

Poverty Reduction Plan Consultation: Small Group Discussion

March 26, 2018, Low Wage Retail Workers

20 participants

Living Wage for Families Campaign and United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1518

Participant Information:

The Living Wage for Families Campaign works to encourage employers to commit to paying a living wage to all direct and contract staff as well as advocates on issues that impact working families. The living wage is the amount that a family, with two parents working full time, need to earn in order to make ends meet. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1518 is a union local with over 20,000 members coming from a diverse range of industries. UFCW Local 1518 members work in the retail sector, community health, seasonal agricultural, food processing and professional services.

Our session targeted UFCW Local 1518 members who were earning under \$15/hr or could only secure part-time work, working in the retail sector and who were long term immigrants to Canada. Two individuals attended who were Canadian born children of immigrants. English was an additional language for all members of the group. Small group discussion took place in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Individuals were primarily Asian (Chinese, Singaporean, and Filipino), one participant was South Asian and one participant was African Canadian. The median age of the group was mid-40s with the age range going from early 20s to early 60s.

In order to facilitate participation a \$50 honouraria was provided; many individuals needed wage replacement in order to take the evening off work and participate in the small group discussion. Participants also received a warm meal and a UFCW Local 1518 water bottle for participating.

Notes were translated from Mandarin and Cantonese on March 27th and 28th, 2018. Translation focused on capturing the wording of the participants.

Solutions and Actions that Can Make a Difference:

As part of the workshops we asked individuals to review the flip chart notes and discuss the issues that were common to each group. We also asked individuals to identify one issue that they wanted to advocate for as part of a poverty reduction plan. The following is a summary of issues identified by participants as key to a poverty reduction plan that reflected their experiences of working poverty.

Fairness in the Workplace:

Unsurprisingly the primary issue for individuals experiencing low wage poverty was low wages. Participants overwhelmingly identified increasing the minimum wage to a living wage as the number one priority. Participants expressed disappointment in the slow timeline to a \$15/hour minimum wage. Participants also expressed concern of the lack of protection they experienced in workplaces that weren't unionized and that access to unionization was a key part of any poverty reduction plan.

Fair scheduling was also an issue that impacted participants. Participants spoke of scheduling changes happening daily, in their non-union workplaces, and often receiving changes the night before a shift. This meant that there was a constant juggling and shifting of personal schedules as most participants held more than one job.

Workplace bullying and favoritism were also issues that were raised. Overwhelmingly participants were not familiar with what their rights were under the Employment Standards Act and were not accessing the complaint based system. There needs to be outreach around what workplace rights workers have access to and what steps they might take if those rights are violated. The Employment Standards Coalition has recommended independent investigations of particular sectors where there is a vulnerability to widespread violations of the Employment Standards Act.

Child care:

Child care came up as a concern in this session for younger individuals or individuals who did not have family members in Canada to help with child care. Very few of the participants had children enrolled in licensed care. Many identified that child care was provided by family members, mostly grand parents. Licensed, regulated and affordable child care, such as proposed under the \$10aday plan would provide families with choices around child care and could provide some flexibility for families who did not have access to extended family networks.

Fair Taxation:

Participants felt that they faced a disproportionately large tax burden. They identified that businesses and wealthy families did not pay the same levels of tax that they did. They also felt that they did not receive adequate supports in exchange for the taxes that they did pay. Participants recommended that the government institute a fair and progressive tax policy that would address income inequality in BC.

Transportation:

Many participants spoke of transportation issues in relation to both public and private transportation. Workers were often scheduled for shifts that started or ended at hours where public transportation was no longer available. As a result, many participants drove their own vehicles. The unexpected cost of parking tickets or other violations were stressful and often left folks unable to afford necessities because they had to cover these unanticipated costs.

Bus zones also came up as a stressful cost for many individuals. One participant chose a daily commute of one hour to and from her workplace rather than transfer to a closer store because the closer store would have meant a multi-zone bus pass was required. The participant identified that she could not afford the multi-zone pass. In contrast, many participants did not live in the same zone where they worked due to high housing costs around their workplace and felt that the zone system penalized individuals who had fewer choices around rental housing due to low wages.

Housing:

The largest costs identified by individuals in the small group consultation was housing; this is also the issues that individuals struggled to find solutions for. People understood the complexity of the lack of affordability for housing in Metro Vancouver and appreciated the implementation of a speculation tax. However, many were doubtful that this tax would directly benefit them as renters. Individuals identified that many countries, including Singapore, were able to provide a wider range of affordable housing for people. Rent control on individual units rather than tenants was also suggested as a solution to rental affordability.

Transcription of consultation notes:

1. What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now.

Question 1 (Group 1 - translated)

- Can't afford living alone, rent and car payment
- Grocery: wait till the items are on sale
- Can't provide well-rounded education for their children
- Can't afford to be a home buyer
- Transportation Cost is too expansive. Including Skytrain pass and Gas Price
- Can't afford to be a car owner.
- Can't afford going to a restaurant (neither Lunch and Dinner)
- Can't afford Cell Phone (monthly) plans & Data Plan
- Can't afford the expense of higher education (Tuition and Fees)
- Having difficulty to afford childcare service
- Having difficulty at work (while paying for Childcare)
- "It is difficult for the youth to get married and build a family these days"

Question 1 (Group 2 - translated)

- The property price is too high. If it wasn't for the previous generations who had invested on real estate, the working class now can hardly afford housing.
- The Provincial tax is too high
- The food price is too high. As a worker in the retail industry, I witness how seniors can hardly afford anything, but discounted items. Very cautious on buying grocery and daily necessities
- The cost of living is much higher in BC than in other provinces, like service industry. Especially compared to US. Participants think that Singapore (country of origin for a few of the small group members) has much better social welfare, job opportunities, and cost of living, much more affordable. Their government also provides social housing and medical plans.
- View 1: Participant believes that our government should seize the initiative in providing affordable housing for low-incomes.
- View 2: The inflation rate is increasing much faster than the wage growth. The price level will be higher than their purchasing power. Even a family with \$5000CAD monthly income will feel the burden.
- View 3: The citizens are taxpayers but can't afford the basic cost of living.
- The cost of transportation is too high. 1 Zone...2 Zone... The more family members, the harder to afford public transport.
- Parking fee are too high

Question 1 (Group 3)

- It is difficult to make enough to pay bills, rent,
- There is no money for social events like meals out or entertainment.

- “You stop living a life”, working so much that we don’t see our family. Can’t afford to visit home or ageing relatives
- There are no vacations
- We are living paycheque to pay cheque. We can’t save money
- More junk food and noodles because it is cheaper.
- Hungry kids
- Property tax is too much
- Constantly collecting coupons and having to shop strategically
- “Work like a machine.” working more than one job, 13 – 14 hours a day
- There is a temptation to steal
- Bus fare is too expensive
- Work issues dominated much of the conversation for this group
 - It is risky to get involved in the union
 - Seniority rules means that folks just hired don’t get sufficient hours
 - Have to work when sick
 - No trust in employers and employers don’t listen
 - Favouritism in the workplace
 - No time or energy to look for a new job
 - Employers change schedules constantly and last minute. (UFCW member have their schedules three weeks in advance but participants whose also held non-union jobs had constantly shifting schedules. On participant spoke of receiving his schedule on Sunday for the week that started on Monday for one job and his other job was the same but the work week started on Sunday so we would receive that one Saturday night. The schedules would then constantly shift as people tried to balance multiple jobs within these just-in-time schedules).

2. What would address these issues and help you or others out of poverty?

Question 2 (Group 1 - translated)

- BC should develop more projects on poverty alleviation
- Improve the existing childcare service, so parents can go to work
- ICBC should introduce more competition, to lower the cost of insurance.
- MSP should include dental plan
- Increase the amount of nursing home and related allowances
- "Increase the low income-level-taxes"? **Translator note:** Something related to the eligibility for low income tax offset?
 - Increase foreign property tax
 - Interest-Free Status extension for Student Loan (Higher Education)
 - Provide book fee allowance or Rent textbooks for free
 - Rental Assistance
 - Transportation allowance for low income people
 - Further Study Allowances for youth
 - Improve the infrastructures (So that people will be willing to move in to the community, rather than concentrated in one or two already-developed community)

Question 2 (Group 2 - translated)

- How should our government solve the housing problem?
- Taxpayers are bearing the burden of refugee, security, drug users and other social problems. Low-income labors are seeking more higher income. Our government should provide low-income affordable housing.
- Different generations are all living under one roof. Youth has no choice. Either seeking opportunity oversea or over-relying on parents' financial support
- The Provincial tax is too high. Reduce taxes for low incomes. Raise taxes to those who are wealthier or with multiple properties. It is inappropriate that the rich is earning through property speculation.
- The government accepted refugee. The cost of supporting refugee relocation is covered by the working class and their tax money.
- Similarly, the cost of upper class's welfare is also covered by the working class and their tax money.
- Improve tax compliance regulation on enterprises, merchandises and upper class
- The government must control the (commodity) price
- The government needs to provide low-income housing.

Question 2 (Group 3)

- Make rent cheaper – rent control
- Cheaper child care
- Increase wages to \$25/hr
- Decrease transit fees and make bus's available earlier and later.
- Car insurance is too expensive
- We need more unions
- Employers should help pay for credit cards
- Fair scheduling
- Transparency from employers
- Lower tuition and waive tuition for immigrants
- Employees should be equal
- Breaks between shifts (workers were often scheduled for closing shifts one day and the opening shift the next)
- Workplace benefits like extended health
- Paid sick days
- Fairer taxation so that those with money are paying higher taxes
- Enforcement of employment standards