

## LEADERSHIP 2015—AGREEMENT REACHED

Thank-you, Harvey, for that introduction. Welcome delegates and guests.

I am honoured to be speaking to you today on the traditional lands of the Algonquin First Nation.

It has been a challenging year since we met 12 months ago at Leadership 2014. A year ago we had just concluded our first day of teacher/occasional teacher central bargaining. After that first session last year, where we had just begun to discuss what issues would be on the central table, I reported that this would be a challenging round of bargaining. I said there would be “bumps in the road...and I said nothing is insurmountable.” Well, sisters and brothers, I have to admit that neither I nor anyone else on our side of the table at that first meeting would have believed that it would be more than a full year before I'd be able to stand before you and tell you that we finally have a negotiated tentative agreement. It took 29 frustrating days at the bargaining table, the assistance of three different mediators, and an entire calendar year to finally get the management team to move off of their radical management rights agenda and come to an agreement—an agreement we should have arrived at months ago.

And while we were experiencing all that frustration in pursuit of a central deal, Bargaining Units around the province were frustrated by a lack of bargaining dates and an unwillingness to initiate local bargaining. Three Districts took the lead in the fight for fair local agreements through a full withdrawal of services in the spring. And I want to take a minute now to thank the members and the leaders of those Districts—particularly Dave Barrowclough, President of District 13, Durham; James Clyke, President of District 3, Rainbow; and Mike Bettiol, President of District 19, Peel—for their courage and their resolve in the face of enormous challenges, and also Dan Maxwell, President of District 25, Ottawa-Carleton and Brad Fisher, President of District 20. But of course it takes much more than a District President to run strike, and we also need to acknowledge the executive members of those five Districts and nine Bargaining Units, as well

as the chief negotiators, the picket captains and all the members who were involved in coordinating those actions. A full withdrawal of services, with hundreds or even thousands of members on the picket lines at multiple sites, comes with enormous stresses and organizational challenges. All of the local leaders in these Districts and Bargaining Units need to be acknowledged for doing an amazing job before, during and after those strikes.

I don't think I need to remind anyone that when those Districts took job action, their respective boards did not respond with a willingness to sit down and resolve the differences, even after five full weeks of a complete walkout. The boards' responses, in fact, were quite the opposite. Rather than negotiate, those three school boards colluded with each other to bring charges against us in front of the Ontario Labour Relations Board. And the government, for its part, rather than showing some leadership and taking aim at the ludicrous strips the school boards were demanding, decided instead to take aim at our members' rights and impose back-to-work legislation. That was a dark week for free collective bargaining in Ontario: Back-to-work legislation from a component of the management team, and a ridiculous ruling from the OLRB that ignored every shred of evidence we put before them.

The knowledge we gained from that experience was a very clear understanding of the depth of the school boards' resolve to strip our collective agreements, and seriously weaken public education in the process. We saw that those boards were willing to keep their students out of the classroom for weeks on end rather than engage in real negotiations. We saw that they were willing to expend a great deal of time and money to hire lawyers and build a convoluted case to undermine our right to take job action, rather than trying to end that job action through an honest effort to come to an agreement.

The inflexibility of those three boards was a direct reflection of the attitude we saw for an entire year at the

central table. They were—and I firmly believe that some still are—obsessed with a radical management rights agenda, and they were fully resolved to lay waste to our agreements. They were resolved to scuttle fair and transparent bargaining practices, they were resolved to gain unfettered control over your day and how you do your jobs, and to the very end they resisted any semblance of real negotiations in their determination to get what they wanted.

But in the end we did prevail. In the end we matched their resolve. In the end we negotiated a deal. As much as this has been a frustrating year for our teacher and occasional teacher members and leaders, our frustration over support staff bargaining is even deeper. To date we have had only five days of support staff bargaining with the Council of Trustees, and not a single article has been agreed to. It became clear to us that there was no appetite on the part of the Council to turn its attention to support staff bargaining until teacher bargaining has been concluded. But I'm here to tell you that while the Council of Trustees habitually undervalue and overlook the role of support staff in our schools, *this union does not*. Our support staff members are integral to their workplaces and they are integral to this Federation. They participated fully in our collective enhanced support for the teachers and occasional teachers on the picket line in the spring, and we are not going to stand by and let the Council of Trustees push them aside. We have now scheduled four bargaining dates: August 28, and September 23rd, 24th and 25th. We will speak more about strategy later in the plenary session this morning.

Make no mistake—even though we may have reached a tentative teacher/occasional teacher agreement, the battle continues. Even after we achieve a negotiated deal for support staff—and we will—this battle won't be over. All of us—every one of us who works for a school board in this province—we are *all* in a very serious battle on behalf of public education with a Council of Trustees and a Public School Boards Association that are determined to undermine our working conditions, gut our collective agreements, and

diminish public education in Ontario. This battle didn't end when we got a teacher settlement and it won't end when we get a support staff settlement. We owe it, not just to each other and not just to everyone who has gone before us in this Federation, but to our students, and to their parents who just want to see their kids succeed...we owe it to all of those people to keep fighting this battle until the threat that's in front of us today—and the kind of thinking that goes with it—is a relic of the past.

I want to take a minute here to talk about something else that needs to become a relic of the past. Its name is Stephen Harper. I have said a number of times now—at our Annual Assembly, at our CPAC Conference and elsewhere, so this is nothing new—but we cannot sit idly on the sidelines of the federal election. We can no longer ignore the Harper government's attacks on unions, on working people, and on the very social fabric of Canada.

Stephen Harper's contempt for unions, for working people, and for free collective bargaining has played itself out time and time again since he came to power. His government jumps at every opportunity to side with employers and to legislate striking workers back to work wherever they have jurisdiction, whether it's Canada Post, or Air Canada or the railroads.

Bill C-377, which requires unions to comply with levels of disclosure that no other type of organization in the country is forced to comply with, is one of the most absurd and disingenuous pieces of legislation any of us has ever seen. It speaks volumes about the depths of deceit to which this government is prepared to sink. But if the Conservatives are re-elected, I have no doubt that Bill C-377 will be remembered as just the tip of the iceberg, because Stephen Harper is determined to do whatever it takes to destroy the labour movement in Canada.

But his hatred of unions is far from the only reason to dump Stephen Harper. He has led the most underhanded, devious and unprincipled government in the history of Canada.

- He is the only prime minister ever found to be in contempt of Parliament.
- He has muzzled public servants, particularly Environment Canada scientists over climate change.
- The robocall scam misdirected non-Conservative voters to the wrong polling stations
- Harper's former parliamentary secretary has been sentenced to jail for breaking election laws.
- His government has lied incessantly about the true cost of F-35 fighter jets.
- And, of course, there is the Mike Duffy-Nigel Wright cover-up, now before the courts.

The list goes on and on. We have to do everything in our power to replace the Harper regime with a new government with new priorities—priorities like reliable health care, affordable child care, good jobs and retirement security. That's why I'm going to be joining CLC President Hassan Yussuff and other provincial and national labour leaders for a series of canvasses in key ridings across the province. Next Saturday, August 29th, I'll be joining Brother Yussuff for a canvass in Toronto, and the next day, on Sunday, August 30th, we'll be canvassing in Hamilton. All of our presidents in or near these ridings will be receiving details about the canvasses over the next few days. Please encourage your members to participate. Encourage them to get involved in a campaign if possible, and at very least impress upon them the importance of getting the vote out. We have two months to convince our friends, colleagues and neighbours to elect a new government, and we simply can't afford to squander that opportunity. Because if we're complacent about this, and if we allow the Harper government to return to power yet again, we'll be paying for that complacency for years to come, and we will be placing our future in jeopardy.

As difficult as this year has been, I've never been prouder of our members, our local leaders, our staff and my fellow Executive members. This year has tested all of us, as so far we have risen to every challenge,

and we will do that for support staff members also. We *will* achieve a fair collective agreement for support staff—an agreement that doesn't devalue our work or diminish our working conditions. But I need to say again that I'm convinced this battle will not be over, even when all of our agreements are signed and ratified. The mindset that we have been dealing with at the central bargaining table is not going to go away. Whether we like it or not, OPSBA is now a player in central bargaining, and as long as that organization brings the same attitude to the table, we can expect everything we've worked for over the decades to come under attack every time we sit down to bargain.

There have been times in this Federation when words like “resolve” and “solidarity” only made an appearance if bargaining was going badly and action was on the horizon. We all know that we're in one of those situations right now. But what's different this time is that we're not going to be able to pack those words up and put them back in the drawer when this round of bargaining is finally over. Our members in Durham and Rainbow and Peel who took their local battles to the picket lines in the spring showed us what it means to have faith in our resolve and to walk together in solidarity. Our members at Brock University were also prepared to take their battle to the picket line, and through their resolve and solidarity they achieved a fair negotiated agreement just last week.

The time is now for all of us—all of the leaders in this room—to do whatever it takes to ensure that “resolve” and “solidarity” become not just part of the vocabulary of every member of this union, but a way of life as we move forward.

When we started this round of bargaining, we could not have predicted that the road would be so long or so difficult—we've encountered bumps and potholes and significant detours. But those challenges have only strengthened our resolve and reinforced our solidarity, and what I said in March at AMPA is still true



now: We started down this road together, we will stay on this road together, and we will be together when we get to the end of this road.