



Council Remarks – Bill Redden

May 17th – 19th, 2013

Madame President, Council Delegates, Guests, Colleagues and Friends

Let me begin by asking you a question. What would your life be like if the NSTU ceased to exist?

In a few minutes I hope you will know why I pose that to you. During my recent travels in another province, I saw a bumper sticker on a car that read: “Enjoying your weekend. Thank a Union!” I couldn’t help but smile as I reflected on that simple statement, because it reminded me of the many reasons why I am proud to work for a union, especially a teachers’ union. But as I thought about it some more, I wondered how many of our own members are knowledgeable about the accomplishments of the labour movement. And if our own members are not aware, then there can be little wonder that the general public knows little about the importance of Unions. Unions have accomplished so much and are responsible for things like: minimum wage legislation, pensions, Old Age Security, employment insurance, supplemental health care like our Total Care Medical Plan, dental insurance, group life insurance, occupational health and safety legislation, paid vacations, maternity leave, decent wages, and the list goes on and on. And professional unions like the NSTU have advocated for setting professional standards and enhancing professional practice, not only to serve members, but also to enhance the delivery of education for our students.

Sadly though, we are currently living in a time when there is a growing movement to take all this away from us. As I was writing this speech, I received an email from the Canadian Teachers’ Federation advising that the conservative dominated Senate had voted 55-35 in favour of Bill 377, moving the legislation forward to its last step before being passed into law. This legislation, disguised as accountability to tax payers, is nothing more than a blatant attack on unions to require them to spend time and resources on preparing accounting records for the Canada Revenue Agency and forcing the disclosure of information not required of any other groups in Canada while invading the privacy of individuals who volunteer or work for unions.

But an even greater threat lies ahead in a back bench conservative MP’s Bill that will, if passed, undermine union funding and silence workers’ collective voice. It will take away the right that unions have achieved under the Rand formula to require all members to pay union dues. This so-called “Right to Work” legislation would require your union to contact each of our members to see if they voluntarily want to pay union dues, even though without paying, they can receive all the benefits of paying members. How many people would elect to pay? I think you know the answer. This will destroy unions! It would not be long before the neo-conservatives would have accomplished their real agenda – to convert Canada to a low-wage, no benefits, economy. Strong unions are the way to prevent the neo-conservatives from achieving that goal.

This so called “Right to Work” legislation is not new, but it is new to Canada. And the threat is real. Tim Hudak, the leader of Conservative party in Ontario, has promised if elected that he will immediately implement this draconian legislation. Martin Luther King Jr., in commenting on the “Right to Work” law, once said: “In our glorious fight for civil rights, we must guard against being fooled by false slogans, as ‘right-to-work.’ It provides no ‘rights’ and no ‘works.’ Its purpose is to destroy labour unions and the freedom of collective bargaining...We demand this fraud be stopped.”

Unions provide one of the only mechanisms we have for ensuring the more equitable distribution of income necessary for the creation of a vibrant middle class. The trade union movement has been the single most important social force for improving the well-being and quality of life for the overwhelming majority of citizens in history and in establishing economic equity.

Paul Krugman, a Nobel-prize winning economist, once wrote: “Unions – as imperfect as they may be – are the only counterbalance we have to unbridled corporate power.”

We have already lost a lot of ground to corporate greed. I came across these amazing statistics recently. Did you know that there are now 180,000 millionaires in Canada and that number is expected to grow significantly in the next 5-7 years? There are now over 1200 billionaires in the world and on an international ranking, Canada stands as number 10 on the list of the most billionaires. The gap between the wages and salaries as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product, the GDP, in Canada and the US is now at its highest level since 1929. The gains made by the middle class during the period since the last World War and the 1980's – a period of growth and shrinking inequity, have now been almost entirely wiped out. The only reason that the shrinking middle class has survived is because of all the two income families. It now takes two incomes to do what one used to be able to do. Over the last two decades, one-third of all income gains have gone to 1% of the population – the very rich – the so-called “lucky sperm club.” It is a strange world that we live in where the media have turned greed into a virtue, and fairness into a vice. This, my friends, is why we need to fight to keep unions strong! Why each and every one of you need to do your part. In countries where unions are strong, there is less economic inequity, less poverty. Louis Brandeis, a US Supreme Court Justice from 1916 to 1939, once wrote: “We can have democracy or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both.”

But teachers' unions do more than protect the economic interest of their members, as important as that might be. Teachers' unions fight for public education. Over the past 3 years, it is the NSTU that has led the fight against the cuts to educational funding. Our “Cut to the Core” campaign was a major success as witnessed by the government's reluctance to further reduce education funding for this coming year and the introduction of class caps at the P-3 level. It is the Union that has taken the lead in providing professional development for our members as Boards and the Department of Education have almost abandoned this role. It is the Union that has fought the government and the Boards over their wasteful practices of data collection for programs like School Improvement Plans, also known as Planning For Improvement. It is teachers who advocate everyday for kids and education, because every teacher knows how important a good education is for the future of our youth.

John Ralston Saul, Canadian author and philosopher has said: “As goes public education so goes democracy.”

We have had some achievements over the past few years but the battles are far from being over. As the American baseball great, Babe Ruth, was fond of saying: “Yesterday's home runs don't win today's games.”

I came across a quote recently by a man named Jacques Barzun that I think captures what I feel to be true about the state of education today. He said: “Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition.” There has never been a time in our history before when we have had such a highly educated group of dedicated professionals in our classrooms, our schools, and our colleges, yet we see over and over again educational policy decisions being made by politicians and others who are far removed from the realities faced everyday by educators. They are making important decisions about funding, about programs, and policies with far too little input from our members. You wouldn't change the practice of medicine without consulting doctors. But in education, governments and boards often announce new initiatives without consulting teachers. As Dr. Ben Levin has said: “We wouldn't tell other occupations how to do their jobs, so why do they feel qualified to tell teachers how to do theirs.”

I raise this issue only because I have become convinced that there are other models in existence that our union needs to pursue. I am speaking, of course, about Scandinavian models particularly Finland's, where teacher professionalism is highly valued and educators are deeply involved in all educational decision making. Teachers actually make most curriculum decisions.

Teachers there are held in high esteem and student performance, as measured on international tests, is superior. And, by the way they don't test their students until later in their school years. They have strong unions, strong social

programs, and very little social inequality. So, if this is the right way to do it, why are we stuck in this out-dated, top-down, out-come based 20th century model that stresses accountability, to the detriment of a quality educational system? As my colleague, Bruce Kelloway, is fond of saying: “Education is too important to be left in the hands of politicians!” My challenge to you, is to take every opportunity that you can to talk to politicians at all levels to remind them that there are better models that they need to explore and implement. We can’t wait another decade to begin the change. We need a 21st century vision, not a 20th century one.

So, let me begin to wrap this up.

Here are some of my final thoughts that I leave with you at the end of my 37 year career, 35 of those years deeply involved in this Union. (In fact, this is my 35th Annual Council). I believe that it is important that members come together in various forums to discuss the day-to-day problems that members face because that is how we work out solutions. But, it is even more important to stay focused on the big picture stuff. We all get caught up in the immediacy of today’s irritants but care needs to be taken not to lose sight of the larger issues. True leadership is having this broader vision and true leadership is turning talk into action by motivating others to actions. Your challenge, Council delegates and leaders, is to motivate your fellow colleagues to come out to meetings to become knowledgeable about the serious threats that the Union faces and to learn about the great work that the Union has done and is doing. They all need to understand the important role that unions play in society. They need to know this, so they will stand up, and speak out for their Union. Unfortunately, too many of our members believe that the Union is just those folks in Halifax. You need to remind them that they are the Union. Let’s all take guidance from the words of Mr. W. T. Kennedy, one of the founding members of the NSTU. In speaking on the importance of unions some 118 years ago at the founding meeting, he said: “Teachers taken singly are a rope of sand, weak and easily demolished; but teachers united in a single body, such as this Union proposed, would present a very different face to any attempt at oppression or persecution.”

Before I finish, I would be greatly amiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank the NSTU staff. Over the past 22 years, I have had the delightful and humble experience of working with some of the finest, most capable people you can image. Any praise that I might offer would be far too little for our highly dedicated and focused employees, most who work far too hard and for far too many hours so that they can serve the members of the NSTU. From our custodian staff who keep our building safe and clean – one of the cleanest buildings you will ever enter – to the support staff who direct your calls and emails and prepare all the materials we produce, to the Early Intervention and Counselling staff who help members when they are hurting, to the staff who provide excellent specialized services in communications, accounting and business management, and lastly to the Executive Staff who work tirelessly to deliver all our many programs and services and help our members when they are in trouble – all staff, both past and present – my sincere debt of gratitude. Some of those wonderful people are here today so please join me in a round of applause to recognize their many contributions. Thank you.

As this is my last speech to Council as your Executive Director, let me say that it has been an honour and a privilege to have served in this role. Very few people get the chance to be an Executive Director – I am only the eighth one in the 118 year history of the organization.

I am extremely proud of the Union and all that it has achieved. We have come a very long way but complacency will destroy what we have. We need strong leadership focussed on true unionism – the greatest good for the greatest numbers.

On a final note, I want to thank the Union for having had the privilege of being a Staff Officer and the Executive Director. Although this was a diversion from my earlier career as a teacher, I have always remained proud to tell people that I was and remain, first and foremost, a teacher. I am angered by recent attempts by the Harper government to denigrate our profession by its attacks on Justin Trudeau, by referring to him as “just a teacher.” Well, Mr. Harper, you were “just a non-practicing economist”! By the way, some recent research revealed that economist

are actually less accurate in predicting the economy than meteorologist are in predicting the weather.

I expect I am like most of you in this room who know that we are what we are today because of the influence of one or more great teachers. I take my hat off to all teachers. You are masters of delayed gratification because it is often years down the road that you finally receive a thank you from some chance meeting with a former student that you helped along the way. Teachers do shape the future.

So it was a difficult decision for me to leave teaching to work for the union. Whenever I think about it, I am reminded of the Robert Frost poem – The Road Not Taken. It begins:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler,*

And it ends with:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,*

And that had made all the difference.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope I have made a difference.

Thank you for your time and your patience.

Keep the Union strong!