



Good morning AMPA delegates, Life members, and guests. Welcome to the 98th Annual Meeting of the Provincial Assembly.

A lot has happened since this Assembly convened here last year. Between then and now, two very high-profile campaigns based on fear, bigotry and xenophobia found success on the international stage in the form the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. We ended 2016 and entered 2017 in a completely unsettled world, a world almost no one would have predicted twelve months earlier. Predictability and stability, in fact, are beginning to seem like quaint notions of the past, as we watch the daily news from south of the border – news that seems more and more like theatre of the absurd as the Trump presidency unfolds.

We're at a moment in history where uncertainty is the theme, and no one really knows what's going to happen. A moment that has the potential to devolve into a very dark period. As educators, we know that public education is one of the best tools or public services ever conceived for finding our way in the dark and lighting the path forward. The victories of Brexit and Trump are expressions of isolationism, of nations turning away from the global community and looking inward. But we know that this is not the time to retreat behind our own walls. This is a time to maintain and strengthen our many international relationships that nurture and promote the ideals of public education and social justice.

We have a long, ongoing relationship with the rural teachers in Bolivia, and we have proudly supported their efforts to build union capacity through the *Union Training School* in Cochabamba, which we are continuing to fund along with the British Columbia Teachers' Federation.

We also have an enduring relationship with the South African Democratic Teachers' Union, or SADTU, with whom we have frequently shared, over the years, our experiences about workplace training and union representation.

And we continue to do some extraordinary work with FECODE, the national teachers' union in Colombia. Most recently, we have assisted, through Co-Dev Canada, the establishment of the Pedagogical Project for the Post-Conflict period, designed to ensure that schools remain zones of peace in a nation that is just now emerging from a 52-year civil war. You may also remember that Julian Mauricio Lozano, former president of the Union of Educational Workers and current treasurer of the Colombian Trade Union Congress in the province of Cali, was one of our guests last year, and addressed this assembly.

Through all of this international solidarity over the years, which includes our participation in the Trinational Coalition with teachers from Mexico and the United States, we have come to recognize and appreciate that whatever language we are working in and whatever the political climate, educators everywhere have the same goals and the same passions for collective action, for unionism, and for social justice.

We learn from our international relationships that we can never become complacent. Over the past year in Mexico, hundreds of teachers have been fired, and some have even been jailed for months, just for peacefully protesting their government's regressive education policies. We look at these foreign governments and we would like to believe that tactics such as these would never be tolerated in Canada.

But there are those who seek public office whose motives with regard to public education are not much different than what we see in Mexico, Colombia and the US – politicians who don't believe in public services. Politicians who would love to commodify education and move it into the private sphere. Politicians who see our bargaining rights not as a constitutional guarantee, but as an inconvenient hindrance. Let's not forget that the current favourite in the race to lead the Conservative Party of Canada has publicly stated that he wants to make unions illegal and throw union members in jail.

And it's precisely because of people like Kevin O'Leary and Kellie Leitch, and others with the same kind of agenda, that we need to maintain a strong coalition with the labour movement all across Canada.

Through our affiliation with the Canadian Labour Congress, we've stood shoulder to shoulder with other unions to win important victories like the ban on asbestos in new construction projects, and the first major improvements to the Canada Pension Plan in more than forty years.

Last year we joined with other unions from all over Canada to raise more than \$300,000 to support the settlement of Syrian refugees. I urge everyone, by the way, to visit the CLC's virtual reality display about the refugee experience, which is set up in the foyer just outside, near the escalators. I think you'll find it both compelling and disturbing. We need also to keep in mind that this is an ongoing humanitarian crisis. The world is still experiencing the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War. And that's why we, on your behalf, continue to make donations on an annual basis to assist refugees.

The newest fight we are undertaking through the CLC – and it's also very important fight – is for a quality National Pharmacare Program, not just for union members, but for all the citizens of Canada. A universal, comprehensive program that will give all Canadians access to prescription medicines based on need, and not on their ability to pay.

This year, the CLC's triennial convention will be held right here in Toronto in May, and OSSTF/FEESO will, of course, be attending with a full contingent of delegates. We are honoured that CLC President Hassan Yussuff will be joining us at our dinner tomorrow night, and I'm pleased to announce that OSSTF/FEESO will be supporting him as he seeks a second term as president.

I'm proud to say, by the way, that while we are relatively small in comparison some of the big national and international unions affiliated with the CLC, we have, over the past few years, begun to punch well above our weight when it comes to labour activism in our communities. OSSTF/FEESO members, in fact, currently hold the role of president in ten of the 41 local and district labour councils in Ontario. That's a quarter of the labour council presidencies in the province, and that's very impressive. Some of those labour council presidents are here as delegates, alternates or guests, and I'd like to ask them to stand and be acknowledged.

Within Ontario we continue to work with the Ontario Federation of Labour on a number of initiatives. Patti Coates, a proud OSSTF/FEESO member from District 17 is the current

Secretary-Treasurer of the OFL, and she is commanding a lot of respect for the work she's doing there.

It's no secret that when Patti was elected, along with President Chris Buckley and Executive Vice-President Ahmad Gaied, the OFL was in pretty rough shape. That entire leadership team has done an extraordinary job putting things back in order at the OFL, and the labour movement right across Ontario is benefitting from the great work they are doing.

The most important initiative we've been working on through the OFL is the Make it Fair campaign. For almost two years, through the hard work of our members on local labour councils across the province, as well as local leaders and our staff at Provincial Office, we have been fighting to ensure that the government's review of the Ontario Labour Relations Act and Employment Standards Act results in a modern, worker-focused, union-friendly employment environment in Ontario. The "Changing Workplaces Review" truly is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make positive legislative changes for working people in Ontario.

It can be easy for us to forget that the vast majority – a full 70 percent – of Ontario's workers do not have the protection of a union. Those workers rely on the *Employment Standards Act*, an outdated piece of legislation that hasn't been overhauled since the 1990s, to govern their relationship with their employers. And that usually means no paid sick leave, minimal, if any, access to benefits, and poverty-level wages. The Act is so toothless, in fact, that it allows unscrupulous employers to classify their workers as "independent contractors" rather than employees – and that allows those employers to circumvent even the minimal standards for things like paid vacations and overtime.

We in the labour movement believe that a job should lift workers out of poverty, not entrench them in it.

And that's we and other labour affiliates have made formal submissions, and have continued to lobby, not just for a higher minimum wage, but for paid sick days and tougher regulations that won't allow employers to misclassify their workers.

The best way for workers to protect their rights is to be part of a union, and Ontario's unions have told the government that it's time to overhaul Ontario Labour Relations Act to make it

easier for workers to join a union without employer intimidation, easier to keep their union once it is certified, and easier to get a first contract. It was Mike Harris who imposed rules making it a lot harder for employees to join a union, and since that time the number of successful union certifications in Ontario has declined steadily.

That's why we've told the Liberal government that, after 22 years under Mike Harris's rules, it's time to reintroduce card-based certification, and to provide easier access to arbitration when employers refuse to negotiate a first contract.

We get involved in these kinds of campaigns for a couple of reasons. One is that the labour movement is also a social justice movement, with a long and proud history of fighting for the rights and security of all workers, whether they're unionized or not.

But there's another reality we need to be aware of. There's an old saying that a rising tide lifts all boats, and that may very well be true. But in the current economic climate, it may be even more accurate to say that a race to the bottom drags everybody down.

If the current trends toward precarious, low-paid work continues, union members with stable work, decent pay, good benefits and secure pensions, will become increasingly isolated in a world where the vast majority of workers has none of those things. We have seen, in recent rounds of bargaining, the intense pressure exerted by employers eager to strip away provisions that we've bargained over decades. In the last round of bargaining it was OSSTF/FEESO who led the fight to protect working conditions in the education sector while the other unions fell in behind us. It was our members who were on the picket line, leading the resistance against employers who wanted to strip our contracts, diminish our working conditions and discount our professionalism. It was a long and exhausting battle, but we defended our collective agreements and made some important gains.

But we can't kid ourselves. The pressures that were brought to bear on us in the last round of bargaining will just get worse if the accepted model for employment in the broader economy continues to slide toward insecurity, instability, low wages and minimal rights for workers. We in the labour movement are not only in the best position to lead the resistance against those downward trends, but it is very much in our own interest to do so.

And every one of you can help right now. On your table you will find a postcard titled “You can make sure Ontarians have DECENT WORK!” There’s also a flyer that explains more about the campaign. Please take a couple minutes this morning to complete the postcard and help us reiterate the message to local MPPs. There are boxes by the exits where you can deposit completed postcards. If you would like to pick up additional postcards and flyers to take back to your district – and I encourage you to do that – please go to the CPAC table.

But, of course, as important as it is for us to always be aware of – and participate in – provincial, national and international concerns, the vast majority of the work we do as a Federation is focused on our own members, and in that regard, there have been a number of significant developments and achievements over this past year.

At last year’s AMPA we were still waiting for a ruling on the Bill 115 Charter Challenge. That ruling came just over a month later, and it came in the form of a resounding victory for OSSTF/FEESO and the other unions involved in the challenge.

Virtually everything we and the other unions had been saying about Bill 115 was reflected in the judge’s ruling.

Justice Lederer wrote that the government violated our right to freedom of association and our right to free collective bargaining by “creating a situation that made meaningful bargaining impossible”. He said that the government’s bargaining process was “ill conceived” and “fundamentally flawed”. And he called the government’s tactics “arbitrary”, which, he pointed out, could be interpreted as “despotic”.

The Charter challenge victory is certainly a vindication for us and for the other unions involved. And, of course, we hope that it sends a clear message to the current government, and – perhaps more importantly – to future governments, that measures like those contained in Bill 115 are not just morally and ethically repugnant, but they are also emphatically unconstitutional.

We know from experience, however, that these victories do not guarantee that the next government won’t violate our rights. Governments are slow to learn and they are often lazy, preferring to opt for short-term political expediency over the hard, tedious work of finding long-term solutions. For evidence of that we just have to look east. We’d be forgiven for thinking that

the Nova Scotia government would have learned from recent court rulings on our behalf and on behalf of BCTF. But no, as we've seen, that government just went right ahead and ignored the bargaining rights of Nova Scotia's teachers. So yes, it's important for us to celebrate these victories and know that we are vindicated, but we have to be prepared to fight these battles over and over and over again. Because we've seen so many times that governments, sadly, never learn from their mistakes because they have the memory of a goldfish.

Another significant victory has come in the form of a formal recognition of teachers' professional judgement – which is now entrenched in our central agreement. Putting it into practice, however, has provided us with challenges. And really, it's little wonder. For decades Ministry initiatives have been eroding the role of our professional judgement, and while formal recognition is a good start, we now have to fight hard to change the culture that's been created over the course of those decades.

We also have a commitment on the part of the Ministry and the school boards to a process of collaborative professionalism that includes *all* education workers. PPM 159 states that teachers, support staff and all educational professionals who work for school boards must be included in the process that governs the implementation of new and existing initiatives at all levels of the education system.

This marks an extraordinary improvement in the way initiatives impacting education are to be implemented in our schools, but it will be our responsibility to be vigilant and highlight this in every way possible, both provincially and at the local level, so that the school boards do not get away with ignoring it. Provincially we have been following a detailed plan that includes, among other measures, communications with both members and district school boards, and conducting surveys of local leaders to provide information about the establishment and use of mechanisms to support collaborative professionalism. We will continue to gather data while holding the government accountable at provincial tables where education initiatives are being discussed. It will be equally important for you, as local leaders, to hold the boards responsible in your districts.

With all we have before us, there is no greater challenge facing us than dealing with violence in our workplaces.

I think most people in Ontario would be shocked to discover that violence at work is major concern for people who work in the province's elementary and secondary schools. But for far too many of our members, a persistent, looming risk of violence has become a prominent feature of their working lives. Violent incidents – some minor, but many serious – are daily occurrences in Ontario schools.

Our members are hit, spat upon, punched, kicked, bitten and scratched on a daily basis. Education workers now have one of the highest rates of lost time due to injuries of any occupation in the province, and many of our Bargaining Units report that violence at work has become the most important issue facing their members. And while it's a problem that affects all education workers, it has a disproportionate impact on educational assistants, who are, more often than not, assigned specifically to support students who exhibit violent behaviour. EAs do what they can to protect themselves, often wearing personal protective equipment that sometimes make them look more like riot cops than education workers, but far too many of them still sustain injuries ranging from minor cuts and scratches to broken bones and concussions that keep them off work for months and have a serious negative impact on the quality of their lives. Working in education should not be a cause for Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

We already know that part of the problem is a lack of appropriate funding and staffing for special education programs. But we also realize that this is a complex issue impacted by a number of factors, and that is why the work that's being carried out by OSSTF/FEESO's Violence in the Workplace Task Force is such an important step. The Task Force is employing a multi-pronged approach to addressing violence in the workplace.

During February we completed the first phase in a series of in-person interviews with grassroots members and local leaders and health & safety officers, all designed to give the Task Force a detailed understanding of violent incidents and reporting processes in our workplaces around the province.

Some of the numbers are very disturbing.

30% of our members said they have never received any training whatsoever with regard to workplace violence.

80% of our members said that violence reporting forms are either inaccessible, or that they don't know and have never been told where to find them.

75% of our members report that their employer frequently tells them not to report a violent incident, claiming that the incident wasn't violent.

The data we've collected paints a distressing and shameful picture of school boards deliberately sweeping this issue under the rug while the government just looks the other way.

In the coming weeks and months we'll be creating resources and training packages to ensure members are aware of their rights, understand how to report incidents and know what supports are in place for them.

We have spoken with and written to the Minister of Education to put her on notice that confronting workplace violence is a priority for OSSTF/FEESO. The Minister, in fact, has now heard about this issue a few times, and not just from me.

The presidents from the other teaching affiliates and I confronted the Minister about workplace violence at the January OTF meeting. It's an issue we need to draw attention to every chance we get, and I hope that, when the Minister takes questions after she speaks to us tomorrow, some of you will help to ensure that she gets the message yet again.

We are also seeking and expecting support and cooperation from the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development.

Just this past week, in fact, I spoke directly to the Minister of Labour about how important this issue is for us. I informed Minister Flynn that we expect action on this, and that the calls for action from OSSTF/FEESO are only going to get louder. We'll be delivering same message to every school board in the province.

Whatever response we receive, we will be moving ahead in our efforts. There is no excuse on the part of either the government or our employers for not joining us in our efforts to address and reduce violent incidents in our workplaces.

This year's Lobby Day, on March 29, will focus exclusively on violence in our workplaces. We will be using the data collected through the in-person interviews in February, along with personal stories from around the province, to ensure that every MPP we talk to has a clear understanding of what our members have to deal with on a daily basis. Some of our members will bring along their protective gear to help MPPs understand the lengths they have to go to in an effort to protect themselves.

We'll be highlighting the need for:

- Appropriately funded face-to-face training;
- Appropriate levels of staffing to ensure that all students have the supports they need and that there are more trained adults working with our students;
- and meaningful reporting that's consistent across the province and generates solutions

In addition to these measures, we'll be undertaking a campaign using radio, social media, web advertising and billboards, to raise public awareness about this issue, and to call for an education-sector-specific regulation in the Occupational Health and Safety Act to address violence in our workplaces.

No OSSTF/FEESO member should have to go to work in the morning fearing the possibility that they they'll experience some kind of violence at work that day. It's an issue that not only affects our members who are victims of violence, but impacts other members who experience vicarious trauma when their colleagues are injured, and it impacts countless students who witness violence every day in their learning environment. The establishment of the Violence in the Workplace Task Force is a major step, but it's going to require work to align all of our resources – both provincially and locally – to address, and eliminate, violence in our schools and on our university campuses.

I want to talk a bit about pensions. Several years ago we had to make some difficult – some would say drastic – decisions by implementing conditional indexing for the Teachers' Pension Plan.

But those measures that were undertaken in 2009 are beginning to come to fruition, and now we've had four consecutive years of surpluses, and pension plan that's more than 100% funded.

We've seen the conditional indexing go from 50% up to 90% last year, and now have returned to full indexing levels. For those who were impacted, their indexing has been fully restored. It was a difficult decision then, but it was about protecting a defined benefits plan, which is becoming a more difficult thing to do. We have seen the mounting attacks on defined benefit plans – we saw in last year's Canada Post negotiations, and we see it in the most recent UNIFOR auto-sector agreements.

We always need to be looking for ways to defend our plan, and one of the ways we're doing that is by advocating for jointly-sponsored plans. OMERS is another great example where we've done a great job maintaining the plan, and we've seen returns this year of over ten percent.

But one thing we need to concentrate on now is to carry that over to our university members. The project that we've been working on for several years now, to create a university sector-wide jointly sponsored pension plan is work that we need to continue. It's has been, and will continue to be, a slow and tedious process. There are a number of competing interests involved in the discussions. But we will continue to be vigilant to ensure that our members have proper representation within the governance structure of a plan that protects their voices and their defined benefits.

Also with regard to our university members, it pains me to have to point this out yet one more time – because we've been pointing it out for years – but Ontario continues to rank dead last among Canadian provinces in per-student funding for universities.

And as for the funding universities do receive, there is still virtually no meaningful public oversight with regard to how that money is spent. It's been two years since the province commissioned a University Funding Model Review, but it's been fifteen months since the Minister received the report from that review, and we still have only vague indications of the government's plans.

We know, however, that those plans appear to include the alarming prospect of outcomes-based funding connected to a Strategic Mandate Agreement with each institution – an idea almost as absurd as funding Ontario's elementary and secondary schools based on standardized testing. So we will be closely monitoring developments regarding the funding model review.

Ontario's universities, and our members who work for them, have waited far too long for a model that provides the funding that universities actually need to serve Ontario's post-secondary needs – enhanced funding that's subject to meaningful oversight and targeted to meet the needs of students rather than the whims of university administrators.

Another long-term and important focus for our Federation is equity. Equity, in fact, has been a focus for 12 years, and we continue to make it a priority, and to grow and develop in our understanding and our actions. This is reflected in the decision to create a permanent Equity Advisory Workgroup.

We have begun to provide equity training for new presidents, as well as for members of committees, councils and work groups.

In 2016 we completed an equity audit of our programs, procedures and policies. An interim report was provided in January, and the final report will be provided to this Assembly.

Also coming to the floor will be a motion to create a formal mentorship program to assist and encourage members of equity-seeking-groups overcome barriers to leadership opportunities.

This is an important step as we work toward a Federation and Federation leadership that reflects and represents the makeup of our members.

As I'm sure almost all of you know, over the next few weeks, membership meetings will be held across the province for our members employed by school boards and covered by the School Boards' Collective Bargaining Act.

Members will have an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the tentative extension agreement and the tentative remedy agreement. I hope those discussions will be wide-ranging and illuminating, and I have no doubt they will be.

Just to recap how we got to where we are . . . the September 30 meeting of Provincial Council endorsed a process and directed us to enter into discussions about a possible extension and a possible remedy for the Bill 115 Charter challenge.

On October 18, a brief was presented to a special meeting of Presidents and Chiefs negotiators, and that brief was approved by a double-majority vote.

In good faith your provincial negotiators, along the ad hoc Advisory Work Group representing teachers & occasional teachers and support staff, did what our Provincial Councillors and our local leaders asked them to do.

Over the next few weeks, it will be up to all of our members to consider the decision to ratify those agreements. And when the members have voted and the decision is made, we will have made a collective decision, and it will be incumbent on all of us to accept the decision. Because that's how a democratic union works. We resolve issues and we win our battles by deciding collectively how to approach the issues we face and what actions we need to take. We make a decision and then we stand together, because there's always another battle on the horizon.

This is my last AMPA. And I'll tell you that this is the most difficult part to do, and I couldn't find anything to put in writing. I'm not going to get emotional, but I do want to say this – two important thank-yous.

I want to thank my home District, if you three or four could stand up. I do want to recognize them for, over the past twelve years of being on the Executive, you always need a place to go home to. Somebody who's going to give you that support, and somebody that, in real honest terms, is going to say, "What were you thinking?" But it's important to have had that for so long, and I can't say thank-you enough to my home district.

And the other one is thank-you to you. Thank you for your support over the past twelve years. We don't always agree, and I think that's a good thing. But I think about the meetings we've gone through, I think about the SMPA that we had, I think about the 60,000 members out there that we represent, and I want to thank you for your support and the opportunity to be your president.

Thank you.