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Bill 115: Section 14

"The Ontario Labour Relations Board **SHALL NOT** inquire into or make a decision on whether a provision of this Act... is **constitutionally valid** or is in **conflict** with the **HUMAN RIGHTS CODE**."

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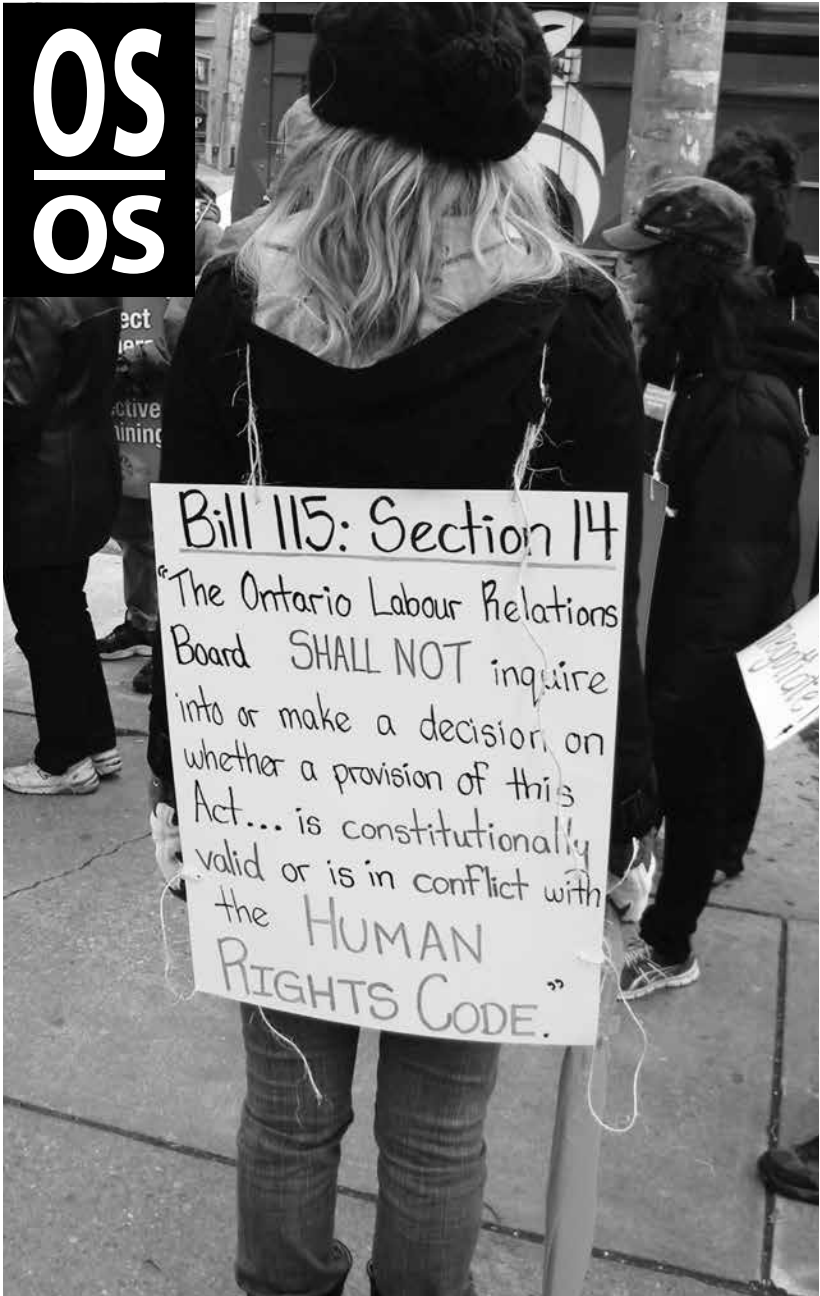
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health care, and child care

CUPE



ERIKA SHAKER

On the Front Lines

The roles and responsibilities of unions have come under renewed scrutiny. Provincial and federal government hostility towards organized resistance to current policies is intensifying through heated rhetoric (“union bosses”) and legislative trial balloons (C-377 federally, Ontario’s Bill 115 and Saskatchewan’s Bill 85, and several instances of back-to-work legislation, sometimes before work stoppages are even announced).

Much of this is facilitated by the current economic insecurity which reinforces individualistic attitudes and often results in resentment directed at those who have it less bad (specifically as a result of union membership and the benefits that go along with it); a general lack of awareness of how much, exactly, society owes to the victories that labour unions have won for all workers and their families (like workplace safety standards, maternity leave, overtime and vacations, child labour laws, etc.) — not to mention a lack of understanding of the rules by which unions operate; and those in positions of power growing evermore eager to use the tools at their disposal (corporate or legislative) to challenge the rights of unions to freely engage in the collective bargaining process to improve the lot of the workers they represent.

Federally, Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre is known for his anti-union rhetoric, insisting that federally regulated workers should be

allowed to “opt out” of paying union dues (there’s little discussion about whether they would also “opt out” of the benefits their union managed to secure for them as a result of those dues). However, he refers to this as “workers freedom” and a move away from “forced unionism”...which is a misrepresentation of the Rand Formula. In 1946 Justice Ivan Rand’s arbitration ruling did not make union membership mandatory, but it did require all workers covered under a collective agreement to pay (though union dues) for that representation and those benefits.

Some politicians have voiced “concern” about the activities unions engage in with member’s dues (such debates are dressed up in terms like “accountability” or “transparency” in legislation like C-377 which requires an onerous degree of disclosure for union finances but not for other similar organizations). This is a thinly veiled attack on the ability of unions to advocate for members beyond the issues related directly to collective bargaining. Making dues collection optional and restricting the activities for which dues can be used is a deliberate strategy to limit the degree to which unions can challenge established power structures and help alternatives flourish. Because unions have always been on the front lines fighting for progressive social change they have always represented a well-funded and organized threat to the political and economic power of those in positions of authority.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* looks at the role unions — specifically teacher unions — have played and continue to play in fighting for social progress and the protection and expansion of basic rights that are now often taken for granted. It also examines how classrooms and school communities are implicated in these struggles to make the world fairer, more equitable and more just.

Bernie Froese-Germain discusses the relationship between labour rights, democracy and inequality, and Larry Kuehn explores the struggles of BC teachers to affirm their freedom of speech inside the classroom. Cindy Rottman explains the connections between social justice and teacher unions as a key to member engagement. And Giorgio Baruchello uses John McMurtry’s *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism* to initiate a discussion questioning the neoliberal agenda that underpins so much of the rhetoric that surrounds our day-to-day existence.

Member and community engagement has been a prominent theme in the Chicago Teachers’ Strike and how the teachers’ union

refocused on social justice and community connection to deepen ties between members, as well as with students and parents. In his upcoming book (excerpted in this issue), Joel Harden looks at the Chicago strike as a case study in successful social justice unionism and deep organizing. Carol Caref (CTU staffperson) and Kevin Russell (research consultant), explore the effects of the neoliberal agenda on school closures by focusing on the Guggenheim school and its standoff between administrators and a community working together to protect their neighbourhood school from underfunding, destabilization, and ultimately closure. They conclude: “[Chicago Public Schools] cannot be allowed to systemically dismantle and destabilize neighborhood schools like they did at Guggenheim. Together with the Chicago Teachers Union, many educators and community leaders are still advocating for the schools Chicago’s students deserve. Their stories, and their fight for resources and a stable school climate must be shared widely and loudly.” And Milwaukee Teachers’ Association President Bob Peterson’s passionate address to the National Education Association drives this point home as well.

Teacher union activism cannot be limited to Chicago, of course, or to the U.S.: Robert Green (a Montreal-based teacher) describes an emerging force — the Badass Teachers’ Association — and points out why Canadian teachers might want to consider using some of these tactics. Marc Spooner and Paul Orlowski discuss how a group of public education advocates managed to thwart an ill-conceived attempt by the provincial government in Saskatchewan to implement standardized testing throughout their public schools.

Teachers and their unions have been at forefront of struggles for safer and more inclusive schools and learning communities that ensure all students and educators are able to thrive. Jenny Kassen and Alicia Lapointe look at the story of one student in the move for Gay-Straight Alliances in schools: “His story asks us as educators to re-imagine how youth participate in the way in which they are represented, both in media and in the school community. Martin is claiming space and taking the lead in writing his own map; navigating on his own terms how his path will unfold.” Ashley Wightman explores how schools, through what she refers to as “meaningful learning”, can better ensure all students have the opportunity to learn in ways that make sense to them, and that teachers have the freedom to help make this happen.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

John Crump looks at Students on Ice, an educational opportunity for young people to learn about the Arctic in ways that will change their relationship with our planet forever. Janet Nicol examines overseas teaching, where teacher unions are often far less resourced, and discusses partnerships between Canadian and overseas educators to share strategies. Katie Hislop details educational programs in schools on the lower mainland of BC are learning about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Janel Nicol's review of *Looks Like Daylight: Voices of Indigenous Kids* describes this series of oral interviews by Deborah Ellis. In an interview, Ellis says that 'the positive experiences for young people often occur "when they are able to get back to traditional practises and to connect with their elders." Ellis also hopes adults reading the book will see it as a "wake up call" about the way young people are treated.'

The world in which young people are living is the subject of Matthew Johnson's exploration of the commercialization of online spaces targeting kids, and of "Jeopardy, Jackpot, or Wheel of (Mis) Fortune," which looks at the impact rising tuition fees are having on the experience of graduates as they enter the world of work.

Finally, Toronto-based John Bonnar provided the cover photo, taken at a one-day teacher strike during the Bill 115 debates in Ontario. And Nancy Reid, as always, provided her own considerable artistic talents to making this issue come to life.

I hope the fall has treated you well thus far, and that you enjoy this issue of the magazine and its exploration of how we achieve progressive change through collaboration, solidarity, and determination.

ERIKA SHAKER is the Executive Editor of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.