

The Successful Campaign for a \$10 Minimum Wage

Priority #4: Build Cross-Sectoral Alliances to Win Things for ALL Workers

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their families from the poverty they would otherwise experience without a just income replacement system.

It is ironic, to say the least, to see Liberals threatening to bring down a Conservative government refusing to undo painful changes in the EI system which the Liberals themselves introduced over a decade earlier. But these days, victories of any kind – and this one would be a big one – are crucial for the labour movement, showing our members and activists that change is indeed possible. In that context, a victory on EI would be testimony to years of careful, consistent struggle – not just to a Liberal change of mind.

The Successful Campaign for a \$10 Minimum Wage

Priority #4: Build Cross-Sectoral Alliances to Win Things for ALL Workers

Kristin Schwartz

THE DAILY GRIND OF WORKING for poverty wages is usually ignored or taken for granted by people with more privilege. But in Ontario in 2007, an energetic grass-roots campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$10 per hour brought the plight of low-waged workers to the front pages of newspapers, and even to the corridors of power. Initiated by the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, the campaign roused a sleeping giant in communities and workplaces across the province. Tens of thousands of ordinary people signed on to the demand. Faced with mounting public pressure and possible losses at the ballot box, the ruling Liberal provincial government committed to raising the minimum wage from \$8 to \$10.25 by 2010, a 28 per cent increase over three years.

A core strength of the campaign was its clear message: “\$10 Now!” Anti-poverty activists had been calling for a \$10 minimum wage as far back as 2000, and the clamour grew through the 2003 election, when the widely reviled Conservative government was defeated. The Tories had frozen the minimum wage for eight long years as part of their overall attack on low-income communities. But once in power, the Liberals did little to repair the damage done under Tory rule. As the gap between rich and poor continued to widen, urgency to address the issue mounted. Under the banner of “A Million Reasons,” the Labour Council took up the ambitious goal of improving incomes for the one million Toronto workers who earn low wages – including the hundreds of thousands who are paid at or near the minimum wage.

By late 2006 the Labour Council recognized that a precious political opportunity existed to score a concrete victory. NDP MPP Cheri DiNovo introduced a private member’s bill to immediately raise the minimum wage to \$10 per hour, with regular increases indexed to inflation. Unexpectedly, her bill passed first reading. When the *Toronto Star* editorial board came out in favour of the bill, it was clear that the measure had some support even among the political and

economic elite. But DiNovo herself was aware that her bill would accomplish little without popular mobilization. “The only way to affect a majority government is by a grassroots campaign that frightens the politicians enough that they think twice about not doing something,” she said. The Labour Council took up the challenge and launched its campaign in early 2007.

Crucially, the strategy to win the \$10 minimum wage involved both organized labour and community organizations. Retail sector locals in the Canadian Auto Workers and the United Food and Commercial Workers committed staff time to mobilize their own membership, with the result that thousands signed the campaign’s petition cards. Meanwhile, the Labour Council built on established relationships with community organizations to host a series of Town Hall meetings in low-income neighborhoods across Toronto. Hundreds of residents participated. There were tears and anger as people described their struggles to stay ahead of bill collectors, or to spend time with their families while holding down two or three jobs. At each Town Hall, the panel discussion on the issues of low-wage work and poverty was followed by small-group strategy sessions on how to actually *win* a \$10 minimum wage. “It’s a way of organizing where you don’t have three or four experts and the rest are listeners and learners,” said Labour Council organizer Judy Persad. “We’re all experts in what is happening in our lives. And it showed people they are not alone.”

Workers of colour are overrepresented at the bottom of the pay scale, and under-represented among decision-makers. Creating opportunities for workers of colour to take leadership on the \$10 campaign was critical to the campaign, which featured the Labour Council’s first Chinese-language press conference and a Chinese community Town Hall. At the Town Hall meetings, many spoke of their encounters with racism and discrimination on the job. “There’s a glass ceiling when it comes to new immigrants,” said René Adams, a single mother of two from South Africa who spoke at one Town Hall. “People are sold a bill of goods. They think they are coming here to good jobs and work in their field. They find that’s not the case.”

The energy of these meetings was translated into direct political pressure when participants signed petition cards and the Labour Council made sure that letters were sent to their MPPs through an innovative web-based system. Individual MPPs were hearing from hundreds of their constituents that the issue mattered to them. More dramatically, in a February by-election the Liberals lost a historically safe seat to NDP candidate Paul Ferreira, whose campaign was focused on the minimum wage issue. This was an ominous warning to the Liberals, coming just months before the October provincial election.

Clearly shaken, the Liberals responded. Two days after the by-election, Finance Minister Greg Sorbara proclaimed “Poverty is my issue.” And six weeks later the Liberals endorsed the \$10 target for the minimum wage, phased in over three years. Once it’s phased in, Ontario will have the highest minimum wage in Canada.

The success of this campaign put a little more money in low-waged workers' pockets. Perhaps more importantly in the long-run, for many the campaign provided a rare experience of speaking out and being heard. Organized labour positioned itself as taking up the issues of predominantly non-unionized workers, their families, and communities. Community-based activists learned the potential of coordinating their activist efforts with the interventions of supportive politicians. For the Labour Council and its many allies and partners, these accomplishments heightened optimism, confidence, and solidarity. And that laid the foundation for our future work together in the movement for economic and social justice.

Private-Sector and Public-Sector Workers are in this Together

Priority #5: Rebuild Active Solidarity Within the Labour Movement

Gil Levine

IN SOME WAYS, PRIVATE-SECTOR and public-sector union members almost seem to inhabit two different worlds. Unionization in the public sector is close to 80 per cent, and has held steady over the last two decades. In the private sector, unionization has been eroding, and is now below 20 per cent. The battles fought by public sector workers are just as tough as those in the private sector, to be sure – as demonstrated by the vicious attacks on public sector workers that have recently been unleashed. But so far the brunt of the economic crisis has hit private-sector unionists first, especially in hard-hit sectors like manufacturing and forestry: hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost, and private-sector unions face incredible pressure for concessions.

So in the wake of the current economic crisis and the intensification of attacks on unions from both employers and governments, it seems obvious that public-sector and private-sector workers are ultimately in the same boat – and they badly need each other, if they are to keep that boat afloat. There is a glaring need to rebuild active solidarity between public and private sector unions, as the labour movement confronts the effects of the crisis, fights to preserve past gains, and strives to shore up its organizational and political power.

All Canadian workers, both public and private, are being hammered by the economic crisis. Public sector workers may have been somewhat shielded from the first effects of the recession. This is certainly true in terms of employment (which has continued to expand in the public sector, in contrast to massive job losses in private businesses), pensions (where most public sector workers still enjoy defined benefit plans, a benefit which is under siege in the private sector),