

PRECARIOUS WORK IN THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION EDMONTON REGIONAL REPORT

September 24th, 2016 – Evergreen Room, Lister Centre, University of Alberta

On unionization & labour standards you said

- Unified provincial labour standards are crucial.
- Unionization and automatic certification are highly important to increase workers' ability to form a union in their workplace.
- Workers need to be trained in labour education. Workers need to know their rights to exercise them and have the ability to start organizing.
- Through labour education, it will be necessary to reach out to workers who have not been a part of the labour movement before. There is an important need for awareness on the particular needs of historically excluded communities.
- Unions must reach out to workplaces that have not unionized before.
- Unions can embrace precarity in a way that supports employment benefits and workers (i.e.: arts sector employees; IATSE).
- Attendees asked the question, "why are unions being seen as increasingly weak"? The answer to this is complex and includes the fact that unions are often undervalued among those with the highest incomes.
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **Progressive and effective reforms to modernize Canada's Labour laws.**
 - **General education on employment standards and workers' rights for young Canadians.**

On 'flexibilization' you said

- Workers turn to freelance often because full-time jobs are not available.
- With 'just-in-time' scheduling, workers are receiving their work schedules at the last minute. This makes it difficult for workers to balance competing demands of work/school/family. Yet workers are stretched too financially thin to turn down shifts. There is little meaningful choice for them.
- Attendees explored how we balance some of the benefits of precarity (being able to be home when a child is sick, for example) while ensuring workers have high quality employment and that they are protected from exploitation.
- Given the statistics on job elimination through automation and the unemployment rate, attendees wondered how that will affect government tax revenue. "Who are going to pay taxes?"
- Attendees also expressed concerns about how 'flexibilization' will affect retirement for the Millennial generation. "Who is going to be eligible for a pension upon retirement?" The federal government should be extremely worried about these grave statistics.

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On minimum and/or living wages you said

- Workers need a federal minimum wage of more than \$15 per hour.
- Living wage policies are great, provided workers have enough hours to make ends meet.
- Restaurant owners pushed back against a proposed minimum wage increase. Yet, despite fear mongering, the \$15/hour minimum wage will not be a drastic upset to the economy.
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **At minimum, workers need \$15/hour to survive.**
 - **Minimum wages should be indexed to the average cost of living in each province.**

On EI you said

- Workers are experiencing significant delays in accessing their first EI payments (up to one month).
- In Alberta, training opportunities for people on EI are all done through the province. Unfortunately, this basic training is not relevant for many workers, especially those who possess post-secondary education. Re-training programs should be offered at various levels to meet the needs of diversely qualified workers with differing levels of education and experience.
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **Spend more on training programs and benefits for young Canadians.**
 - **Remove EI funds from general revenues so the government can no longer use EI money to help balance a budget.**
 - **Diversify EI training programs to accommodate those of all levels of education.**

On the social safety net you said

- Life would not be so expensive if there was access to affordable, reliable daycare, housing, and public transit.
- There is a matrix of factors contributing to precarity, which cannot be separated. These include the cost of housing, childcare, etc. There needs to be improved support for employed moms who are often facing childcare wait-list times up to two years in length.
- Dental care and pharmacare need to be universally included in the public healthcare system.
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **Integrate dental and pharmacare into our public health care system.**
 - **There needs to be a national childcare plan, including the creation of public childcare spaces and caps on the daily cost.**

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On the intergenerational concerns of precarity you said

- Generation X was forced to take on student debt and now Millennials continue to carry a debt burden. This is creating a compounding of generational problems.
- There is an intergenerational impact of precarity whereby parents are supporting Millennial kids who will never be able to have the things that previous generations had (i.e.: home ownership, employment stability, etc.).
- We heard parents fearfully speaking to the crisis, saying “my kids won’t have what I have.”
- One attendee shared personal concerns for her own children and grandchildren. Of 7 children, (the majority with some level of post-secondary education) only 3 have employment with benefits. One is self-employed. The speaker was therefore predicting a generational crisis of pensions. Despite feeling secure with her own pension, the speaker foreshadowed a looming crisis of federal pensions for the Millennial generation.
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **Expanding the Canada Pension Plan so that young Canadians can also benefit from it in the future.**
 - **Forgiving student debt of recent graduates.**
 - **Explore Guaranteed Annual Income.**

On post secondary education & job training you said

- In the 1980s there were ‘ready-to-go’ apprenticeships where workers were paid while completing job training. Nowadays, there is no payment for job training; people work for free (and go into debt) to get a foot in the door. Even after securing training opportunities for themselves, workers are still not guaranteed jobs.
- Training investments need to be given to people entering the skilled trades.
- Attendees felt governments put money into skills training without consideration for employment markets. “Where are we going to employ the newly trained workers?”
- Attendees also expressed concern about the decrease in full-time, high-paying, family-sustaining jobs.
- Education generally, university education in particular, is the key to class mobility. A greater range of employment options open up with greater formal education.
- Tuition fees are just too high. Many students begin post-secondary education but are forced to drop-out because of the exorbitant fees. There are added challenges in these circumstances, as people have student debt but no degree to help increase their earning potential.

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- Investment in education is about the prioritization of values. For example, the University of Alberta insists it never has enough money to pay its staff. Yet the university has enough money to build new residences that require new student-staff (lower waged). This is about the (de)valuing of workers and their contributions to the university/business.
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **Eliminate the barrier of tuitions fees by working collaboratively with provinces.**
 - **Create incentives for employers to provide local training opportunities and co-op placements for all fields of study.**
 - **Unpaid internships should be completely eliminated at the federal level.**

On sector-specific concerns you said

- Precarity is especially visible in the non-profit sector.
- The public system is depending on free labour and taking advantage of people with good intentions who want to do good work in their communities. There is a need to support public sector systems with professional-track employment opportunities and to see public sector occupations as family-sustaining work.
- Long-term care and home-care has been relying on precarious workers to provide necessary supports for the aging senior's population.
- The devaluing of women-dominated occupations and industries needs to stop.
- In many instances, jobs stipulate that employees must have consistent access to a vehicle. This is putting even more pressure on job seekers and can put potential jobs out of reach.
- Freelancers have no access to health benefits and other supports, despite workers' needs.
- IATSE recently signed a contract with Oilers Entertainment Group. Jobs are low paid, at \$14/hr with no benefits. It is hard to support basic needs on this kind of wage. We need to disconnect the value of people from the work that they do.
- Agriculture is very precarious and dangerous work, but there is opportunity to capitalize off of existing programs like "Growing Forward 2" (a federal-provincial-territorial partnership with federally established funding priorities). These sorts of collaborations can push private industry to "move in a collective direction" (i.e.: support value-added jobs). In 2018, the funding priority will be about climate change, so the government can put conditions on the resources it spends.

On precarity in public educational institutions

- At the University of Alberta, residence advisors (RAs) experience unsafe working conditions, bad hours, stagnant wages, and no mechanisms to hold their employers accountable. An attendee commented that as a 20 year old RA, it feels as though your voice is not heard and that the employer has not resourced

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- you enough to deal with crises that come up on the job (e.g. students having to go to the hospital).
- Universities are supposed to be sites of innovation but have been entrenched in precarity for the last 20 years. It is reaching a crisis point.
- University contract faculty are incredibly precarious with no office space and teaching schedules that are made available to them only two-weeks prior to each new semester. This creates a scramble to get prepared. Because contract faculty are hired onto semester long contracts, they have no certainty four months into the future.
- University student-staff are easy to take advantage because their jobs are more short-term, with people moving onto other precarious work after the completion of a contract.
- Universities are producing commodities—degrees—at the lowest cost possible, for which they need to be shamed.
- Attendees asked: “if our public universities can't be model employers, then what chance is there for private-sector employers?”
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **Government must start seeing post-secondary education as an investment in people and public good, not a business.**
 - **Employers should be required to provide fair scheduling, so that employment under multiple fixed-term contracts is considered continuous.**
 - **Based on recommendations submitted by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA): employment standards should be updated to ensure that part-time and contract workers receive equal pay for work of equal value and equal access to benefits.**

On the value of work you said

- It is a myth that Millennials don't want full-time jobs. This is not the reality that attendees know.
- The inherent value of workers needs to be teased apart from the valuing of particular kinds of work. Precarious work is a way to devalue the person doing the work (e.g. there is a profound devaluation of teaching).
- An attendee asked, “where is our value in work when university administration get paid three times what professors do, though professors do the core work of the institution?”
- As a society, we need to value all kinds of labour (including paid and unpaid).
- People don't have dignity of choice, if they don't have the dignity of employment.
- Political pacifism is a repercussion of precarity. Those who are precarious feel nervous about standing up for their rights. In universities, political pacifism impacts academic freedom.

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- An attendee received advice from her employer, that getting married was the best strategy to avoid precarity (i.e. having someone else financially support you). Is this the best advice we have for Millennial women workers?

On mental health you said

- The healthcare system does not provide universal mental healthcare coverage. Without private healthcare benefits, accessing mental health supports is often not an option. Attendees essentially felt that mental healthcare is only available to middle and upper class people with benefits.
- For a generation of workers for whom precarity is a reality, mental health concerns are real and need to be taken seriously.
- An attendee spent a lot of time wondering why they couldn't find full-time work. They thought there was something inherently wrong with them and their skill set. Yet, precarity is not an individual problem - it's structural. Millennials need to truly understand this in order to bust the myth. All generations have the responsibility to end the perpetuation of this harmful tale.
- **Proposed solutions:**
 - **A national mental health strategy that would include extending coverage to cover the costs for psychiatrists and psychologists as well as an educational strategy for mental health.**
 - **Encourage universities and workplaces to adopt mental health coverage policies for their institutions.**