, has serious limitations.

François Legault needs to realize that there aren't 12,000 ways to attract and retain the employees who are sorely lacking in our public services today. The government must:

Significantly improve wages, especially for low-wage earners;

Reduce workloads and improve the conditions under which we work.

And this has to happen at the bargaining table, not at a press conference.

* * * * *

Sisters and Brothers,

I confess, I find it hard to find the right tone to open this Convention.

All the more so with the latest lockdown.

I cannot downplay the difficulties we face—in the union movement, on the political front, and in our personal lives.

But neither can I be overwhelmed by the pessimism that has been washing over us for almost a year now.

OUR UNION LIVES, OUR PROFESSIONAL LIVES AND OUR PERSONAL LIVES HAVE BEEN ENGULFED BY ONE OF THE MOST TRYING TIMES IN OUR HISTORY.

But one fact cannot be denied.

If pre-COVID normality seems distant today, it is because of the incredible amount of work that has been done in the meantime, on all fronts, by our union activists, by CSN staff and by all of our teams.

The women and children suffering under brutal working conditions at the Eddy Match factory in Hull 100 years ago needed courage.

I have seen that same courage, that same resilience every day at each of the unions in our organization, particularly since the pandemic began.

THE SAME VALUES OF MUTUAL AID AND SOLIDARITY ANIMATE US STILL, 100 YEARS LATER. TOGETHER FOR EACH OTHER.

Have an excellent 66th Convention. Long live the CSN!

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the CSN, our history has confirmed that it is possible to take action for a better future.

Confédération des syndicats nationaux. Visual: LaBase. Production: Service des communications de la CSN

csn.qc.ca

CSN