

## **Alternatives to the Low Waged Economy: Living Wage Movements in Canada and the United States**

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**ABSTRACT:** The forty-years of neoliberal capitalism has been accompanied by an ever expanding trend toward deepening inequality and the expansion of a low wage labour market. The expansion of the non-union, post-industrial, ‘new’ economy characterized by low wage service sector jobs became identified with a deterioration in employment conditions and quality. Employment arrangements, reflecting the new normal, offer not security and adequacy but rather low pay and precarity. Living wage movements, as well as campaigns demanding a higher general minimum wage, have emerged as part of the response demanding economic justice. These movements and campaigns, found both in the United States and Canada, are significantly different in breadth and tactics. Here, those differences are described and interrogated as a function of the uneven terrain of neoliberal restructuring within each country.

**KEYWORDS:** Living Wage; Minimum Wage; Canada; United States; Local

### **Introduction**

The forty-year ascent and normalization of neoliberal capitalism is coterminous with an ever expanding trend toward deepening inequality (Giles 2014; Piketty 2014). The Great Financial Crisis of 2008, and the consequent age of austerity ushered in as states turned to fiscal consolidation once the financial system was stabilized, has contributed to an intensification of this process of economic polarization. In response, living wage as well as campaigns demanding a higher general minimum wage, have emerged as movements for economic justice. This movement

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is a direct response to the expanding low wage sector in the labour market as well as the political reluctance of governments in both the United States and Canada to maintain the general minimum wage at a sufficient level of purchasing adequacy. Thirdly, and broadly subsuming the preceding point, is that these movements for economic justice are a contemporary response to the dismantling of the political Keynesianism which framed the post-war social contract between capital and labour. And particularly the institutionalization of trade unions as legitimate actors in collective bargaining. The expansion of the non-union, post-industrial, 'new' economy characterized by low wage service sector jobs in much of the Global North but especially in the so-called Anglo-American capitalist economies, became identified with a deterioration in employment conditions and quality. Employment arrangements, reflecting the new normal, offer not security and adequacy but rather low pay and precarity (Freeman, Hersch, & Mishel 2005; Muffels & Luijkx 2008). In the cases surveyed here, economic justice movements find renewed vigour in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Financial Crisis and the roll-out of austerity policy.

### **Workers, Wages and Social Movements: The Politics of Capitalist Accumulation**

The concept of worker 'precarity', if not the actual word, is hardly new. Engels' analysis of the industrial reserve army of labour in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845/1887) is a treatment of the same phenomenon, in contemporary terms, we refer to as precariousness (Jonna & Foster 2015: 22). The reality of work, in industrial working class life, from its 18<sup>th</sup> century origins to the opening days of the post-1945 Golden Age of Capitalism, was characterized by insecurity. Every dimension of working life was marked by fear and anxiety over access to work, predictability of tenure, adequacy of wages, health and safety, access to leisure time, and the possibilities for advancement and acquiring skills (Standing 2011: 10). None of these were a given and, save for those workers in the skilled crafts, such

employment arrangements were indeed the norm. Only with the legitimation and institutionalization of trade unions, the adoption of a range of labour protections via public policy and regulation, as well as the construction of the welfare state in the mid-20th century, was this regime of insecurity overturned, at least for a large part of the industrial working class if not the entire working class. The neoliberal counter-revolution of the 1970s started a process of dismantling of the political arrangements which constituted the core framework of the post-war capital-labour compromise. By the late 1980s it was becoming evident that the glue which made possible a limited working class but unprecedented degree of consumption was dissolving.

A 1990 study by the Economic Council of Canada put an empirical foundation to what everyone was sensing, that good jobs were disappearing and being replaced by lower quality ones. As the report put it, standard employment, that is full-time, 40 hours a week jobs with a degree of tenure, was giving way to non-standard employment, jobs that were part-time, temporary, and provided little or no opportunity for a career ladder (Good Jobs, 1990). Augmenting the direct attacks on labour laws and social protections provided through the state, were the trade and investment liberalization agreements brokered between states. The result was a new international division of labour which facilitated de-industrialization in key sectors of the Global North capitalist economies. In political economic terms, the result was a locking-in of the neoliberal model where the international agreements effectively constitutionalized the terms and conditions of the new order of work and production (McBride 2003; Gill, 1992). That fundamentally state-led political interventions had profoundly re-balanced class power in favour of capital was acknowledged by the International Monetary Fund no less. In a 2015 study, the IMF concluded that the incessant expansion of inequality was a product of declining union strength (Jaumotte & Buitron 2015). Consequently, over three decades or more, the non-standard increasingly returns as standard. What was old is made new. But that applies to the political and legal structures which shape labour-capital relations but not

to the working class itself. The reorganization of the working class into forms of insecure employment is not to be confused with the emergence of a class separate and apart from the working class which the term ‘precariat’ suggests (Jonna & Foster 2015: 22). Living wage movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century are as much an expression of contemporary working class precariousness as were the 19<sup>th</sup> century demands for a living wage. In other words, it is one aspect of the reanimation of the working class as a social movement.

A key question to ask here is do these campaigns for economic justice constitute social movements? Social movements are born of ‘contentious politics’ which emerge “when ordinary people – often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood – join forces in confronting elites, authorities, and opponents”. It is the unique contribution of a social movement to provide the capacity to mount, coordinate, and sustain the struggle against powerful forces standing in opposition. The resulting “contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents – to social movements” (Tarrow 2011: 6). Probably the most widely accepted definition of social movements proposes that social movements engage in a series of actions, undertakings or assertions made by individuals through collective action against others. Such collective actions have been expressed in three distinct ways: 1) a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on the state (a campaign); 2) applying a variety of forms of political action including building coalitions, public meetings, rallies, and demonstrations; and 3) participants’ public representations of “worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies” (Tilly 2004: 3-4). The key element for comparative purposes is the scope of the movements and the degree of contention raised by the various campaigns.

### **United States: A Case of Post-Industrial Working Class Mobilization?**

The contemporary living wage movement has its origins in the United States. This can be traced to the emergence of an alliance between

religious leaders and community groups in Baltimore, Maryland in 1994. Two decades of deindustrialization destroyed unionized, middle income jobs and left instead an increasingly prevalent working poor (Luce 2012). Where prior anti-poverty movements had failed, the living wage campaign proved to be more effective as it reflected that element of American 'common sense' that those who work should be able to achieve a basic level of subsistence. In political terms, it further filled a vacuum left by the decline of the labour movement which had had its base in manufacturing. Community-based coalitions took hold throughout the United States, comprised of religious leaders, anti-poverty activists, labour unions, academics, and charitable organizations to struggle for a living wage. This resulted in more than 140 cities adopting living wage ordinances throughout the United States in the years following Baltimore's pioneering campaign (Greenberg et al. 2008: 76). These living wage ordinances have limited coverage in that they apply only to city contracts and, in certain cases, firms receiving economic development subsidies. All cities possess the authority to adopt such ordinances covering their own contracting and subsidy guidelines. Again, the scope of coverage – how many workers benefit from such ordinances – can be quite small. In contrast, but still more variable, is the authority for cities to establish wage laws governing private businesses which have no business relationship with the city. In this respect, there are municipalities possessing the legal authority to adopt local minimum wage laws and these have been increasingly passing in the past number of years. In 2015, 14 cities, counties and states approved proposals for a \$15 minimum wage (NELP 2015).

Part of the success of the living wage movement in the United States can be attributed to the authority granted to some municipalities to set their low local minimum wage rates. More than 30 US cities have their own local minimum wage ordinance (Local Minimum Wage Laws 2016). As a consequence, living wage activists in the United States have been able to fight their battles at the local levels. This too, has arguably lent itself to the development of locally-based, grassroots movements,

since the political terrain on which the battles have been waged has largely been local rather than national or even state level (Dalmat 2005). Despite the successes of the living wage movements at the local level, in some states, Governors and Legislatures, have used their authority to override municipal laws and impose bans on living wage ordinances. In the early to mid-2000s, Louisiana and Georgia, among others, intervened in such a way. More recently, in 2014, the State of Oklahoma passed a law banning local living wage ordinances (Bergman 2015). In 2015, debates were held in the state legislatures of Maine, Minnesota and New Jersey on the prospect of imposing a ban on municipal living wage ordinances. In June 2015, Michigan's Republican Governor signed a pre-emption law to stop local governments from adopting their own ordinances. The following month, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker signed a similar bill in prohibiting municipal living wage ordinances in his state (Velencia 2015). In 2016, the State Senate of Alabama passed a law banning cities and towns from increasing minimum wages. The legislation voided a Birmingham ordinance that would have raised the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour (Kasperkevic 2016). The impact of this trend towards the use of state power to override the power of municipalities to set wages could have significant implications for the living wage movement throughout the United States.

The living wage movement in the US is broad and dynamic. Of the movements canvassed here it is the most coherently organized and presents a high degree of popular and political mobilization situated in community-based local and regional, i.e. state-level, campaigns. What is particularly important is the significant participation of certain unions in providing organizational and financial support to these movements. Moreover, the broad-based coalitions making up these movements, entail in addition to unions, immigrant rights, faith-based, anti-racism, women's rights, and various economic justice groups. This inclusivity has echoes of the much earlier civil rights movement as well as of the 1930s CIO campaigns to organize industrial unions. In this respect, the American living wage movement has the look and feel of an urban,

racialized, working class struggle for social and economic inclusion. And, what is a core dimension of the US movement is that the living wage and minimum wage demands are not conceptually or politically separate as they are in Canada to as large degree. Indeed, the demand is that the minimum wage, whether the local or the state-wide minima should provide a level of adequacy to constitute a living wage. The “Fight for \$15” (FF15) was launched with a day of protests and walkouts in New York City in the fall of 2012. Hundreds of workers went on a one-day strike and were supported by large demonstrations throughout the city. This was the product of a year of organizing by the SEIU and the community group New York Communities for Change (NYCC) – which was a successor group to ACORN after it was disbanded. The NYCC, with the financial help of the SEIU, collected thousands of low-wage workers’ contact information often by circulating petitions on indirectly related issues such as ‘stop and frisk’ policies and access to low-income housing (Gupta 2013). These contacts were then used to organize meetings, and ultimately to organize the first strikes and actions.

After the successful New York fast food strike, a second round of coordinated one-day strikes and actions were undertaken in the spring of 2013. Instead of just one city, the one-day strikes rotated weekly from one city to the next. Chicago, New York, Detroit, Seattle, Washington, St. Louis and a number of other major centres in the northeast saw strikes. The organizing model remained the same – local organizations often with SEIU money developed contacts and built towards strike actions. The strikes themselves varied in terms of the number of workers who participated, but those who did strike were supported by large local crowds of allies. These allies consisted of union members, especially from the SEIU, local labour councils, religious groups, community organizations like the NYCC, and student activists. Strikers took advantage of section 7 of the National Labour Relations Act, which gives all workers the right to strike for economic reasons without being fired

by their employer (Basic Guide, 1997).<sup>2</sup> While workers had the right to strike, ensuring that workers were not fired subsequently remains a major issue for the campaign. Indeed, in the few cases where workers were fired, allies went into those workplaces and demanded that those fired be re-instated (Croghan 2012).

The spring strikes were followed by a large SEIU sponsored fast food meeting where workers decided to build on their momentum by calling for a nationwide day of fast food strikes in the late summer. The nationwide one-day strike on August 29, 2013 propelled the \$15 minimum wage demand into the national debate. Over 60 cities saw protests and they garnered nationwide media coverage. On the political front, the once seemingly unrealistic demand of a \$15 minimum wage was already making an impact. Democratic Party members of Congress came out in favour of raising the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour. By November 2013, the President signaled again his support to increase the minimum wage. Earlier, in 2008, as part of his presidential campaign, Obama called for a \$9.50 an hour minimum wage indexed to inflation. Although this was much less than the movement was calling for, the political shift emboldened activists and further highlighted the issue. In Seattle and Minneapolis openly socialist candidates ran for city council in the November 2013 elections on the issue of the \$15 minimum wage. In Minneapolis, the local candidate lost, but garnered 42 percent of the vote. In Seattle, Kshama Sawant unseated the incumbent Democratic Party candidate. At the same time, in the outlying community of SeaTac a ballot initiative to raise the minimum wage to \$15 won. These victories electrified the movement, which held its largest nationwide day of fast food strikes in December, with over 130 cities seeing participation.

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<sup>2</sup> Technically they can be replaced while on strike but must be offered their job back unless the company has found a replacement. Even if that is the case, strikers may seek to be reinstated if they have not found equivalent employment (Basic Guide 1997). The focus on one-day strikes is thus aimed at limiting the ability of employers to replace workers.



The movement continued to grow in 2014. A global day of action for fast food workers' rights took place in the spring in over 30 countries. Two other major coordinated strike days took place in the United States, each bigger and more militant than the last. The SEIU also organized a dramatic march on a McDonald's shareholder meeting in the summer. Building off the movement's success, the newly-elected Seattle councilor Sawant pushed the city council to raise the minimum wage in the city to \$15. Sawant was able to force city council to pass the minimum wage ordinance because of immense pressure from below. Labour and community activists formed a local coalition, "15 Now" in November 2013 to organize around the issue (the movement existed in Seattle before the election, but 15 Now was an attempt to coordinate it on a local level). 15 Now organized demonstrations, hired full-time organizers, recruited hundreds of volunteers and collected thousands of signatures for a ballot initiative all in the hope of exerting political pressure on city council (Figueroa 2014). This effort was ultimately successful in forcing city council to support passing a \$15 minimum wage ordinance.

In the November 2014 elections, San Francisco and Los Angeles passed city ordinances raising the minimum wage to \$15. Numerous other states and cities also raised their minimum wage. Obama raised federal workers' minimum wage to \$10.10 and highlighted the issue of the minimum wage in his state of the union address. The campaign also reached beyond just fast food, as workers in other sectors such as home-care and retail were now taking up the demand. By 2014 the OUR Walmart campaign, backed and launched by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union in 2011, in an effort to organize workers at Walmart, had begun to adopt some of the demands of the FF15 (Jamieson 2015). However, in late 2014, Joseph Hansen, the UFCW president who launched OUR Walmart, retired setting off a leadership race resulting in the election of Anthony Perrone who had, in his campaign, questioned the cost of the OUR Walmart campaign given that it had resulted in few new union members. With Perrone's victory, the union decided to scale back the OUR Walmart campaign (Moberg 2015).

In 2015 the movement faced new challenges, while also exceeding their previous accomplishments. New York City raised its minimum wage to \$13 and the announcement was followed by the governor of the state raising the minimum wage to \$15 for all fast food workers and state employees in the state. In all 21 states saw increases to the minimum wage in 2015, some were due to pre-existing laws that tied the minimum wage to inflation, but most were the product of new laws or ballot initiatives (Kasperkevic 2015). The one-day strikes and protests continued in 2015 with two major coordinated days of action in April and in November, which involved more workers and more cities than previous actions (the November date saw actions in 270 American cities). 2015 was also the year that both McDonalds and Walmart shifted from ignoring the protests to making a big show of raising wages for their workers (Dorfman 2015). While these raises were in reality not what the companies made them out to be, they signified that the campaign was strong enough to force concessions from two of the country's largest employers. These victories were followed by a significant labour board ruling in favour of the campaign. In August the NLRB ruled that companies that hire contractors to hire and supervise staff can be considered joint employers. This opened up the possibility that companies using the franchise model would have to directly negotiate with unions. The legal ruling could create the conditions for effective coordinated bargaining in the fast food industry.

While the FF15 continued to grow, the OUR Walmart campaign began to falter. The UFCW had envisioned the campaign as a stepping-stone into a wider unionization drive of the company. OUR Walmart was launched by UFCW in 2011 as an effort to organize Walmart workers. Despite garnering numerous headlines and engaging in big protests, it struggled to organize workers in many communities. The campaign operated on strategy minority unionism, where non-unionized workers, usually a small fraction of the total workforce, would organize together to push back against unfair labour practices and bad working conditions. Mostly this revolved around public protests and non-union worker

strikes. The union, which had poured millions of dollars into the effort, decided to pull up shop and trimmed down its funding and staffing of the campaign (Olney 2015). The remaining organizers shifted the focus of the campaign to a fight for higher wages (thus attaching it to the FF15). The high profile backtracking of the campaign was a major setback for the entire movement. The pace of individual cities passing city ordinances is slowing in 2016. This is because of the election cycle. The major unions involved in the movement, the United Food and Commercial Workers' (UFCW) and the SEIU have focused on the presidential and congressional races. Activists with the 'raise the wage' movement are attempting to turn city ordinances into state-wide ballot initiatives. The Fight for \$15 has been active in protesting and pushing its demands through the presidential primary and found traction with both the Sanders and Clinton campaigns.

### **Canada: Rational Politics Advocacy and Employer Voluntarism**

In Canada the movement looks quite different. Outside of Ontario the Fight for \$15 is largely notional. Some small groups of activists and some labour unions have taken up the struggle, but so far it has remained largely marginal. The victory in Alberta by the NDP and its position on the minimum wage has boosted the prospects of Canadian activists. The federal NDP's platform of having a federal sector \$15 minimum wage also thrust the issue onto the national stage. Unlike the United States there is no workplace aspect to the Fight for \$15. In the U.S. for instance the FF15 is supported by union money and organizers. Because of this the goals of the FF15 in the U.S. are multifaceted: increasing the minimum wage at the legislative level, increasing pay and improving working conditions at large corporations and ultimately trying to achieve union recognition. In Canada no union has really approached the FF15 with the same set of organizing goals when it comes to unionizing or organizing workers in the service or retail sector.

Unions while supportive are not using the Fight for \$15 as a wide scale organizing effort to leverage employers in the service sector. This

reflects the differences of labour law, unfair labour practices and economic strikes can be undertaken in the United States with some protections for even non-unionized workers. In Canada this is not the case. Another major difference is the ability to win legislative fights about the minimum wage at the municipal level. In the United States this is possible, while in Canada it is not. This makes building local movements easier in the US. The living wage movement in Canada is largely divorced from the broader North American movement. In the US, the momentum of the living wage movement takes place through efforts to push through state imposed increases to the minimum wage. In Canada, the NGO, non-profit arms of the progressive movement have for years been pushing an altogether different approach: the idea of voluntary agreements. Outside of some municipalities, this has been wholly unsuccessful at pushing forward a political and social movement to increase the minimum wage.

The first Canadian living wage campaign emerged in British Columbia in 2001. It was organized in response to a provincial government attack on health care sector workers which saw the government cut the pay of 8000 members of the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) by 40 percent. The union and the BC Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives turned to the example of London Citizen's living wage campaign as a means to give greater profile to the need for meaningful wages. In 2006, First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, started engaging in research into community support for a living wage in British Columbia. The impetus for this research was the momentum of the US living wage movement. First Call partnered with the BC Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) office to develop living wage principles and a calculation for the actual living wage. This work also included a number of different organizations and individuals in the province. In the fall of 2008 the research report was released and shortly after other CCPA offices began to develop similar living wage principles and calculations for cities in Ontario and the western provinces and organizations started to emerge in local

communities that sought a living wage. In response, Living Wage Canada, a network for all of these different campaigns emerged and has helped to shape and organize the movement across the country.

The BC CCPA, various unions, and community groups came together to establish the *Living Wage for Families Campaign* in 2008, which put forward \$15 as a basic living wage. 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 that are contracted directly or subcontracted by the City to pay a minimum of \$19.62 an 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. In addition, a voluntary accreditation campaign aimed at employers had, by Fall 2015, signed on fifty BC employers. There are a number of living wage campaigns currently in BC. A number of the smaller centres do not necessarily have full on living wage campaigns. Instead, many of these living wage campaigns are within larger anti-poverty campaigns. A number of others simply provide a calculation of the living wage in the region as a comparison to the minimum wage or to illustrate the growing income gap in the province. The areas that have well-established living wage campaigns in BC are Victoria, New Westminster, Metro Vancouver, and Esquimalt.

New Westminster represents the first, and until recently, the only municipality in Canada to have passed a living wage policy. The New Westminster campaign was very organized right from the beginning when it launched in 2009. ACORN Canada, whose sister organization ACORN US has played a key role in living wage campaigns around the US, was based in New Westminster and saw the community as a prime place to attempt to implement a living wage policy in the Metro Vancouver regional area. The campaign approached a city councilor in New Westminster about the possibility of a living wage policy in 2009. The councilor was very receptive of the idea and put forth a motion at city council for living wage to be studied by staff, which was passed by

the rest of council (Keddy 2015). As staff were preparing a report ACORN used its institutional resources to recruit other organizations to join the campaign. Most importantly, ACORN was able to secure the support of the New Westminster District and Labour council, which brought along with it the support of most of the local unions in the area. With a strong team of community partners supporting the campaign, ACORN went about engaging the community, local businesses, city council, and other organizations in order to explain the benefits of a living wage. City staff reported back in April 2010 with a report that did not support adopting a living wage for New Westminster. However, the engagement work that ACORN had undertaken created a ground swell of support for a living wage policy. Two days after City staff presented their report to council, city councilors voted unanimously to ignore staff recommendations and adopt a living wage for New Westminster (Paulsen 2010). The living wage campaign's multi-pronged approach worked; not only did they have support from other organizations and the community, but they also had an ear of a city councilor. These aspects put together made for a very effective living wage campaign.

Metro Vancouver Living Wage for Families campaign was officially launched in 2008 after the CCPA report was released detailing the issues surrounding poverty and the living wage in the province. The campaign is hosted by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition and is guided by an advisory committee made up of community partners including: BC ACORN, MOSAIC, the Canadian Labour Congress, Hospital Employees' Union, BC Government and Service Employees' Union, BC, Poverty Reduction Coalition, Canadian Union of Public Employees BC, among others (Staff and Advisory Committee, n.d.). One of the main foci of the campaign is to recruit employers to voluntarily pay their employees the calculated living wage. However, the campaign also recognizes that many employers are supportive of the idea of a living wage, but are concerned that paying a living wage would undermine their business viability vis-à-vis their competitors who are not paying a similar wage to their workers. Thus,

the campaign argues that it is “in [the employers’] interest that employers advocate for programs that would ensure that as a society we collectively address the needs of families with children... [Increased public programs] would decrease the income families require from employment, and therefore reduce the living wage” (Richards, Cohen, Klein, & Littman 2008: 37). Thus, it also advocates for change to public policy at the municipal and provincial levels.

The campaign has had success in recruiting employers. Working with other campaigns in municipalities across BC the campaign has been able to certify 50 employers as living wage employers, with 9 of those coming in 2015. That number represents over 6,500 direct employees earning a living wage in BC (The Living Wage for Families Campaign 2015). Moreover, the campaign achieved a major victory in 2015 with the City of Vancouver officially taking the steps needed to become a certified living wage employer. This would represent one of the biggest employers in the province becoming a living wage employer. Although the campaign has not organized any major protests or actions, it does encourage others to become more involved in pursuing a living wage policy by emailing Metro Vancouver City Council members and on-going dialogue with low-wage workers (Spread The Word, n.d.).

In the provincial capital of Victoria, the living wage campaign launched in 2006. It was born out of the original effort to calculate a living wage for the different regions of BC. Unlike other areas of BC where the CCPA has played a key role in launching different living wage campaigns, the campaign in Victoria was launched by, and is led by, the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria (CSPC). Being the capital of BC there is a large union presence in Victoria, however none of the major unions or other labour organizations are involved in the living wage campaign (Living Wage and Living Wage Employers 2016). The two major aims of the campaign are to provide a calculation of the living wage for the greater Victoria area on an annual basis and to recruit private businesses to voluntarily pay their workforce a living wage. In other words, the campaign is voluntaristic in the sense that the

strategy is to convince private business to agree to pay a living wage “out of the goodness of their hearts” rather than pursuing a living wage policy at the municipal or provincial level. As the CSPC explains, its goal is to “conduct outreach activities to inform employers in the Capital Region of the program and how they can become living wage employers” (Living Wage and Living Wage Employers 2016). The outreach activities also include public education on the purpose of a living wage in general and what living wage employers can do to support their employees facing rising costs of living. The campaign has had moderate success in this regard with a number of businesses in the greater Victoria committing to be a living wage employer moving forward.

Esquimalt, near Victoria, passed a living wage motion but has never implemented this. The entire process was started by a city councilor and led by city staff with no other organizations actively involved. There was little campaigning in Esquimalt leading up to the decision to adopt a living wage policy. In August 2010 a city councilor put forth a motion for City staff to report back on the possibility of implementing a citywide living wage in Esquimalt (Minutes Special Meeting 2010). The motion was passed unanimously and City staff reported back in December 2010 with a recommendation that “all full-time, part-time and casual workers for the city” be paid a living wage and “suggested that a policy that included a living wage provision within the tendering process for contracts from private firms be developed” (Keddy 2015). Before city council voted on the recommendation they opened the debate up to public consultation. The response from the public was overwhelmingly negative, and city council retreated from the recommendation and directed staff to work on new recommendations which were less binding and restrictive on local business. City staff reported back that it would be impossible to develop a policy based on the new requirements set forth by council. Therefore, the original recommendations made to council were finally put to a vote in April 2011 (Keddy 2015). The recommendations were voted down by council and the living wage debate died in Esquimalt as quickly as it had started.



To date, there is no local movement attempting to continue the campaign.

In Ontario, there is a similarly strong living wage movement happening in cities and regions across the province. Like BC, the smaller centres have campaigns functioning within larger poverty reduction campaigns. In many of these the living wage work consists of calculating the living wage for the area and comparing it to the current minimum wage. There has been some success in convincing employers to voluntarily adopt a living wage policy. At this point, nearly 60 Ontario employers have done so (Living Wage Employers 2016) and several cities including Toronto, Waterloo, Cambridge and Hamilton either have or are in the process of adopting a living wage policy for the municipality.

Of the three provinces in Western Canada, Alberta is home to the most developed living wage campaigns. The community-based non-profit, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC), contributed its resources to establish campaigns across the province. The living wage idea first appeared in Calgary when Vibrant Communities established a Community Action Team in 2003. The Team was essentially a network of other community and labour organizations including the Alberta Federation of Labour, the “No Sweat Coalition”, Calgary Health Region, The Calgary Chamber of Volunteer Organizations, and United Way, and the YWCA. An official campaign was launched with a multi-pronged strategy that included engaging four broad sectors: (1) public (municipal government); (2) private; (3) non-profit; and (4) quasi-governmental (health, education, and post-secondary institutions) (Bulthuis 2007). Although there is the focus on engaging local government, most of the campaign is voluntarism in the sense that the strategy is to convince private business to agree to pay a living wage. The living wage for Calgary in 2015 was estimated to be \$18.15 per hour by Vibrant Communities (Cormier 2015). The campaign has been successful in getting more than 50 local businesses in Calgary to sign on as living wage employers (Living Wage Leaders, n.d.). The campaign came very close to a major victory in 2009 when Calgary city staff recommended that the city should adopt a

living wage policy, however council voted down the recommendation later that year (Living Wage Advocacy, n.d.). It is worth noting that most labour organizations in Alberta have chosen to focus on minimum wage rather than living wage, however Alberta Federation of Labour has given its support to the Calgary living wage movement.

Manitoba has a smaller living wage movement where campaigns are located in Winnipeg, Brandon, and Thompson. The campaigns are a shared venture between the three cities and the CCPA, Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (SPCW), Winnipeg Harvest, and the United Way of Winnipeg. The CCPA calculation determined the living wage was \$13.44 in Winnipeg, \$11.10 in Brandon, and \$11.18 in Thompson (The view from here 2009). The living wage was reassessed in 2013 and these values increased to \$14.07 in Winnipeg, \$13.41 in Brandon, and \$13.46 in Thompson (Jarosiewicz 2013). The goal of the campaigns was to help bring about a large-scale adoption of living wage policies across Manitoba, and the proposed method of doing this is through advocating and lobbying private businesses to “take their fair share” in responsibility rather than look to municipal and provincial government to enact policy guaranteeing a living wage. The campaigns call on business to increase pay and benefits to workers, and help in lobbying the provincial and federal governments to make changes to social transfers to Manitoba. So far, the campaign has not enjoyed success in these efforts as there are currently no living wage employers in the province. Labour organizations in Manitoba do not appear to be willing to support the living wage campaigns, instead they have focused on increasing the minimum wage.

In Saskatchewan a campaign did emerge in 2004 when the Canadian Federation of Students, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry together formed the Living Wage Coalition. However, this campaign was much more focused on increasing the minimum wage in the province as their slogan was: “Make the Minimum Wage a Living Wage!” The campaign has not progressed, however the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour continues to push for higher minimum wages. A new living wage campaign recently emerged

in Saskatchewan and is based in and mostly focused on the city of Regina. The campaign is being spear headed by the provincial CCPA. As with many other Canadian campaigns, the focus is on convincing the private sector to pay their employees adequately instead of directing advocacy efforts at the municipal and provincial governments to enact living wage policy.

In the Atlantic Provinces, living wage movements are only just emerging and have only a small footprint at this point. There are only two emerging living wage campaign in the entire region. One is in Saint John, New Brunswick, while the other can be found in Nova Scotia. The campaign in Saint John is led by Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ). The goal of the campaign is to develop a framework for a living wage (Greater Saint John 2013). This includes participating in research on low waged work and workers – who are they, where do they work and what are the trends (Greater Saint John 2013). Important to note, New Brunswick labour organizations, including CUPE New Brunswick and the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, do not appear willing to lend support to the campaign; instead they have focused on the issue of raising minimum wage in the province.

The Nova Scotia Living Wage Coalition officially launched in February 2015 and led by ACORN Nova Scotia, also includes partners such as the Canadian Federation of Students – Nova Scotia, the Halifax Dartmouth District Labour Council, and Solidarity Halifax. The goal of the group is to obtain a \$15 minimum wage in the province for all workers (Nova Scotia Needs a Raise 2015). The campaign has provincial aspirations, however, the focus has been completely local with the only campaigning happening in Halifax. Interestingly, dating back to 2007, the CCPA's Nova Scotia office had been advocating for a living wage in the province (Jacobs 2007).

Prince Edward Island (PEI) does not have any living wage campaigns operating at present. However, the province does have the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income. This group was established in 2003. The basic goal of the working group is to “influence the attitudes and actions

of the community, employees, employers, and public policy makers around the advantages of a livable income for all people”. The strategies that the program uses in order to pursue this goal include: “writing letters to the editor and opinion pieces, and by making sure that whenever health, the economy, or jobs are on the agenda, in workshops, public meetings or at conferences, livable income is part of the discussion” (Livable Income, n.d.).

Finally, there are no living wage campaigns in Newfoundland and Labrador. That said, the provincial New Democratic Party along with Campaign 2000 and the Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC) are leading a campaign to raise the minimum wage in the province (Community Services Council 2004). The Newfoundland Federation of Labour has also supported a raise to the minimum wage, however they have not been overly active in advocating or supporting the campaign. The movement has been successful seeing the minimum wage go from \$6.00 in 2005 to \$10.50 in 2015. This may be a reason why the living wage movement has failed to gain traction in the province.

### **Explaining the Difference: Policy and Political Context Shaping Campaign Tactics and Strategies**

What explains the differences observed between the US and Canadian living wage movements and campaigns can in part be found in the structural and policy differences between the two countries. The most obvious factor is the depth and breadth of inequality. Inequality in Canada is, compared to the United States, less severe. The Gini Coefficient is a number between 0 and 1, which expresses the gap between rich and poor, with 0 representing perfect equality and 1 representing perfect inequality. A number of 1 would mean one person has all the income, while everyone else has none, while a number of 0 would mean everyone has the same income. Disposable income simply means after-tax income, after receiving transfer payments. Using both the old measure of disposable income and the new measure, which

accounts for a more detailed breakdown of transfers received and paid by households, as well as a revised definition of household income, including the value of goods produced for own consumption as an element of self-employed income, we find that income inequality has been increasing in Canada and the U.S., but the pace of growing inequality is much more accelerated in America (OECD 2016a). OECD data details that the gap between rich and poor for disposable income in Canada has been increasing over the last decade from 2000-2013, which expressed as a percentage change has increased by 2.2% (OECD 2016a). In the U.S. on the other hand, from 2000-2014, the gap between rich and poor for disposable income has increased by 10.4% (OECD 2016a). What this tells us is that although Canada is steadily becoming a more unequal country, inequality has been growing at an unparalleled pace in the United States.

Another measure is the extent of poverty. The OECD defines poverty as 50% or less of the median of disposable income (after-tax income, after receiving transfer payments). In 2000, poverty in Canada was at 11.4% of the total population, and by 2011 that had expanded to 11.7% according to this measure (OECD 2016b). We find that from 2000-2011 poverty in Canada has increased 2.6% (OECD 2016b). In the U.S. in 2000, poverty was at 16.9%, and by 2012 was at 17.4%, showing that poverty in the U.S. has increased 2.9% (OECD 2016b). This shows that poverty has been increasing in both countries, but that poverty in the U.S. has been growing at a slightly faster level and is more widespread. A key factor affecting wage income and therefore income inequality is the significant difference in trade union density. While trade union density in the Canadian private sector has been declining, it has been doing so at a much slower rate than is observed in the United States. For example, in 1999, union density in the Canadian private sector was 19.9% but by 2015 that had declined to 16.7% (Statistics Canada, n.d.). In the US, in 1999, the density was 9.4% and by 2015 this had fallen to 6.7% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). In both countries public sector union density is considerably higher than that in the private sector. However, in Canada,

the density rate is substantially higher at 75.5% in 2015 (Statistics Canada, n.d.) compared to 35.2% in the US (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Clearly, unions are faring substantially better in Canada then they are in the US.

Support for the unemployed, both in terms of unemployment insurance and welfare benefits, also provides an indication of how public policy serves the economic needs of those searching for work. Canada and the US offer reasonably similar levels of support to people experiencing unemployment, but some key differences mean that Canada's welfare system prevents more people from falling through the gaps in the safety net. Both countries offer reasonably similar levels of support when it comes to their insurance-based benefits. They differ far more when it comes to welfare payments, which work to fill some of the gaps in the insurance provisions. In both countries, eligibility for unemployment insurance benefits depends on previous time spent in work, measured either by time or earnings. The maximum weekly insurance payment in Canada sits comfortably within the range of maximums that vary across states in the US. Unemployment Insurance maximums are set by states and vary between \$133 in Puerto Rico and \$235 in Mississippi to \$679 in Massachusetts for single people, though the average payment is approximately \$300 per week in 2014 (Stone & Chen 2014). In California, the maximum payment is \$450 per week, while New York's maximum was raised to \$420 in 2014, and Illinois' maximum is \$426 per week for a single claimant. In Canada, the maximum Employment Insurance payout is capped nationally at \$537 per week, which sits at the upper end of the range of payments in the US (Floyd & Schott 2013; Canada 2015), without adjusting for the dollar value differences. It is difficult to identify a consistent, significant difference in the values of support provided by the two forms of insurance.

In both countries, welfare payments are lower than insurance rates, however, these vary at the provincial level as well as the state level. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families payments have generally been

decreasing in value and vary significantly from state to state. For example, TANF in New York tops out at \$789 a month. Washington, South Carolina, New Mexico, California, and Wisconsin all cut their payments in 2011. In 2016, families of three are entitled to a maximum of \$409 in New Mexico, and \$285 in Texas, while many states did not increase their payments (Stanley, Floyd, & Hill 2016). Canada's payments also vary, but tend to be slightly higher for families than payments in the US. Ontario's payments are capped at \$1004 (\$342 for basic needs and \$662 for shelter costs) a month for a single parent family with two dependents under 18. British Columbia's total for the same family unit is \$1035.58, while Alberta's payment maximum is \$826 (Government of Alberta, n.d.; Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation, n.d.; Ministry of Community and Social Services, Government of Ontario 2016).

While both countries restrict access to insurance support, workers in the US are far more likely to run out of unemployment support than Canadians. Canada's employment insurance is available for between 14 and 45 weeks, depending on regional employment rates, while Unemployment Insurance in the US is available for 26 weeks and can be extended for up to another 20 for people in states experiencing high unemployment. In Canada, the time limit depends on a province's unemployment rate. Once people run out of their insurance benefits, they can turn to welfare payments in both countries. However, unemployed people in the US are far more likely to end up without any entitlement to income support: the US cuts off access to welfare after five years of receipt across a person's lifetime. The five-year period includes any month in which a claimant receives another similar welfare payment, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. States can also implement more severe time restrictions. Both Arizona and New York cap access to Safety Net Assistance to just two years (New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance 2011, 9-10; Schott & Pavetti 2011). California and Maine moved to four-year time limits, while other states including Washington tightened the criteria under

which families could apply for extension policies. In comparison, only British Columbia in Canada places time restrictions on access to welfare. In all other provinces, Canadians can continue to receive welfare as long as they are otherwise eligible.

Many workers, of course, in both countries, are entirely excluded from insurance payments and are likely to need welfare payments if they experience unemployment. In the US, 23.1% of jobless workers were receiving benefits in December 2014, a record low (McHugh & Kimball 2015). A report by the National Employment Law Project highlights research that shows that in the US, “low-educated and racial minority unemployed workers—those who may need financial support most during periods without work—are doubly disadvantaged in accessing unemployment insurance: not only do they report lower application rates, but the unemployed who do apply also report lower rates of receipt” (Gould-Werth & McKenna 2012: 2). Similarly in Canada, many are excluded from accessing Employment Insurance: coverage of Canada’s population has decreased from 96% in the 1970s to about 37% in 2013 (Doorey 2016: 397-398). Both countries also make use of workfare policies, requiring welfare recipients to take the “shortest path to work” (Luccisano & Romagnoli 2007; Mitchell & Herd 2005, 65-66, 72). While both countries introduced workfare as part of 1990s reforms, Mitchell and Herd argue that in Canada, the country’s earlier ‘commitment to community and collective responsibility’ meant that voters helped to steer in governments that acted to dull the harsher aspects of workfare (Mitchell & Herd 2005, 73). Prior to the 1990s, Canada’s welfare provisions were much more generous, suggesting Canadians perhaps have not experienced the harshness of limited welfare for as long as Americans. Unemployment Insurance coverage in Canada, for example, was 96% in the 1970s but dropped to 37% in 2013 (Doorey 2016, 397-398)

Finally, there is a gap in the overall support that unemployed families are provided with in the two countries. Both countries use a tax credit to supplement the income of families with children under 18 who



have limited household earnings. In Canada, families with dependent children and an annual income of less than \$25,921 can receive both the Canada Child Tax Benefit and an extra Employment Insurance family supplement, though provinces can distribute these payments in different ways (Canada 2015). For example, Alberta provides a tax credit to working families only, and a reasonably generous child benefit to all families who earn less than \$41,220 per year (“Alberta Child Benefit (ACB),” n.d.). However, in the US, only people who have earned income are able to receive the Earned Income Tax Credit – and Unemployment Insurance payments or forms of social security do not count as income (“EITC, Earned Income Tax Credit, Questions and Answers,” n.d.). People who haven’t worked in the last tax year are therefore, for the most part, ineligible. People in the US who are going through long periods of unemployment are then likely to be significantly worse off than their Canadian counterparts.

## **Conclusion**

Comparing the US and Canadian campaigns leads to several conclusions. The first is that we might think of them as social movements which employ different tactics and strategies to fit with their respective political realities. Clearly, the US experience is older and takes place in conditions where trade unions in particular and workers’ generally have been subjected to a more intense erosion of capacities to bargain and living standards. Where the US campaigns have been characterized by strikes and protests, the Canadian campaigns have centred on policy advocacy aimed at both employers and governments. A second observation is that in the US, very localized campaigns for municipal living wage ordinances have evolved into state-wide, even national campaigns for a \$15 minimum wage. In other words, the central concern has shifted to the greater coverage offered by a higher minimum wage. Unions have been central to the success of these campaigns in terms of providing organizational and material support. In contrast, in Canada for the most part, living wage campaigns do not seek to merge their demands

with those for higher minimum wages. The two aspects remain distinct. In this sense there is an ideological counter narrative presented in the US which contributes to the mobilization from below.

Overall, the living wage movement in Canada varies considerably. The majority of the campaigns are made up of different community partners, mostly from the non-profit and social justice sectors. For the most part the campaigns are not affiliated with labour organizations, although a few exceptions to this generalization have been noted. Instead, in most of the provinces, the labour movement has chosen to focus on the minimum wage rather than the living wage. There are a few campaigns in different parts of the country that are headed up by the actual municipal or regional governments, however this is only in a few small cases and for the most part these campaigns have been less visible and active. The primary strategy for most of the campaigns in Canada is to rely on voluntary acceptance and implementation where the campaign is anchored around recruiting private businesses to voluntarily pay their employees a living wage. There are a few campaigns that have focused more on municipal government and policy, however these have experienced mixed success.

That said, there are a number of emerging campaigns across the country and the already established campaigns continue to make inroads recruiting private business and lobbying local government. There are no contemporary cases of worker mobilization but rather these campaigns take the form of rational policy advocacy where data is presented, typically in the form of a calculated living wage, and this device is used to engage employers and municipal governments to consider adopting this wage as a matter of corporate human resources policy or, in the case of municipal government, to extend a living wage to direct employees and to those of third party contractors. This is not to say that the Canadian campaigns for economic justice are not social movements but rather they employ the tactics that match the degree of political mobilization that is possible within the moment. Over time, given prevailing employment

conditions, struggles for economic justice in Canada may come to resemble those in the United States in terms of tactics and mobilization.

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