

## Respecting the essentials



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By Nate Smelle

IF THERE WAS ever a year in which the day-to-day contributions of the working class deserved to be celebrated, 2020 is that year. When the province shut down last spring, the only workers punching the clock were those deemed essential by the provincial government.

A few essential workers making the list included doctors, nurses, personal support workers, health-care providers, grocery store workers, and gas station attendants.

Now, looking at this list again more than six months after it was initially released, I find myself questioning how much our society truly values the services provided by these essential workers.

Certainly anyone in their right mind would not dare to argue against the essential status of doctors, nurses, personal support workers, and other health-care providers. We all know that without the selfless service of these workers, who have, and continue to put their

lives on the line for the sake of others, the death toll and rate of infection would be far higher.

Yet, despite the obvious importance of these individuals when it comes to the maintenance of public health, it appears that in most cases their value is only recognized with lip service.

As recently pointed out by the president of the Ontario Nurses' Association, Vicki McKenna, while these health-care professionals have stepped up to the challenge during the pandemic, the Ford government has "passed several pieces of anti-labour legislation, failed to provide proper protective equipment to those who need it, and botched its pandemic pay."

The two pieces of legislation exemplifying how "valuable" the essential services provided by these front-line health-care professionals are to the current government are Bill 124 and Bill 195. Ensuring that the earnings of these health-care professionals continue to fall behind the rate of inflation, Bill 124 limits wage increases to a maximum increase of one per cent in total compensation each year for three years. At the same time, Bill 195 enables the Ford government to maintain a state of emergency and override the collective agreements and rights of the workers. Not only do these bills devalue the service provided by these heroes to our society, they also infringe on their rights by interfering with their right to freely collectively bargain. Considering the heightened level of risk they have exposed themselves to during the pandemic, these individuals need to be rewarded.

The same goes for the workers stocking the shelves and cashing us out at our local grocery stores, big-box warehouses, and gas stations. Politicians from all parties have been quick to applaud the services provided by these individuals, while doing little to nothing to reward their contributions. Why did the celebration of these essential workers stop? Did their work suddenly become less valuable?

What the essential services list revealed to us is how vital the basic necessities are in terms of public health. That is why the service of the workers at the gas station risking their lives so that we can fuel up our vehicles and travel to the grocery store; and the workers at the grocery store risking their lives to allow us the opportunity to feed ourselves and our families are just as valuable now as they were at the peak of the pandemic's first wave.

Revolutionary Cuban doctor Ernesto "Che" Guevara touched on this communal approach to encouraging good public health, while addressing a room full of medical students and workers on Aug. 20, 1960. Touting the merits of preventative medicine Guevara said, "The battle against disease should be based on the principle of creating a robust body " not through a doctor's artistic work on a weak organism " but creating a robust body through the work of the whole collectivity, especially the whole social collectivity. One day medicine will have to become a science that serves to prevent diseases, to orient the entire public toward their medical obligations, and which only has to intervene in cases of extreme urgency to perform some surgical operation or to deal with something unusual in that new society we are creating... For that organizational task, as for all revolutionary tasks, what is required, fundamentally, is the individual."

If we truly value our health as individuals and as a community, we can no longer allow those providing us the essential services necessary to create and maintain a robust and healthy body to go without. By devaluing the work of those jeopardizing their own health and well-being for the sake of the community, we neglect to recognize these individuals as the fundamental building blocks of the healthier, more robust society they are striving to create.