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Op-Eds

Fair Wages are Critical to a Strong Economy

The BC Federation of Labour launched the Fight for $15 campaign three years ago, making the basic argument that a person working full-time should not be living below the poverty line.

Our campaign saw remarkable public support and, as a result, the NDP government has agreed to lift the minimum wage to $15/hour.

The only question we are left to contemplate is when do we get there?

The government established the Fair Wages Commission to tackle this question. The Commission is touring the province hearing from workers, organizations and businesses on what the timeline should be, who it applies to, and what happens after we get to $15/hour to ensure workers don't fall behind again.

It will come as no surprise that the BCFED is active in this consultation process, and we have put forward a clear set of recommendations for the Commission to adopt.

On the question of timeline, we recommend that the minimum wage in BC get to $15/hour no later than January 2019. We have proposed a two-step process to get there – a lift to $14/hour in July 2018 and then to $15/hour in January 2019.

We are urging the Commission to move swiftly for many reasons.

Our economy is strong and people and businesses are benefitting as a result. That is true except for low-wage workers whose wages are not keeping pace. To be clear, we are talking about more than 400,000 workers who earn less than $15/hour - almost one quarter of the BC workforce. There needs to be a mandated adjustment to ensure all British Columbians reap the benefits of strong economic performance.

The cost of living continues to soar across the province and the affordability crisis facing communities is creating chaos for families trying to make ends meet. And workers earning below $15/hour are hardest hit. The longer we wait to raise the minimum wage above the poverty line, the further behind workers and their families fall.

We should keep pace with other jurisdictions on the same path. There are now many places in the USA moving to a $15/hour minimum wage, including Seattle and California State. In Canada, Alberta will get there by October 2018, and Ontario is set for January of 2019.

But the timeline for getting to $15/hour is only one piece of the puzzle.

The BCFED is also recommending that the government immediately eliminate discriminatory exemptions from minimum wage laws.

Live-in care givers are exempt from minimum wage laws. And some farmworkers are paid a piece rate, which can leave them below the minimum wage based on the hours they work, time of year and the crops they are harvesting.

Servers in BC can be paid the Liquor Server Wage – which is currently $10.10/hour, $1.25 below the minimum wage. But this lower wage can apply to all shifts in a pay period, even if the majority of those shifts happen at a time when alcohol isn’t served.

In short, we believe that the minimum wage should be just that - the minimum wage a person must be paid for any kind of work in the province of British Columbia.

The existence of exemptions opens the door to exploitation of vulnerable workers. These workers are not only earning poverty wages, but weak employment standards laws and lack of enforcement

means they have little recourse when wronged by their employer.

The former BC Liberal government let the minimum wage sit stagnant for a decade – which fostered poverty and inequality in BC. Paying a fair wage to all British Columbians is a critical step to undoing the damage of their neglect.

A truly strong and sustainable economy must be built on the success of all British Columbians – it can't favour a few and leave the rest behind.

British Columbians can have their say by contacting the Fair Wages Commission at https://engage.gov.bc.ca/fairwagescommission/.