

## **Presentation by Dr. Richard Walsh to the Changing Workplaces Review [25 June 2015]**

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the exchange of ideas on the Ontario legislation concerning employment standards and labour relations. In this presentation I am wearing three hats: First, I am Professor of Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University where one of my areas of expertise is community mental health. Individual and community well-being, of course, is directly affected by economic and labour conditions. Community psychologists, such as I, are concerned about the social determinants of health and mental health, and social determinants include the conditions of work, such as employment standards and labour relations. Secondly, I am the co-founder of the Alliance Against Poverty. The Alliance consists of people in Waterloo Region who live the life of poverty and concerned citizens who are more or less economically comfortable. As a grassroots group, we agitate for economic justice and the eradication of poverty. Lastly, I am the Green Party candidate for Waterloo in the forthcoming federal election. I hold a comprehensive view of the economy, understanding workers, managers, and owners as interacting components of a deeply flawed economic system that must be improved. Just as we Greens advocate environmental justice for humankind on this planet, so we advocate living sustainably and bringing economic and social justice to the workplace. In effect, we promote the notion of a “triple bottom line,” which means that the environment, the economy, and the social-welfare aspects of society are intertwined – what affects one of the three dimensions will have ripple effects on the other two.

### **The Context**

Now, what is the nature of work in Ontario today? In the view of labor economists and scholars, as a direct consequence of the austerity regimen of neoliberal economic thought, put in practice for decades by commerce, industry, and successive Ontario and federal governments,

precarious labour conditions prevail. These conditions mean that increasingly jobs are reduced to low-wage, involuntarily part-time, temporary, and contract positions that render employment precarious while minimizing labour-costs in order to maximize profits. For example, there is no time-limit on how long a company can employ a worker through a temp agency, so employees can remain “temporary” for years, which denies them access to benefits and other entitlements. Rationalized by business and government as “flexible” work, precarious labour conditions also diminish the protection of workers’ rights that unions can provide.

Meanwhile, the provincial and federal governments continue to impose austerity budgets on the social sector, that is, on health, education, and social welfare, while slashing taxes for those who can most afford to pay. As a result, Ontario workers, even in postsecondary education, as my colleagues in the Wilfrid Laurier University Faculty Association can attest, have seen their basic rights and incomes, hence their well-being, compromised. From the perspective of the social determinants of health and mental health, these regimens of austerity and precarious work have costly health and mental health consequences for everyone and all levels of government.

### **Recommendations**

As you might know, over the past several years a wellspring of considered opinion among labour unions and social-justice groups in Ontario has emerged to the effect that both the Employment Standards Act and the Labour Relations Act should be substantially revised to raise the floor for every worker. As a community psychologist, as a member of the Alliance Against Poverty, and as the Green federal candidate in Waterloo, I strongly support the following recommendations that are crucial to correct the unjust conditions of work that prevail in Ontario:

[1] A \$15 per hour minimum wage that covers all workers.

[2] Decent hours and fair scheduling, including pay equity for part-time, temporary, and casual workers.

[3] Paid sick days and increased vacation pay.

[4] Stronger protection for workers who stand up for their rights and greater capacity to form unions. For example, the Ontario Federation of Labour has proposed a series of improvements to the Labour Relations Act that would eliminate the barriers to unionization; prevent employer intimidation and harassment during an organizing drive; and facilitate securing collective agreements, resolving disputes, and maintain union protection in the workplace.

[5] Elimination of exemptions and special rules that leave workers unprotected.

[6] Making employers responsible for employment standards along the chain of temporary-work agencies and sub-contractors.

[7] Stronger enforcement of labour laws.

## **Conclusion**

In my opinion, these recommendations would make sense to most Ontarians and, if implemented, they would prepare the province to face the environmental, economic, and social challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century much better than the current deplorable situation of wallowing in the muck of retrograde policies and practices that mire Ontario in failed, neoliberal, trickle-down economics. This province's outmoded labour laws must be revised to elevate employment standards for all workers, and the balance in labour relations must be restored. Above all, everyone should be assured that having a job will always be a pathway out of poverty.