

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



NOVEMBER 2015

I've been in the UMFA President's office for almost six months now, and while my feet are more firmly under me, I'm still learning new things on a regular basis. The past few weeks have been especially revelatory. Three weeks ago, our colleagues at Nipissing University went out on strike. Their administration was refusing to return to the table to negotiate. They have a tiny Association, with few resources. They were seeking a settlement that closed their substantial salary gap with comparator institutions, maintained their current faculty complement, and gave faculty a meaningful voice in university governance. Through the CAUT Defense Fund, we've been able to send Michael Shaw and Tom Booth to Nipissing to hear what's at stake, to support NUFA's pickets, and deliver the modest contributions that UMFA has been making to their strike fund. In response to this, UMFA received a thank-you letter from NUFA telling us how important our support was "in this fight we all share." NUFA and Nipissing University have recently come to a tentative agreement, which is a victory for us all.

That's one of my big lessons so far at UMFA. We are far from alone, and that makes a difference. In the midst of the paper blizzard of new policies, procedures, guidelines, and initiatives that are transforming—and not always for the better—our university, I hear from other faculty associations facing their own versions of the blizzard. Administrations across the country are pushing new governance and budget models, new systems of accounting and classroom scheduling, and in the course of these transformations, paying less heed to the voices of the scholars who really *are* the university. The experience of faculty at Nipissing—the fact that they have so far managed to resist further erosion of collegial governance, compensation, and the full-time complement—shows that when we stand together, we can maintain and even build on those things that make us delight in being academics: the freedom and autonomy to teach, research, collaborate, publish, speak, and participate in running our institution.

What's true at the national level is, I'm learning, also true at the local. Along with our bargaining team and the Executive Director, I have been meeting with constituents across the University over the past month or so (incidentally, if you haven't had a chance to meet with us yet, pester your Board Rep to set up a meeting). It's an excellent thing to get away my corner of campus and hear from colleagues I've never met before. While they have specific issues and concerns, a lot of them are similar across faculties and departments. People are feeling "out of the loop" with regard to their workplace and their working conditions. Systems, protocols, and new rules are dropping without so much as a by-your-leave, never mind informed consent. Workloads are in many cases rising as a result. Maintaining control over our

work and our working conditions—having a meaningful voice in the present and future of our university—is a widely shared concern, and one we can best address together.

In addition to the shared concerns about the institution, standing together also helps protect individuals: real people; your colleagues and mine. I knew this in the abstract, but I have a better understanding seeing it work day-to-day. The Collective Agreement is a shield, and one that UMFA members and staff built carefully, if not perfectly, over the years. I initially got involved with UMFA partly because I think unions generally make a positive contribution to society—weekends not the least among them. Not everyone agrees with me on that—maybe not you. But I didn't know a lot about the specifics of things: how grievances work, which article of the CA did what, the myriad ways our staff protects our interests. Having been here a while now, as a Board member, as Vice-President and now as President, when I say that I am learning that we are stronger when we stand together, I mean that in a very pragmatic way. Every day I watch our grievance officers and professional staff use the Collective Agreement—the product of years of struggle, reasonable compromise, negotiation, victories, and standing together—to protect our colleagues from the deterioration of their working conditions, from unreasonable discipline, from the theft of their time, and from countless other assaults large and small, where, in the absence of that shield, peoples' lives would be worse.

Working together, nationally, provincially, and locally - it makes us what we are.