

Canadian Labour Policy and Politics

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Introduction

IT IS 2020. JENS, who is twenty-five, and Anna, who is twenty-three, are recent social science university graduates. They live in a rent-controlled apartment in Copenhagen, Denmark. They have no student debt, and their two-year-old daughter is in a high-quality daycare just down the street and for which there are no fees. At the start of the coronavirus pandemic, in March, Anna had recently returned to her retail job after eighteen months off with good maternity benefits. She and Jens were both temporarily laid off from their jobs when the pandemic hit, and their daycare closed. Both continued to be paid. Many public outdoor facilities remained open, so they took the time to enjoy the outdoors and split their time looking after their daughter – as did many other parents in their neighbourhood.

By mid-April, both had returned to work, though primarily from home. And they were able to go back to nearly full-time hours because their daycare reopened with several precautionary measures, including smaller groups and more handwashing. Both remain worried about the long-term effects of the virus on Denmark and other European countries. Neither is worried about their safety or their short-term future.

Jessica lives in Vancouver, Canada. She is twenty-three and also a recent social science university graduate. She attended the University of British Columbia and did well in her studies,

but with the pandemic she has become very anxious about her future. She had been working two poorly paid part-time jobs and was considering returning to university or going to college for another degree. When the pandemic began, she was immediately laid off from her retail job. After six months, she has still not been called back to work as her employer has shifted to online sales only. Her partner, Marta, who is twenty-eight, is also a university graduate and is working three jobs with no safety equipment and little physical distancing.

They live with two others in a small two-bedroom apartment in Vancouver that costs them \$2,400 a month. Each has big student debts – Jessica owes almost \$26,000, Marta more than \$35,000. Neither has been able to find a job that would allow her to use her academic skills and abilities. And neither has the time needed to search for a better job, especially with the pandemic still ongoing and the limited number of jobs available.

Marta is considering moving back to live with her parents in New Westminster to save money, but she would have to commute more than two hours in to work in Vancouver, and her mother has serious health conditions that make both of them nervous about the danger of infection. Jessica would like to move to a less costly city with Marta, but their student debt payments and the difficulty of finding jobs and an affordable apartment are discouraging hur-

dles. Their dream of starting a family soon seems even more unrealistic. The few childcare spots normally available in Vancouver have dwindled because of concerns about the virus.

Marta and Jessica initially relied on the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), but they worry whether they will have enough income to live on at the end of this program. Both are very concerned about what their futures hold. Neither has any confidence in making plans for the next few months or the coming year.

AS THIS COMPOSITE sketch demonstrates, everyday life differed dramatically in Canada and Denmark with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though both have advanced, rich economies. *Canadian Labour Policy and Politics* asks why.

In providing answers, this book explores how labour law and social and economic policies are intensifying the polarization between good jobs and bad jobs. It examines the reasons behind decreasing labour market regulation and why so many people are living in poverty despite being employed. And it asks what progressive policies Canada could enact to develop greater economic equality and political inclusiveness while ensuring a green recovery in the wake of the pandemic.

The answers to all these questions are complicated, to be sure. But a key reason Canadians like Jessica and Marta are so worried about their futures is because business interests and the rich have systematically remade Canadian politics and reoriented power and policy to meet their own needs. Over the past few decades, one of the most striking features of politics in Canada has been the growing scope and influence of business and wealthy elites. Just as distinctive is how many elected officials have been pulled toward the positions of economic elites, leaving many workers ever further behind. The

reasons behind these trends are straightforward, and the combined impact has been potent.

Increasingly, powerful business and financial interests have successfully shifted public policy and labour laws away from promoting the collective prosperity of the many and toward the profits of the few. At the same time, the ability of unions and progressive civil society actors and advocacy groups to influence politics and to protect themselves and their families has declined. The consequences have been profound.

In theory, a liberal democracy, such as Canada's, is supposed to create pressures for politicians to listen to popular majorities. However, as governments in Canada and other more market-oriented liberal democracies (such as in the United States and the United Kingdom) have turned their ear mainly to the priorities of dominant business interests and the rich, the voices of workers have been muted, and the labour laws and public policies that are supposed to help workers have been undermined or eroded. It is this intensifying cycle of strengthening business influence – alongside the weakening of democracy and the decline in workers' power – that is key to explaining why so many Canadians face growing difficulties both on and off the job today.

PUBLIC POLICY IN A COVID-19 WORLD

To make matters more difficult, the pandemic that began in 2020 has cut a path of devastation across Canada and around the world, threatening everyone's health and causing millions of workers to lose their jobs. Indeed, COVID-19 – a severe respiratory disease – has shown itself to be an illness of inequality, exploiting the most vulnerable: the elderly, workers in low-wage jobs, racialized workers, and temporary foreign workers. The pandemic

has also ushered in the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. For as countries have reacted with strict containment and lockdown policies to help suppress the virus, economic activity has contracted sharply and employers have laid off workers in droves.¹

Just as striking has been the one-sidedness of much government reaction to these twin crises of health and unemployment. In the early months of the pandemic, public officials in Canada and elsewhere took emergency measures to ensure health and economic survival. They provided income support and job retention schemes for millions of workers, passed a host of instruments to allow businesses to stay afloat, and supplied billions to financial actors in order to keep credit markets liquid.² As the pandemic has evolved, it has become clear that despite such stimulus, a quick rebound is anything but guaranteed, and the outlook for a broad and sustainable recovery seems bleak.

Canadians face a future of mass unemployment and recession because, even as vaccines have been developed and mass inoculation campaigns rolled out in record time, recovery is expected to take several years. One problem has been the continual emergence of new variants of COVID-19, with new waves of infection and hospitalization as a result. A second is that the effectiveness of vaccines declines over time, necessitating new or repeated vaccination – a huge concern amid the global surge of cases and variants. A third problem is that governments throughout the pandemic have routinely lifted restrictions too early, only to reimpose them within weeks or months. This has left many harmful and long-lasting health and economic repercussions as populations are exposed not only to a deadly virus but also to rising government and household debt, the underfunding of social programs, declining job quality, and worsening income security.³

If that were not enough, the climate crisis remains just as pressing, alongside global threats to the natural world and wildlife. With the onset of the pandemic, concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere dropped as workplace lockdowns and travel bans took effect. But this encouraging trend proved temporary, and rapidly rising CO² emissions have roared back to the forefront of global crises. The consequences – increasing temperatures and climate-related disasters such as wildfires, droughts, and floods – are far beyond anything we have experienced before. Scientists continue to raise warnings that current agricultural, mining, and industrial practices could lead to the mass extinction of life on Earth as economic globalization chronically undermines the planet's life-sustaining ecosystems.⁴

This piling on of global challenges – viral disease, long-term economic shocks, inadequate labour laws and social protection, and threats to the natural world – has made trends in Canada far more cause for worry than for optimism. Indeed, the challenges are particularly fraught with risk for any of the millions in precarious employment or left otherwise vulnerable: such individuals are far more likely to be infected and to die from the virus than is a worker with what many in Canada generally think of as a good job with decent working conditions, employment security, and income. So too the response of Canadian officials to the COVID-19 pandemic has been highly uneven, providing business and financial markets with seemingly unlimited funds while millions have been thrown into unemployment. At the same time, Canada has remained saddled with one of the highest rates of unemployment among advanced industrial economies.⁵

In all these ways, the pandemic has laid bare Canadian economic and political inequalities, exposing ever-widening gaps between the very rich and the rest of the population. It has also

exposed the short-sightedness of public officials and the inadequacy of numerous labour and social policies – shortcomings that have left many workers and families vulnerable to economic shocks and perhaps more virulent viruses well into the future.

So, even as vaccines and treatments roll out, researchers and international agencies the world over are suggesting that the pandemic needs to function as a turning point for citizens and government alike – a critical moment when states commit themselves to urgent action to ensure a sustainable future that serves all people.⁶ Unfortunately, there may be only a small window of opportunity to create a more just economy in the wake of the pandemic. So taking advantage of this chance will require a great deal of effort from workers, unions, and citizens alike. Above all, it will mean people coming together to strengthen Canada’s democratic power, so that it better serves our economy and our society.

These core themes – inequality, politics, power, and achieving a better future for workers by winning equitable and sustainable solutions – are at the heart of this book.

WHY ARE LABOUR LAWS AND PUBLIC POLICY IMPORTANT?

Research indicates that the path to understanding accelerating economic and political inequality and the inadequacy of government responses lies in considering how each country has shaped its labour laws, employment policies, and social policies. International comparisons are telling.

Denmark has a more egalitarian and supportive social democratic approach to meeting the needs of its citizens. Known as *flexicurity*, this set of policies was born out of struggles between labour and business groups over the

better part of the twentieth century, with each seeking to carve out the kind of society they wanted.⁷ Only after years of conflict were citizens, organized business interests, and government able to compromise over three defining ideals that all Danes today believe they have the right to enjoy: employment protection for good jobs through strong labour laws that regulate wages and hours; income security for all workers through well-funded **unemployment insurance** and old age, sickness, and disability programs; and government-provided training or public jobs for all workers to ensure they can actively participate in the labour market – that is, find good jobs if they were laid off.

Labour laws such as these have helped ensure that most Danes are now paid reasonably well. In addition, union strength and labour laws covering much of the workforce meant that employers and unions were able to quickly negotiate a comprehensive wage subsidy policy when the pandemic struck. During the downturn, the Danish government covered 75 percent of the salaries of all employees, whether unionized or not, just as they had done ten years earlier in the financial crisis of 2009–10.⁸

Canada’s history has been very different. Neither unions nor social democratic parties (such as the New Democratic Party) have been as powerful or as politically influential as those in Denmark.⁹ Consequently, business and the very wealthy have long had the upper hand, and there has long been strong support for a more free market approach whose chief priorities are business growth and profits.

Such historical differences have created contemporary distinctions in how governments tackle the challenges posed by globalization, massive technological change, or new crises like the global COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, governments differ in their responses to conflict between the power of private business in

politics and in workplaces, on the one hand, and citizens' demands for greater equality and adequate health, safety, and social protections, on the other. Here there is much to learn from the great variation in democracies across countries.

Some countries, like Denmark, opt for a protective and progressive approach that takes the well-being of its citizens and labour markets more seriously while curbing the power of business.¹⁰ By contrast, in countries such as Canada and the United States, where affluence often buys influence, governments have tended to double down on efforts to meet business priorities through corporate tax cuts, public service reductions, and deregulation of labour standards, thereby reinforcing growing disparities between the rich and the majority of citizens.

This divergence between corporate power and public power – between business and people – sheds light on why excessive business power often leads to greater inequality and a weaker economy. It also underscores the need to rebalance public power so that democracies can pass better labour laws and employment policies – and thereby provide people with the resources and opportunities to work with dignity and live up to their potential.

More than ever, citizens have at their disposal realistic ideas about how to shape a better future. Yet if they are to seize this opportunity, a first step is to create or rebuild strong labour organizations and political coalitions to challenge excessive business control of major investments and business influence on public authorities.

Canadian Labour Policy and Politics explores these issues and explains how our labour laws and employment-related public policies generate their effects, and why these laws and policies have evolved to the disadvantage of people on the job. Focusing on tensions be-

tween capitalism and democracy, it spells out how and why Canada's legal and public policy mechanisms – in theory operating to protect workers and uphold their right to a decent standard of living – often leave workers in low-wage, precarious jobs with little economic or social security while providing business with a low-cost flexible workforce.

This book develops several key themes:

- how federal and provincial government policies designed to promote economic competitiveness and lower business costs – an approach often referred to as **neo-liberalism** – have undermined labour laws and employment policies across Canada
- how growing business influence on public policy makers has weakened employment protections, muted worker voice, and reduced job quality through **labour market deregulation**
- the primary effects of these new policy directions, including inequality, low-wage work, and bad jobs, which affect all workers but typically are most harmful to youth, women, recent immigrants, and racialized minorities
- policy alternatives grounded in a more inclusive, progressive world view, and the reasons why these are necessary to create a broadly shared prosperity.

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

Part 1 provides the context for much of what has gone wrong for workers in Canada, beginning with the twin forces of growing corporate power and rapidly increasing economic and political inequality. These trends have recast government policy choices – above all, structuring markets in ways that have allowed corporations and finance to soar while doing little to

help workers left trying to survive in low-wage, part-time, and temporary employment.

From this starting point, the chief cause of many of Canada's recent unequal transformations has been the adoption of neoliberal policies by government officials acting under pressure from organized business interests to improve corporate growth and profitability.¹¹

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an economic philosophy and accompanying set of policy principles that emerged in the 1940s through the work of economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. It assumes that competition for economic wealth is humanity's defining characteristic, and that when citizens act freely as market consumers or business owners the well-being of society is lifted for all. Competing in the market, it claims, sorts us into a natural hierarchy of economic winners and losers. Any attempt to moderate economic competition and its consequences tends to disrupt the discovery of this allegedly natural order.

These ideas were first embraced by business-friendly politicians in the late 1970s and early '80s, such as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (1979–90) and President Ronald Reagan in the United States (1981–89), and by subsequent governments including that of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in Canada (1984–93). To implement this philosophy, they cut taxes, privatized and outsourced public services to private for-profit companies, re-trenched social programs, and restricted trade union rights. As a result, governments in countries such as Canada and the United States did much less to redress imbalances of income and resources than they had in previous decades, and much more to assist business by carrying out aggressive tax cuts, cutting public services, and deregulating labour markets in order to help boost corporate profitability.

As business owners and those with economic power wielded growing political influence, public policy was rewritten in their favour. Policy actions were introduced so that government power would return to advancing older, so-called liberal economic principles that emphasized business and competition, and advocated that Canadians should trust the market to provide wages, essential services, and investments in basic infrastructure.¹² And with the wider adoption of neoliberal models over the past few decades, policies governing the private and public sectors alike have prioritized the interests of private business and investors while neglecting many of the growing costs for average Canadians. Those costs can be calculated in terms of stagnating wages, rising precarious employment, and lack of access to essential public services like universal childcare.

Nevertheless, it's important to note that although these developments have done much to colour contemporary politics and policy making, large differences exist in the degree to which public officials are committed to such business-first policies. In Finland, Norway, and Denmark, for example, where neoliberal policies have not been as widely utilized, income inequality remains far lower than in Canada and the United States. In the Nordic countries, higher percentages of workers are covered by collective agreements; trade unions are stronger not only in the workplace but also within the political system; and greater proportions of citizens, community groups, and unions effectively pressure political parties and governments to uphold social programs that benefit society as a whole.

These developments are explained in greater detail in [Part 1](#) of this text, which provides international comparisons while assessing the driving forces behind neoliberal politics and policies in Canada. By looking at how Canada compares with the United States, Sweden,

and Denmark, these opening chapters demonstrate how and why Canada's workers, unions, labour laws, and employment policies fit into broader longer-term political and economic developments.

Chapter 1 examines the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and evaluates Canadian attempts to protect the health and well-being of citizens on and off the job in comparison to those of other countries. It discusses how ill-prepared Canadian political and economic systems were to deal with the virus, revealing a common source for these difficulties: politics and policies favouring the interests of corporations and the wealthy over those of the wider populace. The chapter concludes by proposing progressive policy alternatives, starting with those that would help Canada achieve a clean energy economy. These key themes – inequality as the product of a flawed economic system, politics that have been captured by economic elites and their allies, and the need for inclusive policies that protect the planet – are echoed throughout the book.

Chapter 2 focuses on how governments in Canada and elsewhere have systematically supported business interests by promoting financial liberalization, as well as free trade and investment policies, in recent decades. With business using its formidable resources to shift the political terrain, elected officials have pursued long-term policy strategies that facilitate business growth and profit while redirecting the financial rewards to major shareholders and senior executives. This chain of business developments and business-first policies has brought increased layoffs, temp work, and short-term contracts – a **fissuring** of employment that has left more and more workers vulnerable to wages, few or no benefits, and little job security.¹³

Such connections between public policy and business, financial deregulation and labour

cost cutting, and free trade and economic globalization are the first piece of the puzzle, explaining why income growth is being redistributed to the benefit of a few at the cost of the wider Canadian workforce. They also help account for the insistence of Canada's corporate and financial executives on prioritizing their own oversized pay packages while often refusing to provide personal protective equipment, implement social distancing, or offer paid sick leave as the pandemic took hold. Indeed, in many flourishing enterprises, workers who complained about or refused unsafe work found themselves threatened or even fired.¹⁴

Deregulation

A second reason why neoliberal policies have fuelled inequality in Canada is that they have prompted provincial officials to deregulate labour markets by watering down and failing to enforce labour laws and employment regulations and standards. This has allowed employers much greater discretion to lower wages and to impose harsher working conditions as they see fit.¹⁵

Neoliberal policies often target collective employment relations such as laws governing union certification, strikes, and **collective bargaining**, which are thought to impede the freedom of markets and limit the ability of firms to set contracts between managers and individual workers at market prices (see **chapters 3 and 4**).¹⁶ From a neoliberal perspective, regulating employment relations – through labour legislation, collective bargaining, a **minimum wage**, or mandated paid sick and parental leave – promotes inflationary wage levels and creates overly rigid labour markets that limit the incentive to hire more workers.

The logical extreme of this business-oriented view is to see the role of labour law and employment policies as simply to support market forces and create incentives for people

to work harder for whatever wages they can get. Politicians and state officials who adopt this standpoint – as so often happens in Canada and the United States – consequently often seek to expose workers to competitive market forces by dismantling or undermining the collective protections of labour laws and collective agreements. Such goals are similarly served by weakening or eliminating pro-labour programs, such as unemployment insurance, and other hard-won labour rights and employment standards, or by freezing the minimum wage for many years so that it no longer provides basic income security.

Consider the number of Canadians in low-paying jobs. Although the definition differs considerably across countries, one widely used measure of low pay is that it is less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage or less than two-thirds of the median annual earnings of all full-time workers. Using this definition, Canada has the third-highest level of low-wage work among rich industrial countries, with 22 percent of full-time workers in low-wage employment in 2015 – behind only that of Ireland and the United States.¹⁷

Even more telling is the proportion of workers in part-time, temporary, and solo or bogus self-employment, who now make up over 40 percent of the total Canadian labour market. Such non-standard employment is rapidly redefining what is considered a normal job, as more and more workers are stuck with low wages, little job or income security, and few long-term prospects. In 2015, roughly 7 million Canadians in such non-standard employment averaged just \$15,000 in annual earnings, less than a third of what the average full-time/full-year worker earned.

It is these precarious workers who have been most exposed to job and income losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. And while many were helped by CERB and its successor

programs, some still found themselves and their families going hungry as they struggled to pay rent or mortgages, bills, and other costs in the wake of layoffs and long-term unemployment.¹⁸

THE POLITICS OF LABOUR POLICY

Part 2 of the text examines the impact of neo-liberalism and deregulation in greater detail, analyzing why so many workers have been left without adequate protection or representation. Arguably, more democratic politics should help to improve wages and working conditions. Because citizens have the right to vote and protest and express their opinions, logic suggests that Canadian government policies reflect citizens' voices and address their concerns with better wages and social programs.

However, firms and financial interests can have seemingly unlimited access to governments and far greater influence than citizens do in shaping policy. By contrast, the policy needs and preferences of workers and other Canadians are increasingly ignored. Consequently, more and more people are becoming exasperated with their politicians and governments. At the same time, issues of race, religion, and immigration divide Canadians, leaving some with neither time nor energy to pay much attention to politics, and others finding no reason to trust that their governments will enact many policies most voters prefer. Making matters more difficult is that workers who were once well organized by unions and civic associations have seen these atrophy and their leaders turn in a dozen different political directions.

These skewed social and political developments raise troubling questions about changes in the relationship between capitalism and democracy in Canada in recent decades. Are Canadian governments becoming more attuned

to the interests of business and the wealthy than to the majority of their electorate? To what extent is economic inequality linked to increasing bias in political voice, representation, and public policy making? Has the transformation of democratic politics influenced our labour laws and employment regulations, and coloured how elected officials have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Part 2 assesses the impact of these political shifts on several crucial policy areas: industrial relations and collective bargaining, provincial and federal employment standards, union certification procedures, health and safety, temporary worker policies, and income transfer and service programs. In each of these areas, the text evaluates the following:

- how laws and public policies are designed to work
- how well they are implemented and enforced
- how they fit into overall policy directions
- who benefits and who pays as a result of these policies
- the political dynamics generating these policies.

Part 2 begins with a survey of major political shifts across Canada's provinces. These are crucially important to understand as provincial labour laws and regulations cover some 90 percent of the national workforce (see **Chapter 5**). While noting provincial variations, the text examines how powerful business interests and the affluent have reshaped the terrain of public policy making in their favour.

Most notably, organized business interests have used their economic and political power to exert disproportionate pressure on core areas of public policy-making with the goal of creating a more deregulated and flexible labour market. In turn, provincial and federal governments have

implemented policy and regulatory reforms to roll back labour rights. Or just as often officials have sought to avoid wider political controversy by simply blocking improvements or weakening the enforcement of employment rules. When these strategies have proved insufficient, many governments have introduced new policies (or updates to existing policies) that fall outside of standard labour laws and regulations, such as temporary foreign worker programs.

Subsequent chapters examine how this government opposition to collective labour regulation has harmed workers, altering labour laws in ways that tip the balance toward employer concerns with so-called economic efficiency and away from equity and worker voice. **Chapter 6** examines such shifts in the federally regulated private sector: the roughly 10 percent of the labour force engaged in sectors such as banking, railways, aviation, telecommunications, pipelines, and roads that cross provincial and international boundaries. Whereas federal jurisdiction has historically often been seen as a more model employer – with labour legislation and employment standards that frequently surpass those in most provinces – the shift to neoliberal models of public management and labour market deregulation has also facilitated the growth of precarious employment in the federally regulated private sector.

Chapter 7 explores how crucial areas of labour law – like union certification and union organization in new workplaces and sectors – have either been recast or more often allowed to atrophy, creating additional hurdles for workers who want to unionize their workplaces. These moves have meant that labour law reform has failed to keep up with the changing face of work, making labour laws less effective and less relevant. Even though the workforce has grown by nearly 40 percent over the past twenty-five years, to more than 18 million, fewer and fewer workers are able to organize unions in their

workplaces and to garner the potential benefits of collective agreements.

Other essential areas of labour legislation – such as workers’ health and safety – have seen no significant improvement, with thousands of workers across Canada suffering critical injuries, even death, both on and off the job. (Chapter 8). New legislation has also encouraged non-standard employment and low-wage work, most notably through the legalization of temporary employment on a nationwide scale. For example, temporary foreign worker programs have given employers in an ever-growing number of sectors – from agriculture, child and elder care, and restaurants to construction and high-tech – the right to apply for and employ thousands of temporary migrant workers. This often includes employers having the effective power to deport them (see Chapter 9).

Nor have Canada’s social programs kept pace with issues of low-wage work and income security (Chapter 10). In fact, rather than protect workers against turbulent labour markets, Canadian governments have focused more on debt reduction and to cutting or freezing social programs. In addition, governments have cut benefit rates, tightened rules of eligibility for programs, or quickly repealed universal programs once introduced, such as CERB. Such program overhauls – and reversals – have contributed to ever greater fear and insecurity among workers, especially for those in low-paid, insecure jobs, and particularly for women and others with greater care responsibilities for children and elders at home. Canada now ranks near the bottom among advanced industrial economies in social spending.

Taken together, these developments suggest that federal and provincial governments have reshaped how our labour markets work fashioning a much more market-driven order by privileging employer goals across a range of laws, policies, and regulations. In doing so,

public officials have significantly weakened collective employment relations to the detriment of large numbers of working Canadians, their families, and communities. It is this systematic deregulation of the labour market that has put many workers across the country at higher risk of unemployment, stress, infection, and in some cases death.

POLICY BARRIERS ACROSS THE LABOUR MARKET

Part 3 examines how neoliberalism and deregulation have reshaped specific parts of the public- and private-sector labour markets, both before and during the pandemic. The chapters look at industries from private services and manufacturing to public health care and long-term care for the elderly, and illustrate how government policies that promote **labour market flexibility** often contribute to a wider deterioration in the quality of work. As these chapters demonstrate, the costs fall disproportionately on more vulnerable workers: women, young people, and people of colour.

Across the Canadian labour market, changes to economic and labour policies that are supposed to boost economic growth, enable firms to be more efficient, and make their workforces more flexible are instead creating bad jobs: those providing insecure and unstable employment, low wages, few or no benefits such as paid sick leave and pensions, too few work hours with no worker agency over schedules, and/or limited long-term prospects for improvement.¹⁹

Numerous workers in bad jobs – who typically have no union protection – deal with a host of other problems as well. For example, those doing on-call work lack job security and basic labour protections.²⁰ Uber drivers and Foodora couriers generally have no right to a minimum wage or vacation pay because they

are falsely deemed to be self-employed. Others who work through temporary employment agencies in manufacturing or security services similarly have no right to basic employment standards such as sick leave or family leave. All workers in such jobs are in precarious positions, and this has left an ever-larger proportion of the workforce unable to achieve an adequate standard of living or to improve their work conditions.

As [Part 3](#) emphasizes, bad jobs don't exist because of natural market processes, nor does low pay reflect lack of skill, talent, or productivity.²¹ Rather, this dysfunction is rooted in government support for employer interests (in the form of a cheaper and more flexible workforce) at the expense of government protections for workers.²² For with the declining strength of unions and their political allies, even workers who previously enjoyed good jobs frequently now feel that they have to put up with worsening work conditions as a new reality.²³ To a large degree, it is this failure of governments in Canada to uphold or improve basic rules protecting jobs and wages that accounts for the rising number of bad jobs – and for the widening income and wealth gap across the labour market.

In the private service sector, which generates almost two out of every three jobs in Canada, firms have cut costs by making positions part time and temporary, and adopting flexible work arrangements that shift the risk of too few hours and little job security onto workers ([Chapter 11](#)). This has exposed workers in the sector – especially in cleaning, care, retail stores, and restaurants – to non-standard, precarious work.

In private-sector manufacturing, the consequences of deregulation can be found in a marked shift in government behaviour. Not merely removing themselves from regulating how the market operates as Free Trade agreements are ostensibly supposed to do, Canadian

governments have actively intervened. They have devised new rules that more exclusively serve business interests, either by legislating new and trade investment policies or by waiving competition policies for multinationals to expand their operations. Similarly, governments have allowed firms to hire more and more workers on a notionally self-employed or temporary basis (see [Chapter 12](#)). Such public policies have benefited American and other foreign automakers significantly. But they have also put Canadian autoworkers in direct competition with global supply chains located in Mexico and China, where wages and labour standards are far lower. And rather than support displaced workers with effective job-creation programs or investments in retraining for a clean energy economy (as Denmark has done), Canadian officials have largely looked the other way as workers are forced into unemployment or lower-paying jobs.

In the **public sector**, similar policy changes have undermined good jobs and labour protections. For example, care work in hospitals, long-term care facilities, and social service agencies used to provide many better jobs with secure employment. Recent government austerity drives have cut budgets and shifted public services in the sector to private firms and for-profit providers, pushing numerous frontline care workers into worse jobs with lower wages ([Chapter 13](#)). In hospitals and health care services, too, **new public management** models emphasize flexible work scheduling, variable work hours, and compressed work weeks. These translate into higher caseloads, more patients, and an ever-increasing number of job responsibilities – typically with less time to do the added work and with far less support from employers ([Chapter 14](#)).

Employer discrimination and other policy obstacles continue to harm First Nations workers and their families ([Chapter 15](#)). As members

POLICIES FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

- comprehensive nationwide vaccination, infection testing, and contact tracing
- personal protective equipment in all workplaces
- paid leave for all sick and quarantined workers
- support for workers with additional family care needs through income transfers and services
- mandatory health and safety training for all workers and supervisors
- more preventative inspections and health and safety enforcement campaigns in workplaces
- protections from employer reprisals for workers who refuse unsafe work or make complaints about workplace conditions
- increased public funding for injured workers and their rehabilitation
- increased penalties for firms that repeatedly violate health and safety regulations

POLICIES FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION

- universal, high calibre public childcare
- significant expansion of appropriate social housing
- fully publicly funded postsecondary education, adult education, and retraining programs
- vigorous public job creation and retention schemes
- accessible and supportive employment insurance for all workers
- a permanent universal basic income

POLICIES FOR THE LABOUR MARKET

Workplace Regulation

- stronger laws to allow workers to form unions and negotiate collective agreements
- limits on employers' right to interfere with attempts to unionize
- **compulsory arbitration** to help workers and employers achieve collective agreements
- new regulations to allow unions to form collective agreements across entire sectors covering wages, working conditions, and benefits
- amendments to labour laws that exclude temporary foreign workers or exempt employers from paying minimum wages or abiding by employment standards

Minimum Wages

- minimum wages tied to a **living wage** that ensures a decent, dignified standard of living

- independent commissions that regularly adjust minimum wages

Employment Standards

- legislation to provide medical and dental benefits to all, including part-time and temporary workers
- legislated paid sick leave, paid maternity leave, and paid emergency and family leave for all workers
- government publicity campaigns to ensure broad awareness of basic employment rights and obligations
- effective government enforcement of labour standards, and competent inspections of all workplaces and individual complaints
- adequate, timely penalties to deter employers from breaking labour laws and regulations

POLICIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

- realistic carbon budgets and an adequate carbon tax on fossil fuels to meet **green-house gas (GHG) emissions** targets
- GHG emissions reduction of 75 percent by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2050
- deployment of clean and renewable energy systems nationwide
- a public environmental agency to reorganize economic sectors for sustainability
- measures to ensure worker rights and unionized jobs in the transition to a renewable energy economy
- public retraining for all workers, especially those displaced from fossil fuel sectors, so they can produce, build, install, and maintain renewable energy infrastructure and retrofit buildings for improved energy efficiency
- new investments in natural infrastructure to restore forests and wildlands, reclaim mines and oil sites, and improve biodiversity
- ambitious, rapid expansion of affordable/free public transportation

of sovereign nations with land claims that are central to the exercise of that sovereignty, Indigenous people often find their work lives fundamentally shaped by Canadian government policy, or absence of policy. This can result in insufficient resources for job training and education, and a lack of effective anti-discrimination and anti-harassment measures. Moreover, a current emphasis on casinos as a means of economic development in some Indigenous communities has created many low-wage, non-union, precarious jobs.

In almost every case of deregulation – and policy failure – studied in this book, workers have been left relatively poorer and less economically secure. The numbers of those who struggle have expanded beyond blue-collar production workers and communities built around factories. They also include families feeling the effects of underfunded social safety nets, and millions who rely on an inadequate minimum wage and little more to make ends meet. These groups are casualties of labour market deregulation policies intended to free labour markets of institutional rigidities.

BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE

Part 4 concludes by examining the opportunities and hurdles that workers, their families, and communities now face in their efforts to attain better employment, a more sustainable environment, a clean energy economy, and a more democratic political system. Since the start of the pandemic, environmental organizations, trade unions, international policy agencies, and others have called for initiatives that **build back better**.²⁴ Faced with health, environmental, and economic crises, people the world over have begun to realize that a return to business as usual will not be enough to restore sufficient good jobs, nor will the status quo be anything but environmentally destructive.

Indeed, COVID-19 has shown that there is no healthy economy without a healthy society and sustainable environment, and that true prosperity is not simply about individual wealth. Rather, it is about how we as citizens live, work, learn, and play in ways that are sustainable and meet everyone's basic needs and human rights.²⁵

If a recovery plan is to help all Canadians, its design must ensure collective prosperity and environmental sustainability. The pandemic has demonstrated that when a crisis is urgent enough, governments can take dramatic action to help people – and do so much more quickly than anyone could have anticipated. But while some governments have seized the opportunity to make big investments in health and environmental sustainability, others have not. Canada falls into the second group.

As a start, a recovery plan should provide workers with comprehensive testing and tracing systems, protective equipment, and paid sick days and quarantine facilities, governments must also build stronger public services. These include effective labour and public health inspectorates, integrated health information networks on virus infection rates, and policies that protect families and communities. Just as important for a more caring society is the expansion of public long-term care, public home care, and publicly funded assisted living for seniors. These policies are the first way that Canada and other societies can build back better.²⁶

An equally essential part of building a better future entails ambitious plans to enact inclusive labour laws and employment policies to link democratic citizenship from our workplaces to our local, provincial, and federal governments.²⁷ This deepening of democracy involves policies that can turn bad jobs into good ones by legislating and enforcing better labour laws, including significant participation and decision-making by workers in relation to workplace issues that affect them, by enacting higher

minimum wages adjusted to a living wage, or by improving health and safety regulation. Implementing reforms such as these will not only ensure a shared and collective prosperity. It will also provide workers with the individual and collective voices to gain greater security and opportunity in their work and family lives.²⁸

Finally, new policies are essential to extending more democratic control over our shared future. The climate emergency is clear: a Green New Deal is needed, one that commits government to developing clean energy infrastructure while phasing out coal, oil, and gas, and to planning alternative jobs and livelihoods for a **just transition**.²⁹ As the problems of global warming multiply, it is vital to launch a policy agenda now that tackles the political and economic interests tied to fossil fuels and at the same time develops a **zero-carbon economy**. Just as essential are new initiatives that protect the natural world and ensure greater biodiversity to, among many other benefits, help reduce the likelihood of to prevent the outbreak of future infectious diseases.

Yet as this text points out, the main difficulty isn't any shortage of progressive policy options or evidence that more worker-friendly, environmentally responsible, and democratic policies would benefit societies such as Canada. Nor have many Canadians, especially young people, environmentalists, and unionists, been politically inactive in their support for such policies. The fundamental problem lies in the power of corporations, the influence of employer organizations, and the ubiquity of corporate media. These forces are able to limit democratic voices and shape public expectations as to which public labour policy reforms can be regarded as politically realistic.

Developing solutions will certainly be a challenge for workers and citizens, but as the past century has demonstrated, significant hurdles are not insurmountable. During the Great

Depression and in the wake of the Second World War, citizens mobilized and agitated for democratic reforms, and unions launched massive strikes. This marshalling of countervailing power allowed people to win huge reforms that regulated business and oversaw an expanding economy that distributed income widely in the postwar period.³⁰

Today brings signs of a reinvigorated politics as more citizens and more workers are increasingly concerned to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the climate crisis. Increasingly, workers are building new alliances and seeking collective agreements and public policies that alter the rules of markets dominated by fossil fuel interests (see [Chapter 16](#)). It's not uncommon for media reports to suggest that many workers are opposed to fighting climate change because of its costs and potential job loss, or that Canada's oil and gas sector is too economically important to allow even discussion about phasing out fossil fuel infrastructure. But the truth is that many labour unions in Canada and elsewhere are increasingly giving urgent priority to raising climate issues among the general public and in the workplace.

There are also signs of more innovative union organizing, as well as renewed efforts to bring unionized and non-unionized workers together ([Chapter 17](#)). Consider, for example, recent campaigns to organize GoodLife fitness instructors, bike couriers and delivery drivers, and fast-food workers who are challenging their employers with strikes and protests to demand better wages and working conditions. Just as notable, through new worker-centred organizing to raise the minimum wage for all workers – such as the Fight for \$15 and Fairness movement (now named “Justice for Workers: Decent Work for All” in Ontario) and the Agriculture Workers Alliance – coalitions of unions and non-union workers have built networks to extend solidarity.

These are encouraging trends that suggest a more vital and powerful labour politics is possible, with unions and citizens once again working on issues beyond wages and working conditions, and building more effective citizen power through direct action.³¹ Such progressive politics has been central to the widening and deepening of democracy in the past, and its current re-emergence within Canada, the United States, and other countries again suggests that citizens can find a wider common good despite the fragmentation of their work and community lives. The pandemic too provides new opportunities for unions and citizens alike to unite to improve public policy for the better.

Yet, as the final chapter reminds us, there are no easy solutions. Activists and unions face daily challenges in gaining and retaining the resources they need to keep a foothold in politics long enough to make politicians listen. So too free markets and further investment are not only undermining economic sustainability, they are also fundamentally skewing the debates over how to address our problems with inequality and the climate crisis. To take on these challenges, citizens will require a re-energized and motivated democratic politics. That will take new union organizing and ambitious political mobilizing. It will necessitate unions, progressives, and environmentalists building broad coalitions. It also must involve mass protests and progressive organizations across Canada taking elections seriously. But it will be how we respond – and act collectively in taking on these challenges – that will help determine the kind of Canada – and world – we can collectively build for each other.

For people the world over, this is an epoch-defining moment. The COVID-19 pandemic has made us reflect on what is most important and what we most value in our societies. Many are finding renewed optimism and new inspiration

in the idea that a better future does seem possible now. But if governments are to embrace more egalitarian, inclusive, democratic, and sustainable public policies, this will only be the result of citizens developing plans, working

hard, and using their political imaginations to build public power. Only with these bold steps forward can a more just, prosperous, and democratic Canada become a reality.

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