

# Why Unions? The Role of Police Associations in the Twenty-First Century

*By Bill Cole*



Bill Cole, during a CPA Executive Leadership training module as he outlines the important role of police associations in the police workplace. The CPA Executive Leadership Program was established in 2008 and has been attended by over 240 public sector union leaders from across Canada.

Sometime in the next few months approximately eighteen thousand sworn members of the RCMP will participate in a vote to certify the National Police Federation as their bargaining agent – their union. This is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the long journey to get to this vote which included two trips to the Supreme Court of Canada and thousands of hours of lobbying the federal government for the right to unionize. With a membership this size the NPF will become the largest police association in

Canada. An historic moment of this kind naturally raises the question: what is the value of police associations today? This question is not limited to the men and women of the RCMP: it would hardly be a surprise if, among the fifty-six thousand members of the Canadian Police Association, there weren't questions about the value of their local police associations in the twenty-first century.

Associations play many roles in representing their members. I like to define these from both a broad and

narrow perspective. Broadly speaking, perhaps the most important role for associations today is being an effective “voice” for the policing profession. In fact the legislation that regulates the labour-management relationship in all Canadian jurisdictions presumes that associations will be independent from the employer in every way. This empowers association leaders to speak out on issues of concern for their members and to be critical of public policy considerations by chiefs and police services boards. In having this balance between associations and employers, it is expected that the quality of public debate on issues will be enriched, and both sides of an argument will be aired more fully. As public sector employees – today more than ever – police are more vulnerable to threats of restructuring, contracting out or privatization. At a time when the public dialogue on professional policing is anchored in the arbitrary notion of unsustainability, the role of police associations becomes even more important. As independent voices in policing, association leaders can speak to issues without fear of reprisal – something not available to the individual officer in the workplace.

Other roles, broadly speaking, include association involvement in health and safety for their members. Associations have played an invaluable role in the evolution of protective equipment, ergonomically improved workplaces, staffing requirements and performance standards. These improvements are not achieved in a vacuum – the size and resourcefulness of police associations and their affiliates can support independent research into the unique dangers inherent to policing. Health and safety legislation across Canada has evolved, in part, due to the contributions of police associations, and the continued efforts of representatives on the many joint occupational health and safety committees. Just as leaders are provided a voice in public policy discussions, health and safety representatives can address workplace issues with statutory immunity.

Members are likely more familiar with their association’s representation in collective bargaining. The negotiation of the terms and conditions of employment is one association role that impacts all members and is often mistakenly considered their only important representation function. Given the incremental progress that typically results from collective bargaining, it is more useful to consider its impact over a longer period.

It was not so long ago that the working conditions of police officers across North America were vastly different than they are today. For example when the police in Boston went on strike almost one hundred years ago an officer worked up to ninety hours per week (having one day off every fourteen), was required to live in his assigned station (sleeping on straw mattresses) and paid for his own uniforms and protective equipment. After years without wage adjustments, in 1919 the Bos-

ton Police Social Club was certified as the Boston Police Union and voted 1,134 to 2 to engage in a strike. When peace finally returned to Boston, the City terminated 1,100 officers, blacklisting them from police employment elsewhere. More than 1,500 hundred new officers were hired and paid at nearly double the previous rates with improved hours of work and a new pension plan.

In Canada organized police associations/unions can be traced back to the early years of the 20th century. It took several decades however, before they gained strength in the mid-1950s when public sector collective bargaining took root. At that time a police officer worked 56 hours per week which was then negotiated down to 48 and ultimately 40 hours in the early 1960s. Pensions evolved from life-time average earning plans into today’s defined benefit structures. All the result of collective bargaining by police associations. Since then negotiations have provided minimum staffing obligations, indemnification coverage, improved court time compensation, accessible sick leave, long-term disability provisions and improved equipment. Today’s issues include job security, work-life balance, wellness, health care benefits and fairness in the assignment of work. Threats on the horizon include possible risk-sharing pension structures, cost containment in health care benefits, and restructuring police organizations, to name only a few. Together with negotiating the collective agreement, the Association plays a central role in administering and enforcing its terms and conditions through a grievance process.

As over-zealous as oversight bodies can be from time to time, police accept that oversight is a critical component of policing today. Associations play a key role in making certain that members who are designated subjects or witnesses are provided fundamental rights of due process and representation. Perhaps most important of all, when a member is subject to criminal charges in the performance of his or her duties, his or her Association provides counsel in what would otherwise nearly always be a crippling financial experience. Criminal trials involving police officers routinely exceed a hundred thousand dollars – expenses that would financially devastate any employee who did not have large group legal funds for this purpose.

My attention has been focused on the role of the police association as part of the individual employment relationship for members, leaving out their various other roles. They are more vital to their memberships today than any time in the past.

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