

## **Presentation to Ontario Ministry of Labour Public Consultations on the Changing Nature of the Modern Workplace**

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Thank you to the Ministry of Labour for scheduling these consultations and providing citizens with the opportunity to comment on the Employment Standards and Labour Relations Acts. I commend the government also for raising the minimum wage to \$11.00 an hour last June and tying that wage to inflation. However, as you're aware, not all workers receive a minimum wage and the minimum wage rate is not high enough to ensure that all workers, even those working full-time all year can cover their basic necessities. You probably know that the \$15 an hour movement in the United States is meeting with continued success. Last week, the State of New York announced that its current minimum wage of \$8.75/hr. will go up to \$15/hr. for fast-food workers in New York City by 2018 and for the rest of the state by mid-2021. New York joins Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco in setting hourly minimum wages at \$15. And of course Premier Rachel Notley is raising minimum wage in Alberta from \$10.20 to \$15/hr. by 2018.

I'm here today for a couple of reasons. First of all, in my job with the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul in their Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Office, I work with others in Kingston and Ontario to raise the income floor for both workers and non-workers alike so that all individuals and families can cover the costs of daily living: shelter, food, transportation, clothing, and other essentials. Unfortunately I regularly meet people who cannot cover their basic expenses and find themselves in a position where they must choose between paying their bills and feeding themselves or their families. Impossible choices between rent and child care, hydro and healthy food, clothing and transportation take their toll on peoples' physical and mental health, undermining the well-being of all of us within society.

I'm here also to speak briefly to my own experiences of precarious work in Ontario. When I left university with a Master's degree but as a single parent of three children, I could not find work that would support my family. Multiple volunteer jobs and contract, freelance and part-time employment did not fully pay the rent and feed my kids, which resulted in my income being topped up by social assistance. Even when I did find 40-hour-a-week employment, I did not receive a wage high enough to exit the welfare system. Only after eight years as a full-time worker, single mother, and volunteer anti-poverty activist did I secure a job which paid a living wage.

But even then I was not in the clear. After five years at that job, my employer dismissed me. Even as he fired me he told me he couldn't find fault with the work I was doing. But he didn't need a reason to sack me. Because Ontario's Employment Standards Act allows employers to fire their workers without cause. And he expected me to leave without a cent of compensation. Had my brother not been a labour lawyer who took my case for free, I don't know what would have happened to me. Thanks to my brother I got three months' severance pay. And within that time I was able to cobble together two, short-term

contract and two part-time minimum wage jobs which altogether were enough to pay the rent, put food on the table and save me from falling back onto welfare. But only by working 60- to 80-hour weeks, which took me out of my home and away from my children days, evenings, and most weekends.

All during this time I was looking for a single full-time job with decent wages. I had a friend who had found a secure job with the provincial government through a temp agency and suggested I try to do the same. The temp agency recruiter took one look at my resume – it indicated I had four degrees, had been working or going to school since I was 16 years old and had diverse job experience – declared me “overqualified” and refused to even register me. Reasoning, arguing, crying made no difference. In the context of looking for work, that was my lowest point.

The cost of living in Ontario continues to escalate. Basic necessities such as food and shelter are beyond the reach of low-paid workers, particularly those trying to survive on minimum wage. The Canadian Mortgage & Housing Corporation Rental Market Report for Spring 2015 shows that while the vacancy rate in Kingston is holding at 2.8%, rents have climbed again. The average cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Kingston is now \$908/mon. and \$1,548/mon. for a three-bedroom. If you’re the sole earner for a family that requires a three-bedroom apartment, you will need \$18,516/yr. just for rent. But if you’re working 35 hours a week for the full year at min. wage, your total earnings will come to just over \$20,000, which leaves you, should you be the sole provider of your family, with less than \$2,000 a year for all other expenses.

Considering that the cost of food has increased by about 35% since 2004 (The Food Institute, University of Guelph, December 2014) and hydro rates are going up (A December 2013 *Toronto Star* article reported that hydro rates will rise 42% in five years), it will be impossible for that family to pay all its bills and survive.

In Ontario since 2000, part-time work has grown 25% and temporary employment by 40%. Full-time work has increased by only 16%. Over the same time period, those working part-time who wanted full-time employment increased by 43% (*Ontario Labour Bulletin*, January 2014).

In Kingston, by occupation, sales and services represent the largest segment of the working population: 22,508 out of a total work force of 92,918, which is nearly 25% (*Kingston Canada, 2015*). Most of those jobs will be paid minimum wage or less, because there are categories of workers who don’t get the minimum wage by law: ‘home’ workers, liquor servers, and students under the age of 18 who work 28 hours a week or less when school is in session, or work during a school break or summer holidays, all receive a lower minimum wage. Workers in the agriculture industry, including those deemed migrant workers, are excluded from Ontario’s minimum wage laws altogether.

As of June 2015 in Kingston, there were 50,385 full-time, full-year workers and 42,533 people in the labour force who did not work full-time, although the breakdown of temporary, part-time, and self-employed workers wasn’t specified in the Stats Canada report.

The Employment Standards Act has failed to regulate part-time, temporary, and self-employed workers resulting in a huge gap in wages between full-time and other workers. For instance, the gap between women in part-time and full-time work is 57%. For men, 47%. The median hourly wage for part-time workers is \$12.38, for temps \$15.00, and for full-time workers \$24.00 an hour.

Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour would bring full-time, minimum wage workers up to a wage of over \$27,000 a year and lift them out of poverty. But some particulars also need to change in the Employment Standards Act if all non-unionized workers are going to be treated justly and fairly.

A Workers' Action Centre Report, "Still Working on the Edge" (Spring 2015) contains an extensive list of recommendations, all of which I support. The ones I will mention today are as follows:

- Require all workers be paid a uniform, provincial minimum wage regardless of a worker's age, job or sector of employment
- Promote full-time, permanent work with adequate hours for all those who choose it
- Extend minimum protections to all workers by eliminating exemptions to the laws
- Protect workers who stand up for their rights
- Require a \$15 an hour minimum wage for all workers

Recent news from the Workers Action Centre included an update on Metro grocery store workers, who, through Unifor, negotiated a collective agreement that will guarantee minimum hours for workers and require that workers get their schedules five days in advance - two things that Ontario's Employment Standards Act doesn't do. The Centre remarks, "As the Ontario government reviews the province's labour laws for both unionized and non-unionized workers, now is the time to raise the floor of minimum standards for all workers."

To that end, a group in Kingston believes that the solution to poverty is a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) for all Canadians. A minimum income above the poverty line would enable people to afford basic necessities and would cushion them from the vicissitudes of life, such as losing their job, being unable to obtain work, or becoming ill. The Association of Local Public Health Agencies has passed a motion supporting basic income, and the Medical Officer of Health from Peterborough is in support of BIG. The mayors of Calgary and Edmonton, the premier of Prince Edward Island, former Kingston Senator Hugh Segal, and the federal Liberal, NDP and Green parties have all spoken in support of a minimum basic income. While Ontario's provincial pension plan is an acknowledgement that people aren't earning enough to save for retirement, I hope it will acknowledge also that a fixed income floor to end precarious employment is essential as well.

Thank you.