

**An open letter to: Ken Coran, President, OSSTF**

Written by Jim Stringer, OSSTF District 3

Wednesday, February 27, 2013

From: Jim Stringer, Strike Captain, Manitoulin S.S.

To: Ken Coran, President, OSSTF

OSSTF Provincial Executive

OSSTF Provincial Council

Dear Ken,

People in public office rarely hear anything but complaints. The occasions on which they are thanked for the difficult work they do and the challenging decisions they must make on behalf of the people they represent are few and far between. So I begin by thanking you - and all of our elected representatives both provincial and local, as well as all the talented staff who work to support you - for your ongoing work on behalf of federation members. I respect your dedication and your efforts to provide the best possible service to us. That said, I must register my grave concern with the current situation regarding contract discussions with the provincial government.

Last Friday, the Provincial Executive (PE) unanimously recommended to Provincial Council (PC) that members suspend their political action around extracurricular/voluntary activities (xc's). After considerable debate, this motion was supported by a majority of PC. This decision was based on a review of progress made in recent discussions with the province. As a result of communication issues outside your control, exacerbated by media that are unable or unwilling to report these matters factually or accurately, by Friday evening many members, and most of the public, were convinced that we had been directed to resume xc's. That erroneous impression has been somewhat ameliorated amongst us via subsequent communications, though not amongst the general public, including our students. In any case, the withdrawal of xc's, the lone remaining weapon in our fight against Bill 115 imposed working conditions, is in serious question. Members feel betrayed and abandoned. This outcome was neither accidental nor unforeseeable. In fact, it should have been anticipated.

It is clear that PE and PC were satisfied with the results that had been achieved through withdrawal of xc's, ie. a resumption of discussions with the province. Indeed, your communications to us spoke of "significant progress". Your Sunday memo itemized some of that progress. Those details were incomplete and I awaited further details, which were revealed to us Monday afternoon at a meeting of strike captains and rules committee members here in District 3. I was initially at a loss for polite words to express my reaction to that information, but will attempt to do so now.

To be fair, those details represent some potential improvements on our current imposed working conditions. For example, further discussions may tweak the short term sick leave plan which replaced our stolen sick leave banks. Future changes to the grid structure would not be imposed (at least by this government) and the

number of unpaid days could be reduced, as I understand it. That said, issues of great importance, particularly to our younger members, are conspicuous by their absence. In particular, there is no mention of even potential improvement on the losses suffered as a result of restricted grid movement. Even more troubling, there is nothing of any significance evident to address the tens of thousands of dollars lost by many of our members as a result of the province's theft of their gratuities. In short, it is painfully clear that our leadership has accepted the most significant strips to our collective agreements in decades and is no longer prepared to fight against the almost certainly permanent loss of significant benefits accumulated over many years of hard fought negotiations.

It was suggested that discussions with the province should yield results in a matter of weeks. On that basis I assume that sometime not long after March break we will be presented with a tentative memorandum of understanding with the province. Based on all the evidence available to me it is clear that even the best case possible for such a memorandum will fail to achieve the results that I believe a majority of OSSTF members still expect and which all deserve. As such, I will be actively opposing it. Please know that, while I speak for myself in this letter, it would be extremely naive of you to assume that my concern is not shared by many.

As I draw to a close, let me reiterate what I began with. I appreciate that you and the PE have worked, and continue to work, diligently and in good faith to achieve what you believe to be the best possible outcome in this challenging situation. I thank you for that. That said, I must say, in the strongest terms, that the best possible outcome you can now achieve is inadequate and represents a disservice to all, and particularly to our younger members who will have to look forward to a career of bitterness at both the government and their own union. As a teacher in Ontario since 1987, I am sadly familiar with the former; the latter would be new. Your members deserve better, and I assure you that they are prepared to do what is necessary to achieve it.

Earlier drafts of this letter suggested that you and the PE should resign. That was based on what I and many others see as a failure of leadership evidenced by an effective rollover on key bargaining issues, an apparent abandonment of a membership committed to a long term struggle to regain what was lost and the adoption of a strategy guaranteed to create major rifts and internal strife amongst that membership. On reflection, that seems both excessively confrontational and unhelpful to the situation. What I ask instead is that you undertake at the earliest possible opportunity, and certainly before you proceed further down the path of discussion with the province, to survey the membership on the issue. Are we willing to accept the strips? If not, are we prepared to stand firm until we achieve a satisfactory resolution. I am confident that you will be surprised by the strength of the resolve of the membership.

Thank you for your patience in reading this lengthy submission. I look forward to your response.

Jim Stringer