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Op-Eds

We must raise the minimum wage

How many British Columbians have been told that getting a job is their path out of poverty?

Unfortunately, the sad truth is that thousands of full-time workers toiling at $10.25 per hour (the current minimum wage in BC) find themselves thousands of dollars short of the reaching the poverty line each year.

And every day it gets worse – their wage is stagnant, but the cost of living keeps going up.

Minimum wage is determined by the provincial government on an ad-hoc basis with no regular review to make sure it keeps people out of poverty. The last increase was more than two and half years ago. And that only happened after nearly a decade long fight by the labour movement and the public.

BC workers are falling behind – and they can't afford to wait any longer.

That is why the BC Federation of Labour is launching a new province-wide campaign to give BC's lowest paid workers a real wage increase. And that means fighting for $15 an hour.

The BCFED is not alone in thinking it's time low-wage workers get a raise. A recent poll shows more than two thirds of British Columbians believe the minimum wage in BC should be increased to $15/hr. Further, more than 80 per cent support reviewing and adjusting the minimum wage on a regular basis.

We would not be the first place to do this. Seattle recently put a plan in place to reach $15/hr, and San Francisco just voted to increase their minimum wage to the same.

We can, and should, do it too.

There are more than 120,000 British Columbians earning the minimum wage.

The picture of a minimum wage worker in BC is probably different than you'd expect. They aren't all teenagers living in their parents' basements, working for pocket money. They are mothers and fathers, seniors and students. In fact, 47 per cent are older than 25, and 63 per cent are women, and 8 per cent are 55 or older.

In other words, there are many minimum wage workers who supporting families or who don't have the ability to retire.

There are other myths that need to be challenged when it comes to increasing the minimum wage.

For example, it is not just small business that pay minimum wage. 46 per cent of minimum wage earners work for businesses with over 500 employees. In reality, CEOs are getting rich while single moms clean $250 per night hotel rooms or serve coffee and doughnuts for poverty wages.

There will be critics who cry that the sky will fall and businesses will close, but the evidence simply does not back this up. A recent cross-Canada study found that increases to the minimum wage have little to no impact on job creation or job loss. Researchers found that even where there was a connection, it was just as likely to be positive as negative. After the last increase to the minimum wage in BC, unemployment actually declined.

Those same critics often ignore the other positive effects a higher minimum wage would have on the economy. Low wage earners are more likely to spend their money at businesses in their neighborhood, stimulating local economies. Businesses may also see improved employee retention, and productivity increases when employees feel valued and respected.

BC’s minimum wage is one of the lowest in the country. Yet our province is the most expensive and unequal according to Statistics Canada data. BC is also the only province in Canada without a poverty reduction plan.

Something clearly needs to change.

Let’s start with making jobs in BC better. That means paying a fair wage. A wage that provides workers with dignity, and that respects their contribution to our economy.

While $15/hr is still below a living wage for almost every city in the province, it is an important step to ensuring our lowest paid workers are not left behind.

$15 will put a worker above Statistics Canada’s low-income-cut-off. $15 gives working people a chance. $15 is fair.

Join the fight for $15. Let’s build an economy that works for everyone.

Find out more at www.fightfor15bc.ca

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