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Releases

Canada’s Labour Leaders to the Premiers: Make Life Better for Vulnerable Workers

(Whitehorse, YT) – Ahead of the Council of the Federation meeting, Canada’s labour leaders are calling on the provincial and territorial premiers to make Canada’s most vulnerable workers the focus of their talks.

“This is the first time the premiers have met in Yukon – and we certainly welcome them this beautiful part of Canada,” said Vikki Quocksister, president of the Yukon Federation of Labour (YFL), “it is the hope of workers here and workers from all of the provinces and territories that the premiers will use this historic meeting as a chance to make history for the country’s most vulnerable workers,” she added.

While the premiers gather for their annual Council of the Federation meeting in Whitehorse, Yukon, the presidents of Canada’s provincial and territorial federations of labour are hosting parallel meetings where a $15/hour minimum wage, migrant workers, and Employment Insurance (EI) will be the main priorities.

“No one should have to go to the food bank at the end of the work week just to feed their family. It’s time to end poverty wages in Canada, and that means lifting the minimum wage to $15 an hour,” said Irene Lanzinger, president of the BC Federation of Labour. “Poverty has a long-term cost on families, on communities and on the economy. By setting the minimum wage at $15 an hour we are ensuring

that a person working full-time is living above the poverty line and able to support their families and invest back into the local economy."

It is time to raise the minimum wage across Canada – it's only fair. Currently, most full-time minimum-wage workers are living below the poverty line as measured by Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut Off (LICO). The federation of labour presidents believe the minimum wage should bring people working 35 hours per week above the poverty line, so they can support themselves and their families.

"Using every standard measure of poverty, $15 an hour would bring workers' wages above the poverty line," said Irene Lanzinger, president of the BC Federation of Labour, "it will also benefit local businesses and support the local economy by putting money in workers' pockets to spend in their community," she added.

The federation of labour presidents are requesting that the premiers review the minimum wage in their respective provinces, and consider the following recommendations:

• Pledge to increasing the minimum wage to $15 an hour;
• Implement rapid, yet reasonable, phase-in periods such as the province of Alberta, and;
• Once implemented, make plans to convert from a minimum wage to a living wage.

Launched in the early 1970s, and originally intended for limited high-skilled, high-paying jobs, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) has grown into an economy-destroying nightmare that is putting Canadians out of work and enabling the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers.

"Since 2006, the number of Temporary Foreign Workers in Canada has more than tripled. And Alberta is ground zero for the abuse of the program – and of Temporary Foreign workers," said Gil McGowan, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, "because Temporary Foreign Workers are dependent on the whims of their employers for their right to stay in Canada, they are at a disadvantage in terms of negotiating for fair wages, safe workplaces and respectful treatment. They face higher rates of wage theft, higher rates of workplace abuse, and often work for lower wages," he added.

The federation of labour presidents are seeking the premiers' support on the following TFWP recommendations:

• Phase-out the TFWP, especially in low-wage sectors;
• Workers who are in Canada as a result of the TFWP should be granted permanent resident status, and;
• Consult broadly with stakeholders, including migrant worker justice groups and organized labour, to develop stringent safeguards and strict rules for any program that may replace the TFWP for highly-skilled sectors.

With regards to EI, there are a number of recommendations the federations of labour will be raising with the premiers and canvassing them for support.

"Only 40 per cent of workers now qualify for regular EI benefits – the system is broken," said Carl Pursey, president of the PEI Federation of Labour, "precarious working conditions, failures in the Automated Claims Processing system, public service job cuts, the elimination of zones in PEI and other northern parts of the country, and inadequately recognizing the challenges of seasonal employment are just a few of the areas that need fixing," he added.

The federation of labour presidents are seeking the premiers' support on EI recommendations that include, but are not limited to:

• Hire more staff in Service Canada Centres and train them in all aspects of a claim;
• Review the automated process to identify and address failures and delays;
• Reinstate the Board of Referees appeal process, and;
• Apply EI surpluses to benefit expansion as opposed to premium reduction.

"Our priorities at this meeting of the Council of the Federation are to fight for vulnerable workers, do what's right for working families, and strengthen the economy," said Quocksister, "this is a tremendous opportunity for the premiers to work with labour leaders from across the country and put forward-thinking, progressive solutions into action," she added.

Together, Canada’s provincial and territorial labour federations give voice to over three million workers, represented by the Alberta Federation of Labour, British Columbia Federation of Labour, Canadian Labour Congress, Manitoba Federation of Labour, New Brunswick Federation of Labour, Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour, Northern Territories Federation of Labour, Nova Scotia Federation of Labour, Ontario Federation of Labour, Prince Edward Island Federation of Labour, Fédération des travailleurs et travailleises du Québec, Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and Yukon Federation of Labour.

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