

Our vanishing freedom to fight for fairness



By Nate Smelle

Getting up before sunrise to go for an early morning walk through the forest at this time of year, one cannot help but notice the signs telling us that winter is coming. Everywhere one looks, our environment is there reminding us that we need to prepare for the harsh weather that will soon consume the majority of our time, energy, and thought. The absence of leaves on the trees; the honking of Canadian geese overhead; the crunching sound resonating from the forest floor with every step one takes; each in its own way pointing to the seasonal change underway.

Strolling along one of the trails atop the Eagles Nest in Bancroft recently, it hit me that I hadn't explored the loop I was hiking for more than three years. As I sat there taking in my surroundings, watching a red squirrel blend into the fallen leaves while nibbling on a strange looking mushroom, I also realized that since COVID-19 showed up in January 2020, I had limited my early morning hikes to a single trail close to my home. As I let this realization sink in, it occurred to me that the fact I had subconsciously decided to expand my range was also a sign ? a sign indicating that I am personally getting more comfortable with the new normal.

Watching the morning news on Nov. 1, I came across another notable sign that we are collectively moving beyond allowing our lives to be dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. That's not to say that this deadly virus is not still a massive threat to our existence as a species. On Thursday, Oct. 27 Ontario reported that there were 121 more deaths, along with 1,921 people hospitalized with COVID-19 (the highest hospitalization rate recorded in the province since last February). The provincial government's "wastewater signal" has also detected that the virus is on the rise in public wastewater; and, in response to this data is predicting a significant increase of cases in the coming weeks and throughout the colder months ahead.

Still, despite these numbers and the potential dangers to public health and safety they represent, it somehow feels as if we are now on the better side of this monster. Ironically, the news foreshadowing better times to come in our new normal came with the Ford government's recently announced back-to-work legislation, dubiously labeled the "Keeping Students in Class Act."

Although the idea of forcing underpaid essential education workers to work for less than a living wage might warm the hearts of those who prioritize the greed of the few over the needs of the many, that is not the reason this freedom-stealing legislation gives me hope for a better future. In fact, when I first heard Minister of Education Stephen Lecce introduce the Act I found myself chewing on a familiar feeling of disgust that I hadn't experienced since covering the government's duplicitous approach to workplace negotiations during the province-wide job action taken by teachers and education workers prior to the arrival of COVID-19.

At that time, education workers throughout the province were protesting the Ford government's cuts to education. The issues arising

from the government's cuts that were being protested, included: increasing class sizes; mandatory e-learning; fixing and making schools safe; teacher and education worker job losses; the preservation of the current kindergarten model; ensuring that fair and transparent hiring practices would be maintained; and, violence in schools.

With COVID-19 forcing teachers, education workers, and the government to step back from the dispute to address the unprecedented public health emergency at-hand, the important issues on the table were swept aside to be dealt with when the threat had passed.

Well, considering that the province's education unions are preparing to launch a job action that puts many of these issues back on the table, it appears now that for the first time in almost three years, COVID-19 is once again no longer our governments' one and only priority.

Now that other issues are beginning to be addressed again, we have a precious and time-sensitive opportunity to observe our governments' true priorities with a fresh set of eyes. To our advantage, the COVID-19 pandemic has expanded the scope of our vision, and taken away our ability to shirk our moral obligations to one another as human beings. Furthermore, by restricting our access to the "un-essential" we have also now gained a heightened appreciation of the limits of our rights and freedoms. In turn, this greater understanding of freedom, and what it means to be considered "essential" has enabled us to make better decisions as responsible citizens.

Perhaps once the "Freedom" convoy crowd catches wind of the Ford government's plans to fine "essential" education workers ? the same workers praised as heroes at the peak of the pandemic ? \$4,000 a day just for defending their right and freedom to fight for fair compensation and workers rights. Perhaps the federal Conservative's most recent "freedom" fighting leader Pierre Poilievre will join the 55,000 education workers at the Canadian Union of Public Employees' province-wide job action this Friday. Perhaps this season the Toronto Maple Leafs will win their first Stanley Cup since 1967. I am not holding my breath on any of these wishes, but if enough of the right people with the right priorities work together for the greater good, anything is possible.