

Learning to live with it



By Nate Smelle

In a few hours it will be Monday, Sept. 5 ? Labour Day. While the vast majority of the world recognizes the accomplishments of workers on May 1 - International Workers Day - the first Monday in September is the one day of the year when workers in Canada, the United States, Australia, and a handful of other countries celebrate our combined contributions to society.

Throughout the pandemic, it became overwhelmingly clear how vital the various roles each of us play as workers are in maintaining our social structure and quality of life. Forced by circumstances beyond our control, we had to come to terms with what is and what is not essential.

Because of this inconvenient and unpredictable predicament, we also experienced firsthand what it is like to be faced with empty shelves and long lines at a grocery stores. Courtesy of COVID-19, we were also awakened to the harsh reality many of our Elders endure daily in Ontario's long-term care homes and hospitals due to decades of under-funding.

As a sign of respect and gratitude, we saw people all over the world hanging from windows and balconies at sunset, banging pots and pans in a worldwide showing of solidarity for the essential workers risking their lives on the frontlines of the crisis. In the windows of businesses, and on the front lawns of homes across the province, people put up signs expressing their appreciation of the workers committed to providing us with essential services and supplies.

Seeing so many of our family, friends, and neighbours bravely stepping up to the challenge posed by this unprecedented danger will continue to serve as a source of pride and inspiration for workers for the rest of our lives. Thankfully, or at least so it seems, the worst of the pandemic is over. Celebrating the contributions of workers, however, has never been more important.

Despite a seventh wave of COVID-19 forecasted for this fall; and the fact that China just locked down some 65 million people in anticipation of the coming wave, the Ford government appears to be ready to gamble on ?living with it.? Evidence of the provincial government's new approach to juggling public health with economic recovery is apparent in their recent decision to: dissolve the Ontario Science Table; and, allow workers and students to return to their workplace and/or classroom maskless, when they are ?feeling better.? As much as we are ready to leave this historic global health crisis behind, the end of this pandemic's story has yet to be written. In the coming weeks and months we will see the outcome of the Ford government's bet play out within Ontario's classrooms.

Some may take issue with the idea of experimenting on children, teachers, and education workers for the possibility of a more

expedient and profitable economic recovery. Others will encourage it, highlighting how ?With great risk comes great reward.?

Don't get me wrong, as everyone of us has witnessed over the past two years, the value of in-person learning is undeniable. For many, the return to the classroom/workplace will provide a much needed boost to their mental health. If indeed we do have control of COVID-19 to the point that we can treat it like a common cold, the government's bet could be a significant step forward in terms of learning to live with it. On the other hand, if we do not quite yet have a handle on the pandemic, the consequences of this new approach could prove to be catastrophic for children, teachers, education workers, and the communities they serve.

Either way, as we learn to live with COVID-19, it is now more important than ever that we aim to minimize the opportunities for this deadly virus to take over our lives again. While the idea of learning to live with it seems rather new after a couple years of having to abide by public health measures, we have actually been learning to live with COVID-19 since it was first discovered. Whether addressing the inadequacies within the public health-care system, education, and both the public and private sectors, as we define our path forward, we must never forget the sacrifices of the workers who continue to serve others in spite of the danger they face each day they clock in.