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**Rising Up**  
The Fight for Living Wage  
Work in Canada



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# Contents

List of Figures and Tables / vii

List of Abbreviations / ix

- 1** Resisting Low-Wage Work: The Struggle for Living Wages / 3  
*Bryan Evans, Carlo Fanelli, and Tom McDowell*

## **Part 1: The “Standard” Employment Relationship: Low-Wage Work**

- 2** The Comparative Political Economy of Low Wages / 29  
*Stephen McBride, Sorin Mitrea, and Mohammad Ferdosi*
- 3** Labour Justice: Assessing the Politics of the American Labour Movement / 50  
*Biko Koenig and Deva Woodly*
- 4** Media (Mis)Representations and the Living Wage Movement / 69  
*Carlo Fanelli and A.J. Wilson*

## **Part 2: The Fight for Living Wages in Canada**

- 5** The Emergence of the Living Wage Movement in Canada’s Northern Territories / 97  
*Kendall Hammond*
- 6** Getting By but Dreaming of Normal: Low-Wage Employment, Living in Toronto, and the Crisis of Social Reproduction / 115  
*Meg Luxton and Patricia McDermott*

- 7** The Living Wage and the Extremely Precarious: The Case of “Illegalized” Migrant Workers / 134  
*Charity-Ann Hannan, John Shields, and Harald Bauder*
- 8** Working for a Living, Not Living for Work: Living Wages in the Maritimes / 153  
*Mary-Dan Johnston and Christine Saulnier*
- 9** The BC Living Wage for Families Campaign: A Decade of Building / 171  
*Catherine Ludgate*
- 10** Challenging the Small Business Ideology in Saskatchewan’s Living Wage Debate / 187  
*Andrew Stevens*

**Part 3: Resistance and Alternatives**

- 11** The Living Wage Campaign in Hamilton: Assessing the Voluntary Approach / 211  
*David Goutor*
- 12** Why Business-Led Living Wage Campaigns Fail: The Case of Calgary, Alberta, 1999–2009 / 230  
*Carol-Anne Hudson*
- 13** The Low-Wage Economy in the Age of Neoliberalism: What Can Be Done? / 251  
*Tom McDowell, Sune Sandbeck, and Bryan Evans*

List of Contributors / 279

Index / 283

# 1

## Resisting Low-Wage Work: The Struggle for Living Wages

*Bryan Evans, Carlo Fanelli, and Tom McDowell*

Debate about what has been happening to the “middle class” has existed for some time but has accelerated since the 2008 global financial crisis. By the 1970s, the postwar class compromise that had characterized the three decades following the end of the Second World War, the so-called Golden Age of Capitalism, had come increasingly under attack by capital and the state as incompatible with an increasingly globalizing economy. The strengthening of labour’s bargaining power relative to capital had become politically problematic as increasing trade union membership and militancy, decreased social inequality, universal state-funded social programs, and a range of worker protections (regulation of minimum wages, hours of work, institutionalization of collective bargaining, unemployment insurance, etc.) challenged capital’s primary goal of profit maximization. Since the 1970s, there has been a concerted effort to re-establish broader socio-political and economic conditions conducive to profitability and competitiveness. Those measures have been successful in eroding the political and organizational foundations that facilitated the emergence of a broad middle layer of wage and salary earners.

The resulting economic anxiety gave rise to a variety of morbid symptoms, the realities of which became increasingly apparent in the decade that followed the Great Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008, including 1) the populist right best personified in the presidency of Donald Trump and his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again,” borrowed from the 1980 presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan that sought to tap into the frustrations of the slumping middle class; 2) the United Kingdom’s 2016 referendum on “Brexit”; 3) party realignments in France, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe, largely as a result of the collapse of the post-1945 big tent centre-left and centre-right parties and their displacement by the populist far right and to a much lesser extent the populist far left; 4) Bernie Sanders’s unsuccessful campaign in challenging the corporate centrists leading the Democratic Party; and 5) the “yellow vests” (*gilets jaunes*) mobilization in France in 2018 and 2019.

That the rising tide of economic malaise has led to a profound level of political destabilization speaks to the need to better understand what has happened to wages and incomes generally over the past four decades and to conceptualize alternatives. In the thirteen chapters that follow, we seek to set the stage for a broader discussion about alternative public policies and mechanisms that might ameliorate income insecurity rather than simply address these momentous developments through a grand narrative. Although the contributions in this volume do not follow a singular, all-encompassing theoretical approach, each proceeds from the presupposition that left to the market, work often does not pay sufficiently.

As labour rights have been increasingly attacked, and unionization rates have declined, the terrain for most workers to struggle for improved living conditions has shifted from the workplace to civil society. For this reason, after bringing into focus the context of low-wage work and eroding labour rights, this volume examines efforts to resist the conditions that have led to rising levels of inequality in the Canadian context. Specifically, it explores the living wage movement, which has emerged as arguably the most impactful movement in support of workers' rights in the "post-crisis" period in Canada. The issue of low-wage work in Canada has become particularly relevant given the COVID-19 pandemic, which has required front-line workers to take on the most significant health risks while working for relatively low wages. The pandemic has laid bare fractures in the existing social support system and inequities in the labour market.

Living wage movements have the potential to improve conditions for low-wage workers; however, progress is uneven. This book fills a critical gap by providing an overview of the nature of low-wage work and a detailed exploration of the content and character of living wage movements in Canada. Although there are important differences, the living wage movements throughout the country share some common traits. In this introductory chapter, we provide a general overview of the broad trajectory of living wage movements and their various manifestations throughout Canada.

This volume is unique in that it employs diverse methods and approaches to understand the complexities inherent to various living wage movements and campaigns. Each chapter approaches this issue from a different perspective. Analyses include macro comparisons of political economy and public policy, a content analysis of the prevalence of discussion about living wages in Canada's major newspapers, the sociological mapping of living wage movements, and qualitative interviews with employer groups as well as precariously employed workers in several regions of Canada. The range of approaches presented provides readers with diverse cases and analytical perspectives that convey the possibilities and challenges – organizational, strategic, and ideological – confronting these movements for social and economic justice.

The volume proceeds in three sections. Part 1, titled “The ‘Standard’ Employment Relationship: Low-Wage Work,” frames the discussion by exploring the evolving nature of low-wage work around the world today and the implications for labour rights. Part 2, “The Fight for Living Wages in Canada,” provides an exploration of the various forms that the living wage movement has assumed in communities across Canada. Part 3, “Resistance and Alternatives,” reviews the effectiveness of business-led living wage campaigns and compares the living wage idea with other approaches to reduce income inequality in Europe and North America.

The objective of this volume is to survey and interrogate the broad swath of living wage campaigns and social movements in the Canadian context. This project derives from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Development Grant, which began with a focus on living wage campaigns in Ontario. Through that effort, an introduction to the various other campaigns across Canada was made. And, significantly, the substantive difference between formal living wage campaigns and movements that seek to increase the general minimum wage was a critical observation.

Of course, to fully understand these movements, we must consider how the macro-economic and labour market conditions have transformed and created the material conditions from which these movements have emerged in response. The application of comparative political economic analysis (see McBride, Mitrea, and Ferdosi, Chapter 2, this volume) contributes to situating Canada in a larger context of varieties of capitalism. As such, there is no inevitability, no “invisible hand,” at work creating a low-wage economy. Rather, these are political choices indicating that there are political alternatives to low wages.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as “good jobs” disappeared and were replaced by those of lower quality, a new politics of work and employment began to take shape. Material conditions shifted the “standard employment relationship” – that is, full-time employment, often unionized, of forty hours per week, a degree of security, and some benefits – toward jobs that were increasingly part time and temporary and provided few opportunities for career advancement (Economic Council of Canada 1990). When considered historically, secure, full-time employment has been the exception, not the norm, representing only a small period within 200 years of capitalist development. If there is such a thing as a “standard” capitalist employment relationship, then it is much more closely related to the “iron law” of labour degradation articulated by Karl Marx in the mid-nineteenth century than to the mid-twentieth-century interlude. Trade and investment liberalization agreements further enabled the implementation of neoliberal public policies, resulting in a new international division of labour that deindustrialized key sectors of the Global North. The bargaining power of unions declined, and bargaining strategy became increasingly defensive. Over the next two

decades, even the International Monetary Fund, hardly an advocate for labour rights, acknowledged that the explosive growth of inequality had been a product, to a significant degree, of declining union strength and increasing workplace precarity (Jaumotte and Buitron 2015). Thus, the primary mechanism for increasing labour income began to be increasingly constrained. This was not, as has been frequently argued, a withdrawal or hollowing out of the state. State power often led or created the conditions for capital to lead an all-out assault against labour and the Keynesian welfare state. It is in this context that movements for living wages have emerged, first in the United States and subsequently in Canada.

A living wage is distinct from the minimum wage in several important ways. A minimum wage establishes a government-mandated and -enforced base rate of hourly compensation that applies to all employers. In some jurisdictions, the law allows for certain occupational variance from the general minimum, such as for alcohol servers, students, and temporary foreign workers. The minimum wage is set as a “floor” and is not tied to the poverty line or otherwise determined by some measurement of income adequacy. Conversely, the living wage is more than a “floor” since it is calculated as what working families need to bring home based on the actual costs of living in a specific community. In other words, economic need is a central component of the living wage concept and reflects the failure of minimum wages to address the issue of income adequacy. Living wage movements and more general demands for “decent work” mark a renewed attempt to inform labour policy.

Most living wage frameworks assume a family unit composed of two working adults and two dependent children. A “basket” of goods and services to meet this family’s needs is constructed consisting of food, clothing, rent, transportation, child care, non-government-funded health-care expenses, adult education, and quality-of-life measures, such as a family night out once per month. The living wage measure does not evaluate need by accounting for more realistic and common expenses such as debt or interest payments, savings for retirement or children’s future education, mortgage payments, and anything beyond minimal recreation or entertainment, such as the costs of caring for a disabled, ill, or elderly family member or an emergency fund.

What follows is organized into three main sections: Part 1 examines the broader structural changes that have reshaped the contours of the Canadian labour market; Part 2 discusses the emergence and aims of living wage movements across Canada; and Part 3 assesses the various strategies utilized by living wage advocates, ranging from grassroots mobilization to professional lobbying. Throughout, we stress the significance of coalitions and tactics in building a mobilizational force capable of challenging the structural subordination of labour to capital. Put more succinctly, this book is about building a movement that presses for some measure of job security, income

adequacy, and fair treatment. This might create space for deepening engagement in trade union activity, bringing an enhanced awareness of widening social inequality, and rekindling a broader working-class politics.

### **Low-Wage and Precarious Work**

Coinciding with the stagflation of the 1970s, minimum wages in Canada peaked and were much closer to the average industrial wage than they are today. A Statistics Canada (2014) study showed that between 1975 and 1986 minimum wages as a proportion of average manufacturing wages ranged from a high of 47 percent in 1976 to a low of 35 percent in 1986. Between 1986 and 1997, the real minimum wage increased by approximately \$1.00 per hour. The ratio of the minimum wage to average hourly earnings remained relatively stable depending on the data series consulted. During the period from 1997 to 2005, the ratio fell, dropping 3–4 percentage points, leading the real minimum wage to decline by roughly forty cents. Increases occurred mainly from 2005 to 2010, with the ratio subsequently remaining stable through to 2013. According to the Survey of Employment, Payrolls, and Hours series data on all industrial sectors, the ratio of minimum wages to average industrial wages went from 41 percent in 2005 to 46 percent in 2013. In the manufacturing sector, the ratio rose even more, going from 37 percent to 45 percent. As for the ratio based on the Labour Force Survey, the increase went from 39 percent to 42 percent for all employees and from 45 percent to 49 percent for employees paid by the hour. One clear problem of these historical variances in the ratio of the minimum wage to average industrial rates is a lack of any explicit policy goal. The ratios do not reflect whether the policy goal is to create higher average industrial wages, to ensure that work is paid above the poverty line, to keep the real minimum wage from eroding, or to take wages out of competition, resulting in an improvised and politically driven process of wage determination.

As Tom McDowell, Sune Sandbeck, and Bryan Evans (Chapter 13, this volume) argue, citing evidence from North America and Europe, though such policy interventions have functioned to improve conditions for low-wage workers, they have proven to be inadequate as a method for resolving the essential contradictions that lie at the heart of the wage relationship between private enterprise and labour. Moreover, the shift in the balance of political and economic power in favour of the private sector has resulted in a weakening of both trade unions and social democratic politics more generally (Evans and Schmidt 2012; Workman 2009). This is a theme picked up by Stephen McBride, Sorin Mitrea, and Mohammad Ferdosi (Chapter 2, this volume) and demonstrates how the institutional configurations that underpinned unequal power relations and contributed to the degradation of labour have proven to be compliant with the structural and political pressure to redistribute income to the wealthiest class of earners. This was followed by

the erosion of social program spending as well as the (re-)emergence and “standardization” of precarious and low-paying employment.

The notable rise in low-wage workers, defined as those earning less than 1.5 times the minimum wage, accounts in part for the dramatic rise of living wage movements. Whereas precarious work accounted for 13 percent of all employment in 1989, it rose to more than 20 percent by 2007 (an increase of 53 percent). By 2008, women accounted for 60 percent of all minimum wage workers in Canada. Between 1997 and 2013, the proportion of minimum wage earners rose from 5 percent to 6.7 percent across Canada (an increase of 34 percent). Tellingly, though the proportion of fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds earning the minimum wage rose from 30 to 45 percent, nearly 40 percent of minimum wage earners were twenty-five or older. At the same time, the proportion of those paid a rate between the minimum wage and 10 percent above it declined from 31 percent to 21 percent. By 2013, the average minimum wage corresponded to just 46 percent of average hourly earnings (Galarneau and Fecteau 2014).

At the same time, the number of part-time jobs grew at nearly twice the rate of full-time work, 5.9 percent versus 3.3 percent, and accounted for 40 percent of all job growth between 2008 and 2013. An astonishing 72 percent of all net new jobs created between 2009 and 2014, the “recovery” phase following the GFC, fell into precarious or low-paid categories, while the underemployment rate of 14.2 percent stood at double the unemployment rate of 7.1 percent (CLC 2014). Meanwhile, the percentage of working-age Canadians rose 1.1 percent, outstripping the growth of jobs in the economy, which grew at only 0.7 percent. By the end of 2014, the labour participation rate fell to 65.7 percent, its lowest since 2000. Meanwhile, as a percentage of the total unemployed, long-term unemployment peaked at 20 percent in June 2011, more than double its pre-recession level, and it has remained near that level ever since (Bank of Canada 2014; National Bank 2017).

Changes in union density in the private sector have been an important driver of growing income polarity and social inequality. Although union density in Canada declined only slightly between 1997 and 2011 (from 29 to 27 percent), that decline disproportionately affected private sector workers. Whereas 21 percent of private sector workers were unionized in 1997, their unionization dropped 33 percent by 2011, to just 14 percent. The erosion of union density was found to be closely associated with workers’ descent into lower-paid and non-unionized jobs (Mackenzie and Shillington 2015).

A study by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (2015) noted that, since the late 1980s, the number of part-time jobs created has been rising at a significantly higher rate than full-time jobs. According to the bank’s employment quality index – a measure that includes the distribution between full-time and part-time work, self-employment and paid employment, and

the sectoral composition of full-time work – Canada’s labour market had been on a downward trajectory for the previous twenty-five years, reaching an all-time low in 2014. The report notes that the decline in employment quality is structural, not cyclical, and that the fastest growing segment of the labour market is also the one with the weakest bargaining power. In a similar vein, a study by the Toronto Dominion Bank led to similar conclusions. Based on a new index of labour market indicators that includes hours worked, self-employment wage trends, and temporary work, the study shows that the country’s job market “is currently experiencing more weakness than is implied by looking at the headline unemployment rate alone.” This weakness, noted senior economist Randall Bartlett, “is driven by elevated levels of labour underutilization, involuntary part-time employment, and long-term unemployment” (Grant 2014).

These trends are amplified in the context of persistent gendered and racialized divisions of labour that exacerbate labour market exclusion. Across the labour market, racialized persons remain concentrated in low-income occupations, often falling below the average Canadian hourly wage and yearly salary (Block and Galabuzi 2011, 2018; PEPSO 2015). Consequently, racialized families are up to four times more likely to fall below low-income cut-off measures, with new immigrants more than twice as likely as those Canadian born to experience chronic low incomes, contributing to a broader racialization of poverty. As Charity-Ann Hannan, John Shields, and Harald Bauder (Chapter 7, this volume) demonstrate, precarity of job tenure and lack of protection for immigrant workers are widespread not only across Canada but also across much of the United States and United Kingdom. They argue that “illegalized” migrant workers remain largely invisible, even in the living wage movement. This raises difficult questions about the inclusiveness of a movement that advocates on behalf of society’s most vulnerable and marginalized. Rapidly increasing income and wealth inequalities have occurred despite Canadian labour being more productive than ever before. Although median real hourly earnings grew by only 0.09 percent per year between 1976 and 2014, labour productivity grew 1.12 percent per year (Ugucioni, Sharpe, and Murray 2016). A recent Statistics Canada study (Fecteau and Pinard 2019) showed that the median annual wage was \$36,980 in 2017, up marginally (less than 1 percent) from \$36,630 in 2016, up even less from \$36,740 in 2015. This contributed to both a general decline in labour’s income share and a deterioration of labour’s purchasing power. Over this period, real wage growth accelerated at the top of the income spectrum while stagnating and declining for median- and lower-income earners.

In the twenty-five years between 1980 and 2005, the earnings of the bottom 20 percent of Canadian workers dropped 21 percent while the earnings of the top 20 percent increased by 16 percent (Block 2013, 1). The wealthiest 10 percent of Canadians own more than 50 percent of the national wealth,

and the richest 86 Canadians alone own more than the bottom 11.4 million. In other words, the richest 0.002 percent of Canadians hold an amount of wealth equal to the bottom 34 percent of the population (Macdonald 2014). In the decade of austerity following the Great Recession, Canada's 1 percent continued to pull away (Macdonald 2018). In other words, as Lars Osberg (2018, 9) argued, "Canada is more unequal now than it was in 1981 and Canadians can expect it to become even more unequal each year into the indefinite future."<sup>1</sup> Although corporate profits historically have tended to average less than 5 percent of sales, structural changes over the past decade have moved that average to over 6 percent, reaching a twenty-seven-year high in 2015 (CIBC 2015, 1). Such income and wealth inequalities are bad not only for labour markets but also for the broader health and well-being of society. For instance, a Statistics Canada study found that income inequality was associated with the premature deaths of some 40,000 Canadians since "income influences health most directly through access to material resources such as better-quality food and shelter" (Tjepkema, Wilkins, and Long 2013, 14).<sup>2</sup>

Proponents of living wages have politicized issues related to income inequality, deteriorating labour market conditions, and their detrimental health effects, recognizing that those who work should not have to live in poverty. With roughly one million Canadians earning minimum wage, and close to another one million earning less than fifteen dollars per hour, the living wage movement is a demand to private and public sector employers to pay wages sufficient enough to provide a modicum of social and financial security. It is also about efforts to build broader notions of labour justice, as Biko Koenig and Deva Woodly argue (Chapter 3, this volume), that go beyond traditional disputes about wage compensation to include a more holistic understanding of the needs of working people.

Critics of living wage movements often argue that legislated wages interfere with market-based transactions by artificially inflating the cost of labour. In turn, employers are forced to freeze hiring or lay off workers, reduce hours, raise the costs of goods and services, and lower planned investments. The anti-living wage camp also argues that a living wage will disproportionately hurt small businesses and lead to more high school dropouts as students apparently will be encouraged to leave school and take up minimum wage jobs (CBC News 2009). However, as chapters in this volume demonstrate, there is little empirical evidence in the United States, Canada, or internationally to support such a view (ILO 2015; Manning 2013; OECD 2015). Yet, as Carlo Fanelli and A.J. Wilson demonstrate (Chapter 4, this volume), this was the dominant theme expressed in the editorial pages of fourteen major Canadian newspapers over the past decade. Accounting for newspaper ownership, their chapter shows how most Canadian newspaper editorials maintained

an anti-living wage stance, reinforcing the dominant neoliberal paradigm. In fact, much of the research has found that raising the wage floor has beneficial effects by countering weak demand, increasing productivity, reducing after-tax government redistribution, raising consumer purchasing power, and ensuring higher employee retention. Also, minimum wage workers tend to be disproportionately employed in firms of 500 persons or more, particularly in the retail, food, and service industries. As vividly detailed in the chapters that follow, claims that a higher minimum wage is inevitably a “job killer” are not consistent with the empirical evidence.

### **Surveying the Canadian Landscape**

In Canada, the federal government’s Fair Wages Resolution Act of 1900 was among the first attempts at regulating wages, but it extended only to workers in public works projects and under government contracts. The intent was to “protect workers from aggressive competition in the bidding process, which always resulted in corners being cut on wages and safety standards” (Hennessy, Tiessen, and Yalnizyan 2013, 11). Provincial minimum wage legislation was first passed in Alberta in 1917, with British Columbia and Manitoba following in 1918, Saskatchewan in 1919, and Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia over the next decade. In 1959, Prince Edward Island finally established a minimum wage; however, minimum wage laws applied only to women and were set on an industry-by-industry basis, whereas various Fair Wages Acts regulated the conditions of traditional blue-collar industries for men (McCallum 1986).

Standardizing for hours worked, Russell (1991, 73) notes that the minimum wages established for women ranged between one-half and two-thirds of the fair wages adopted for a variety of occupations for men. The juxtaposition of minimum wages for women’s work and fair wages for men’s work underlies the construction of unequal gender relations. Whereas men enjoyed privileged access to higher earning potential and more secure employment in the construction and trades sectors, women remained relegated to less desirable and lower paid forms of work, notably in food preparation and retail. Farm labourers and domestic servants, then as now, remained excluded from protective legislation. This situation served to reproduce the male “breadwinner” model, consigning women to the sphere of unpaid domestic labour that reinforced patriarchy. The role of trade unions on gender and wage policy was mixed, neither pursuing nor challenging a policy of exclusion from higher-paying industrial occupations. Rather, unions pragmatically adapted to altered social and political conditions, which then transformed labour market circumstances (Russell 1991). Although minimum wage legislation served as a form of social protectionism, it was operationalized through successive economic and political struggles led primarily by women and

historically marginalized groups aiming to improve their circumstances. State policy nevertheless undermined these efforts by reinforcing occupational segregation.

It was not until the 1970s that legislated gender-based wage discrimination was eliminated, along with the removal of higher minimum wages for urban workers versus rural workers. Still, there remain significant exemptions to minimum wage laws, including self-employment, independent contractors, people who work on commission, and those who serve alcohol or work for tips. Most provinces still exclude farm workers and live-in caregivers from minimum wage legislation, and Ontario remains the only province that still allows workers under the age of eighteen to be paid less than an adult. Employers have also devised a range of measures to avoid paying the minimum wage, including outsourcing, hiring through temporary agencies, misclassifying employees, and hiring independent contractors. In many cases, workers are excluded from employment standards legislation, making them ineligible for overtime pay, paid leave, and benefits. The provision of publicly funded health care, a higher level of unionization, a formally social democratic political party that challenges for power, a somewhat less aggressive approach to privatization to date, and limited extreme inequality compared with the United States (though Canada is rapidly catching up) are the most likely factors causing the later development of living wage campaigns in Canada compared with the United States. These differences raise questions about Canadian living wage campaigns and their potential for success.

The first Canadian iteration of the living wage campaign occurred in British Columbia in 2001. That year the provincial government ripped up its collective agreement with the Hospital Employees Union (HEU). Eight thousand workers saw their wages cut by 40 percent through outsourcing. The union, together with the BC office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), quickly realized how vulnerable the wages of workers, even public sector workers, were to the caprice of governments. Shocked by the government's abandonment of what was understood as not only the collective agreement but also the social contract, a group of activists, advocates, and academics came together to examine the issue of economic security in British Columbia. Concurrently, poverty activists were organizing around child and family poverty, and these two streams – discussed in detail in Catherine Ludgate's contribution to this volume (Chapter 9) – resulted in two important sister initiatives: the development of the Living Wage for Families campaign, hosted by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition; and the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, which can claim some credit for the recent introduction of the BC Poverty Reduction Strategy Act (the last province in the country to move on this issue).

In 2011, the City of New Westminster, a municipality within the Greater Vancouver Area, became Canada's first government to adopt a living wage policy that requires all firms contracted directly or subcontracted by the city to pay a minimum of \$19.62 per hour, nearly double the provincial minimum wage. Soon after, the tiny Township of Esquimalt set a living wage of \$17.31, but it has yet to be implemented. Today almost 150 employers are certified by the BC Living Wage for Families campaign. In late 2017, the newly elected New Democratic Party (NDP) government of John Horgan raised the minimum wage to \$11.35 and then to \$12.65 in mid-2018, with plans to get to \$15.21 per hour by 2021 (Kines 2018).

Since the launch of the BC campaign, living wage movements have emerged across Canada. Although their makeup varies, they often include segments of organized labour, faith-based groups, community-based non-profit organizations, and anti-poverty coalitions. Women, along with immigrant and racialized communities, have often been at the forefront of organizing since they are disproportionately represented in low-wage and precarious work. The campaigns are supported by some key actors. Vibrant Communities Canada (which provides the organizational basis for Living Wage Canada, the umbrella for most campaigns) offers leadership in advocacy techniques and strategies. The CCPA and/or local social planning councils provide social policy research and advocacy support. Tactics include door-to-door canvassing, participation in public hearings, and rallies. Most Canadian living wage movements emphasize the following: 1) calculating annually a local living wage; 2) advocating for a municipal living wage policy to apply to direct employees and, more contestably, employees of third-party contractors; and 3) lobbying employers to voluntarily adopt a living wage as the minimum rate of pay.

Canada's prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba vary in their strategies. In Calgary, the living wage movement began in 2003 when the Calgary Living Wage Action Team was established. The movement includes high-profile, community-based, non-profit organizations, the Alberta Federation of Labour, the United Way, the YMCA, and the Calgary health board (Vibrant Communities Calgary 2006). In Edmonton, the living wage movement was launched by the Social Planning Council in 2004. In 2014, Edmonton's mayor established a poverty reduction task force whose mandate included researching a living wage (Tumilty 2014). However, there has been no evidence that action on implementation is proceeding. In the Wood Buffalo region, Grand Prairie, and Red Deer, municipal governments have led the movement, but it is progressing slowly. A major breakthrough occurred in 2016 when the provincial NDP government of Rachel Notley passed legislation that increased the minimum wage in Alberta to fifteen dollars per hour effective October 2018 (CBC News 2017).

In Regina, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry (which brings together faith-based as well as other community organizations concerned with poverty), and the Canadian Federation of Students formed a living wage coalition in 2004. It campaigned initially to increase the minimum wage. Today the CCPA leads a campaign with a focus on conducting research and raising public awareness through the publication of the living wage calculation. A small “Fight for \$15 Saskatchewan” campaign has surfaced in the province, but its presence is otherwise limited (Stevens 2017). In this respect, Andrew Stevens (Chapter 10, this volume) interrogates the strength of Saskatchewan’s “small business ideology,” the core theme of which is that higher minimum wage rates undermine economic performance. Hardly peculiar to Saskatchewan, this line of argumentation, as seen recently in Ontario, has broad currency. Stevens points out the limitations of the employer voluntarism strategy, at the centre of many living wage campaigns, given that Saskatchewan businesses, to a large degree, reject the premise that wages should reflect a greater adequacy.

In Winnipeg, the living wage movement began in 2004 when Vibrant Communities Canada’s Living Wage Learning Initiative was launched (Caledon Institute of Social Policy 2005). Today it is led by the Manitoba office of the CCPA, with support from the Winnipeg Social Planning Council, Winnipeg Harvest, and United Way. It encourages employers to volunteer to become living wage providers, prompts municipalities to adopt a living wage policy as part of their procurement practices, and advocates for the public provision of essential goods and services, such as drugs and dental care. To date, both the Saskatchewan NDP and the Manitoba NDP have vowed, if elected, to take steps toward implementing a \$15.00 minimum wage.

In Ontario, there are at least fifteen ongoing campaigns, with those in Toronto, Hamilton, and Waterloo linking dense networks of trade unions, anti-poverty coalitions, community organizations, faith-based groups, and some private sector employers. As David Goutor (Chapter 11, this volume) shows, notable victories include the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, which succeeded in getting the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, one of the largest in Ontario, to sign up as a living wage employer in 2013 (see also Wells 2016). In Hamilton and Waterloo, a dozen or so private sector employers have also volunteered as living wage employers and made a strong business case for implementing a living wage. However, in Chapter 12, Carol-Anne Hudson shows that voluntarist arrangements with the corporate sector can be problematic as solutions to low-wage work. In a study of the City of Calgary from 1999 to 2009, Hudson argues that inherent tensions between the living wage movement and corporate partners functioned to undermine and dilute the more radical policy objectives of grassroots advocates.

In most of the Ontario campaigns, the annual calculation of the living wage is a core part of their advocacy and popular education work. This calculation, supported by the expertise of the Ontario office of the CCPA, serves as a heuristic device that demonstrates the inadequacy of the general minimum wage and illustrates the hourly wage that a working family actually needs in order to live a modestly comfortable life in a given community. Many of the Ontario campaigns do not address the minimum wage directly, except to say that it is inadequate and that conflating the living wage with the minimum wage only serves to confuse the two issues. Between 2004 and 2010, the minimum wage was raised from \$6.85 (where it had been frozen since 1995) to \$10.25. It was subsequently frozen for the next three years, which eroded its real purchasing power. In 2012, a coalition of more than a dozen advocacy groups and trade unions came together to form the Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage to \$15.00. There was mounting pressure from social justice, labour, and community-based organizations, and in June 2014 the general minimum wage increased to \$11.00, and in November 2014, following in the footsteps of Yukon, it was indexed to inflation. The minimum wage rose to \$11.25 in October 2015.

Under pressure from poverty reduction and social justice advocacy coalitions, the government of Ontario also established a Minimum Wage Advisory Panel in June 2013 that undertook a formal review of the province's approach to setting the minimum wage. The panel reported its four recommendations in December 2013: 1) that the minimum wage be revised based on the change in the consumer price index (CPI); 2) that the minimum wage be revised annually; 3) that there be a full review of the minimum wage rate and the process by which it is revised every five years; and 4) that the government of Ontario establish an ongoing research program responsible for collecting data and information necessary to inform policy-relevant minimum wage issues (Minimum Wage Advisory Panel 2014, 4). In late 2017, the Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne passed Bill 148, the Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act, 2017, which included (among other changes) requirements that employers pay part-time, casual, and temporary employees the same rate as full-time employees for the same job; that employers pay workers three hours of wages for shifts cancelled with fewer than forty-eight hours of notice; and that all workers be eligible for ten days of emergency leave, two of which must be paid. Perhaps the biggest news, however, was that the minimum wage would increase to fourteen dollars per hour January 1, 2018, rising to fifteen dollars per hour in 2019 (Ontario 2017).

However, shortly after assuming office in 2018, the Progressive Conservative government under the leadership of Premier Doug Ford brought forward sweeping omnibus legislation to repeal many of the changes enacted by the Wynne government. The Making Ontario Open for Business Act repealed Bill 148, eliminating the minimum two paid sick days and the minimum

wage increase to \$15.00, leaving it at \$14.00 for the foreseeable future (Crawley and Janus 2018).

Quebec is an outlier in the contemporary Canadian living wage movement since it is the least developed in the country. Part of the explanation for this lack of development is the higher degree of tax-transfer supports for those who earn lower wages, especially for children, which indirectly acts as a public subsidy for low-wage employers. Also, a larger welfare state socializes several costs normally included in the calculation of living wages via child-care supports and, to a lesser extent, social housing, reducing the number of people who would benefit from a living wage. Until recently, adding to this situation were the generally much lower rental and housing costs in Quebec, which meant less pressure on incomes, though this discrepancy has waned as of late. The bulwark of mobilization around living income issues has therefore taken place in areas related to anti-poverty programs, such as changes to social assistance and child-care benefits (Graefe and Ouimet Rioux 2018). Although both Montreal and Trois-Rivières signed on to the 2004 Vibrant Communities Living Wage Learning Initiative, it has evolved little, though there are some signs that the movement will soon be adopted by a coalition of labour and community-based groups under the banner Coalition contre le travail précaire (Coalition against Precarious Work) ([www.15plus.org](http://www.15plus.org)).

In Atlantic Canada, living wage struggles are varied and part of a broader anti-poverty movement. For example, the Prince Edward Island Working Group for a Livable Income was established in 2004 as a result of the community organizing work of the Cooper Institute. This group brought together a number of organizations concerned with the minimum wage and low wages. As the name suggests, the focus is on a livable income, whether from employment, social assistance, or some other income maintenance program. The group makes deputations on changes to the Employment Standards Act and Employment Insurance. Currently, its advocacy is centred on a basic guaranteed income. Although Prince Edward Island has the highest percentage of workers earning fifteen dollars per hour or less, the movement has seen little growth in the province, with the Liberal government asserting its commitment to gradual wage growth on an ad hoc basis (Chapin 2016).

In Nova Scotia, there is a convergence of living wage and minimum wage advocacy since much of the struggle is built on raising the provincial minimum wage to a level corresponding to a living wage. The original Nova Scotia Living Wage Coalition was composed of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, the Canadian Federation of Students, the Halifax-Dartmouth Labour Council, and Solidarity Halifax. This group became the Nova Scotia Needs a Raise campaign, demanding a province-wide minimum wage of fifteen dollars per hour but also advocating for a municipal living wage ordinance (Enxuga 2015). The Nova Scotia office of the CCPA

provides leadership on the living wage concept, with efforts to secure voluntary employer adoption of the annually calculated living wage for Halifax. However, the Nova Scotia office keeps the living wage project separate from minimum wage advocacy in a bid to avoid confusion and keep the higher standard set by the living wage at the forefront of the argument. Although not in power, the Nova Scotia NDP has formally endorsed a provincial minimum wage of fifteen dollars per hour (Devet 2015).

In response, Liberal Labi Kousoulis, the minister for labour and advanced education, noted that “with our economy, to move to a \$15 minimum wage, where you’re essentially forcing a small business to pay an entry-level worker, \$32,000 a year full-time would have a devastating effect” (quoted in Quon and Walsh 2017). Instead, the Liberal government has committed itself to studying a new two-tier model in which a company with twenty-six employees or more would have to pay a minimum wage different from those with fewer workers. In January 2018, the provincial government announced that on April 1 the minimum wage for experienced workers in the province would go up by fifteen cents to \$11.00 per hour, whereas the minimum wage for someone with less than three months of experience would rise to \$10.50 per hour (Ryan 2018).

In New Brunswick, the living wage movement is relatively new, though the City of Saint John was also a participant in the Vibrant Communities 2004 Living Wage Learning Initiative. Although there is a history of anti-poverty activism in Saint John, the living wage movement is at an early stage. Leadership is provided by Vibrant Communities Saint John, Tamarack’s Cities Reducing Poverty Working Group, the Saint John Human Development Council (the social planning council), and the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, which brings together members of local businesses concerned about poverty. In 2015, the New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice, backed by over thirty-five community and labour organizations, came together to advocate for a minimum wage of \$15.00 per hour (Glynn 2016; New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice 2012). In November 2017, the provincial NDP joined the campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$15.00 an hour (Harding 2017). In January 2018, the Liberal government of Brian Gallant announced that the minimum wage would increase to \$11.00, from \$10.65, on April 1 and be tied to inflation, because the Maritime provinces had agreed that any minimum wage increase should take place on the first day of April in any year (Poitras 2017).

Mary-Dan Johnston and Christine Saulnier (Chapter 8, this volume) provide insight into the specific living wage campaigns under way in Halifax, Antigonish, and Saint John. In each case, a local living wage is calculated as a means to demonstrate the disparity between minimum wages and living wages. Although fighting for higher minimum wages is important and necessary, the authors link it to the need to expand the “social wage” – that is,

universal public goods and services – and the need for improved, expanded, and enforced labour protections. In Newfoundland and Labrador, there are no formal living wage campaigns, though several advocacy organizations – specifically Campaign 2000, the Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour – have focused their efforts on raising the minimum wage.

As Kendall Hammond (Chapter 5, this volume) shows, two of Canada's three northern territories – Yukon and Northwest Territories – have living wage campaigns. These movements have altered the political landscapes in these two territories by opening new political spaces for discussions about the cultivation of economic justice for low-wage workers. For instance, in 2012, the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition initiated a discussion with the territorial government and the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce on the living wage within a broad framework that included food security and affordable housing. In 2016, the NDP came out in favour of a territorial minimum wage of \$15.00 per hour, though the Liberal government of Sandy Silver has not indicated whether it plans to increase the wage beyond the current \$11.32 per hour. In the Northwest Territories, Alternatives North – a social justice coalition of churches, trade unions, environmental organizations, women and family advocates, anti-poverty groups, and interested individuals – advocates on issues related to poverty reduction, improved public services, and greater self-government for Indigenous peoples. In August 2015, Alternatives North released the calculated living wage for Yellowknife, the territorial capital, which stood at \$20.00 per hour (Haener 2015). In January 2018, the government of the Northwest Territories announced that it would increase the minimum wage to \$13.46 per hour, up from \$12.50 per hour, starting April 1. Consistent with past practices, the government will review the adequacy of the minimum wage every two years, though Alternatives North has noted that it would need to rise to at least \$22.00 per hour to qualify as a living wage (CBC News 2018).

In Nunavut, living wage advocacy is limited to pan-territorial efforts, such as the Public Service Alliance of Canada Northern Chapter's Fight for \$15.00 North campaign. Recently, Nunavut News (2018) put out an editorial proposing that the minimum wage be set closer to \$20.00 per hour. Some 40 percent of Nunavut residents receive social assistance, and unemployment rates are typically twice the national average or more. Issues related to social assistance rates, social housing, and food insecurity therefore tend to predominate. Inequality in Nunavut is also much higher than in much of the rest of Canada, with a clear divide between those employed in the broader public sector (and thus earning a decent wage) and the rest, generally un(der)employed (Hicks 2018). Complicating matters further are geography and population dispersion, for communities are typically smaller and less connected. For instance, Iqaluit has only 21 percent of the territorial population,

whereas Yellowknife has 45 percent and Whitehorse 75 percent. Thus, it is inherently more difficult to organize in this environment. Finally, there is a conspicuous absence of data. As found in the federal government's Northern Market Basket Measure Feasibility Study (Heisz 2019), data challenges unique to Iqaluit make it difficult to measure the cost of living. For instance, some items included in standardized tools intended to measure the cost of living across the country are not available in Iqaluit, and there is a lack of CPI sub-indexes for Iqaluit. Recently, the federal government's Poverty Reduction Strategy included a funding commitment to support poverty measurement in the territories, so a living wage calculation for Iqaluit might emerge in the immediate future.

### **Assessing the Strategies of the Movement**

Understanding the distinction between the living wage and the general minimum wage that prevails among many living wage proponents is more than a theoretical distinction. Whether to keep them as separate policy issues has implications for political, organizational, and ideological strategies. The central critique of the minimum wage is that it has proven to be an ineffective policy instrument to address low-wage work because provincial/territorial governments, which set minimum wages, have been unable for political reasons to adjust the rate upward to reflect a sufficient level of income adequacy. The result, as Meg Luxton and Patricia McDermott show (Chapter 6, this volume), is that across the country the minimum wage is far from meeting the real needs of low-wage workers. Their chapter paints a vivid portrait of a youth population that has an increasingly difficult time imagining a future in which they are free of debt and able to live out their relatively modest dreams of owning a home, purchasing a car, or travelling. Despite these and other challenges, efforts to improve minimum wages to reflect living wages have had some success.

Long-standing frustration with governments' ad hoc and conservative view of the role of the minimum wage as a floor rather than a standard based on need has contributed to the view among living wage activists that a focus on the minimum wage has yielded modest results and has not shifted the policy and ideological debate about the minimum wage to one of income adequacy. In this respect, the living wage offers greater possibilities because the policy venue is local rather than provincial or territorial. The living wage also serves as a heuristic device to shift the debate to one based on economic and social need rather than a standard wage floor. In this way, the living wage, unlike the minimum wage, offers a very different policy objective.

The limitations of living wage campaigns are threefold. First, there is a general tendency among many campaigns to establish a sharp distinction in advocacy work between the minimum wage and the living wage. Doing

so might limit the potential for more broad-based mobilization of low-waged workers like those observed in the United States. The power of social movements derives from the broad coalitions constructed that possess the organizational capacity to pressure recalcitrant governments and employers. Canadian living wage campaigns have largely chosen to employ a strategy of rational policy deliberation with employers, governments, and the public rather than one centred on “mobilization from below.” Second, the policy venue for living wage campaigns is local government and employers. Although this has had some success in the United States, Canadian cities do not have the same legal authority to establish local minimum wage rates (Fanelli 2016). Although many Canadian cities can and do have fair wage policies regulating wages paid to the workers of third-party contractors, the number of workers actually covered is small. Third, the local focus, though accounting for real differences between regions and cities, leads to a patchwork of varying wage rates that can apply in different ways.

Nevertheless, by challenging the conventional wisdom of neoliberalism, the living wage movement has stimulated a public debate about low wages and social inequalities. This is the case across Canada, where campaigns share some similar objectives, tactics, and features despite regional variations. Whereas American living wage campaigns for a \$15.00 an hour minimum wage can be largely characterized as grassroots mobilizations of the low-wage, urban, and racialized working class – a movement from below – the same cannot be said for Canadian living wage campaigns. The latter tend to use a shared policy advocacy strategy that targets municipal governments and local employers. A municipal government is lobbied to adopt a “fair wage” policy governing the procurement of goods and services. They can include security services, cleaning, construction, and other contracted services. The value of a living wage is typically a wage rate above the legislated minimum wage rate and that, where possible, reflects the rate paid to that occupation in a unionized workplace. The second strategy is to convince private sector employers of the business case for paying direct employees a calculated living wage for that locality. Unions, of course, see the value of municipal living wage policies and have a history of advocating for such policies stretching back to the 1920s and 1930s. Although it is not empirically documented, it can be assumed that unions see less value in the efforts to win employers over to living wage voluntarism.

What the literature on living wage campaigns and implementation tells us is that campaigns need to be concerned with more than educating employers on the benefits of adopting a living wage policy. As the American experience suggests, the mobilization of working-class communities, aided in a major way by trade unions, is crucial to success. And, when there is success, it is a cue not for demobilization but for ongoing participation in the process of implementation to ensure enforcement of the policies. In

2015, Vancouver and Toronto initiated processes to adopt living wage policies. It is still too early to come to any conclusion regarding these initiatives. However, even if popular, community-based movements do not exist in any meaningful way with the capacity to apply pressure on governments, so the likelihood of successful and meaningful implementation is diminished.

What requires further research is the relationship between mobilization from below and technocratic policy advocacy and lobbying. It remains an open question whether or not the presence of a mobilized grassroots movement will enable more effective and successful policy advocacy. With respect to strategic opportunities, beyond the policy and human resource practices reforms, Canadian living wage movements open up spaces in which to place a number of important political issues on the table. Is there a way to provide a point of unity between unionized and non-unionized workers? Four decades of industrial and labour market restructuring and the consequent decline in union density have transformed work and workplaces in Canada. Precarious, non-unionized jobs are now the standard, with informal “gig” labour increasingly not captured by standard measures of employment and hours or employment standards legislation (Kostyshyna and Luu 2019). Trade union participation in and support for living wage campaigns are critical not only to the campaigns but also to the cause of reigniting efforts at unionization.

Living wage campaigns provide ideological and political opportunities by drawing attention to “free” labour markets as failing economic institutions. Work that does not pay adequately to allow a decent life is both a political problem and an ideological problem for capitalism. In this respect, living wage campaigns highlight not only the contradictions between an economy based on conspicuous consumption and falling wages but also the need for a broader range of public services. The need for universal, publicly financed and delivered child care, dental care, housing, transportation, and so on becomes essential to the idea of an economy that works for everyone. More specifically, municipal fair wage policies, especially those that extend to third-party contractors required to pay living wages to their employees working on government contracts, are a clear statement that contractors paid with public dollars have an obligation to pay their workers a living wage. This is not moralism but good public policy. Poor pay means poor workers who will draw more heavily on public services, including health care, social assistance, unemployment insurance, and so forth, and they will more frequently move into and out of the formal labour market.

In sum, between forty and fifty living wage campaigns have been launched across Canada and are at varying stages of development. But conditions on the ground are what shape any campaign and coalition momentum. The absence of broad and deep movements will mean that living wage campaigns will prioritize policy advocacy and lobbying activity rather than collective

mobilization. The result will likely be much more limited wins, and even they will remain subject to shifting political coalitions within the local city council and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, if the living wage movement continues to evolve and grow, it might well be able to exert a greater influence on public policy as well as issues of workplace democracy and social justice.

### Notes

- 1 Unfortunately, these trends are consistent with global findings. A UBS and PricewaterhouseCoopers Billionaires Insights report found that global billionaire wealth grew from \$3.4 trillion in 2009 to \$8.9 trillion in 2017. This report followed on the heels of a report by Oxfam, which found that the world's twenty-six richest people own as much as the poorest half, who saw their wealth fall by 11 percent in 2018. In the past ten years, the fortunes of the richest Davos Dozen soared by a combined \$175 billion. Meanwhile, findings from the International Labour Organization showed that workers across the Global North and Global South missed out on the gains from growth in 2017. In other words, widening inequality is embedded in neoliberalism, which continues to see tax cuts largely flowing to the wealthy (Elliot 2019; Ghosh 2019; Metcalf and Kennedy 2019).
- 2 The authors arrived at this conclusion by following 2.7 million Canadians for a sixteen-year period and calculating death rates from a wide range of diseases and injuries in relation to a person's income. They calculated the relative rate of mortality by breaking the data into quintiles and comparing the number of deaths of the wealthiest 20 percent to the poorest 80 percent. The authors found that poorer Canadian men have a 63 percent greater chance of dying from heart disease than those in the top income quintile, whereas women have a 53 percent greater likelihood. Excess cardiovascular deaths for lower-income earners are 19 percent for men and 18 percent for women, and mortality in relation to diabetes jumps to a 150 percent greater chance for men and 160 percent for women. Similar divergences between the wealthiest 20 percent and poorest 80 percent appear for every potentially fatal health problem, including cancer, respiratory disease, injury, HIV/AIDS, and many others.

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