

No room for profit in health care



By Nate Smelle

Last Thursday I had the opportunity to stand in solidarity with the 68,000+ members of the Ontario Nurses Association and their allies as part of a province-wide 'All-out Picket' to protect our province's public health care system. With an extreme winter weather warning in effect that day, I had wondered as I slid my way to town whether the demonstration would be canceled or postponed. Understanding the critical importance of the nurses' fight amid the Ford government's push to privatize health care in Ontario, I decided to press forward through the slick driving conditions to see if the day of action was still on. As I approached the intersection, to my surprise I could see a dozen or so people carrying signs bearing slogans such as: 'Better Workloads = Better Care?'; 'I Support Nurses?'; and, 'Better Staffing/Better Wages/Better Care?'. Standing there on the corner of Station Street and Hasting Street in downtown Bancroft, wiping the ice pellets from my notebook as I attempted to jot down the most important elements of the story, it was obvious from the number of people waving and honking their horns in support of our nurses that the public appreciates their service to the community. Speaking with Registered Nurse and ONA site representative, Pam Cannon at the picket, I gained deeper insight into why she along with her fellow nurses had taken their fight to protect health care to the streets of Ontario. Having served as a Registered Nurse for more than 28 years, and even spent time working within the American private health care system, Cannon clearly understood the issues at play when debating the pros and cons of publicly-funded health care versus private for-profit health care. What I found most enlightening about Cannon's story was the reason why she would spend her afternoon standing in the freezing cold to demand better staffing, better workloads, and better wages when she is only four years away from retirement. Explaining her reason for being there, Cannon told me about how when she was first hired as a nurse in the mid-1990s, she was satisfied to get a job that paid a 'decent wage'. Now here is where the most ardent and uncompromisingly hypocritical capitalist will jump in and say 'See, it's all about wages.' However, as anyone who knows a nurse, or any kind of health care worker for that matter understands, there are far easier and safer ways to earn a living. Proving this point, and explaining why better wages need to be included in ONA's deal with the provincial government and Ontario Hospital Association, Cannon continued, 'For women around here, the money was good. We have a scale on which we are paid. We get paid in increments up to eight years of nursing, and once you hit eight years you don't get any pay increases or changes in wage until you hit 25 years of nursing. I'm OK because I have been nursing for more than 25 years, but those young girls with families? ONA did a study in regard to their wages? they have had, with the cost of inflation, a decrease in their wage of \$12,000 a year. That's a brutal amount of money! When you factor in inflation and all that, they are making \$12,000 less a year than I was when I got hired as a nurse.' As Cannon so carefully points out through her words and actions, what our nurses are fighting for in Ontario is about more than just fair wages. What it truly comes down to is respect for those who care for us in our time of need; and, respect for the value of our public health care system. Exemplifying how dedicated nurses are to ensuring that we are cared for in times of sickness and crisis, Cannon shared her personal experience of

working on the front-lines during the COVID-19 pandemic. 'It was really horrible,' Cannon said. 'The fear for our families, and the fear of going to work every day, wondering if I was going to bring this home to my kids. In the emergency room we were garbed up. it was brutal coming home with marks on our face from your mask and goggles. We had to wear goggles, masks, shields, gowns, the whole thing. At one point we even had boot covers on under all that.' As she shared her firsthand account of what it was like in the belly of the beast, I was reminded of how heroic these individuals were during the hardest hitting waves of the pandemic; and how heroic they are every day they punch in. Recalling how the Premier had repeatedly referred to nurses as 'heroes' at that time, and how contradictory his actions have been since, there is no doubt in my mind that his statements were nothing more than lip service. Is it respectful of our Premier to call nurses 'heroes' during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then put forward unconstitutional wage suppression legislation 'Bill 124' that he knew full well would only worsen the quality of care being provided in Ontario's grossly under-staffed and under-funded hospitals? Is it a sign of respect to hand out a 14 per cent pay increase to Members of Provincial Parliament 'the majority of which are from his own regressive Conservative Party' while the 'heroes' in our hospitals only received one per cent? Is it respectful to our nurses and health care professionals, to consciously deplete the limited resources available to them through our publicly-funded health care system by allowing private companies to profit off of the funds that we contribute as taxpayers, with the expectation of receiving the best health care possible? That's what this comes down to my friends; we are handing over our hard-earned tax dollars to a man and a government that prioritizes the interests of private for-profit companies over public health care and our health as individuals. Until we realize this and elect a government that is actually 'For the People' we will unfortunately continue to receive the health care we deserve. For now I guess we will have to settle for less than the best health care possible. Or do we?