

As inequality grows, change is important to sharing prosperity

To the Editor,

Oxfam International just released a global report outlining global inequality. It's timely here in Ontario as the province looks to shift inequality among workers. The report points out the alarming and growing gap between rich and poor: 42 people hold as much wealth as 3.7 billion people across the globe.

Inequality is less and less about rich and poor counties, as the inequality between counties closes. What this means is inequality is among us? in our communities and we live next to each other. In Hastings and Prince Edward counties people are homeless, without heat, without food and yet we are a wealthy nation. Extreme wealth at the top does not make for a prosperous society, but rather it demonstrates its failings as millions of working people are kept in poverty wages ? making our clothes, growing our food and serving us coffee.

Ontario's workplace legislation can be the game changer we want it to be.

Jan. 1 was a remarkable day as 1.6 million minimum workers across the province received a raise and assurances of better workplace conditions. It matters. Many of us in Hastings and Prince Edward counties rely on minimum wage work to get by ?and the latest census data shows that increasingly more of us work in sales and services ? a sector that employs more minimum wage employees than any other. The rise of minimum wage gets us closer to wages that are no longer poverty wages; it's been hailed by some as great change ? it moves us away from wages that keeps us in the worst kinds of poverty ? hungry, with unstable housing, with bills that can't get paid, and sick.

Poverty has consequences on the person and on all of us ? the cost of poverty across Canada has been estimated to be between \$32 billion to \$38 billion per year. Increasingly the poor are working. Seventy per cent of the ?poor? in Canada are working people ? sobering stats.

We all share the same value ? workers should not be condemned to a life of poverty. At a time of record lows of unemployment across the Canada, employees should be able to live off their wages. Yet in Hastings Prince Edward low unemployment levels have not equated with reducing the number of people living in poverty.

The Poverty Roundtable held community conversations throughout the last two years on the experience of poverty with more than 400 people living below the line. Minimum wage was a prevalent discussion ? it kept people out of work as they couldn't afford to work ? they couldn't afford the transportation to get to work and they couldn't pay bills on minimum wage. Across Hastings and Prince Edward counties people spoke of repeated job churn and constant stress. Causes of poverty in Hastings and Prince Edward have been repeatedly quoted as the result of minimum wages that don't meet the cost of living, followed by job losses for a variety of reasons: illness, job loss because a child died, because they needed to provide care to a child or parent. The new act helps workers, helps to value us, and it humanizes all of us.

Highlights:

Equal pay for equal work

Not requiring a sick note for illness

Time off if in the death of a child

Time off to care for family members

The Oxfam International report on inequality can be found **here**.

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