

Troubling Care (Armstrong and Braedley, 2013), a book that troubles the categories and identifies troubling aspects of long-term residential care.

These projects are about working for care and caring for work, for project members, for paid and

unpaid workers and for the residents and families in order not only to understand the world but also to change it, doing so in a collective, feminist, democratic, and—equally important—fun way. A woman’s work is never done.

Note

1. See Women and Health Care Reform website <http://www.womenandhealthcarereform.ca>.

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21 The Living Wage Movement in Canada: Resisting the Low-Wage Economy

Bryan Evans and Carlo Fanelli

The idea that workers should be paid a “living wage” (LW) emerged with the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism in late-nineteenth-century Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. The concept was taken up by early trade unions and social theorists like Karl Marx as a principle to guide wage bargaining

with employers (Littman, 2014; Jonna and Foster, 2016). This impulse led to minimum wage policies in many jurisdictions. However, minimum wage policies remain vulnerable to political maneuverings and fail to provide adequate compensation for an increasing proportion of workers. As a result,

over the past 20 years, a social movement for a LW has emerged. This movement emerged first in the United States and, more recently, in Canada. The demand for a LW is one response to the crisis of quality employment. In what follows we (1) compare and contrast the minimum wage with the LW, (2) explore the strategies and tactics utilized by living wage proponents, and (3) briefly discuss the origins of LW movements in British Columbia and Ontario.

Comparing the Living Wage to the Minimum Wage

A living wage is distinct from the minimum wage. A **minimum wage** establishes a government mandated and enforced minimum rate of hourly compensation that applies to all employers. In some jurisdictions the regulation allows for certain occupational variance from the general minimum. In this sense, the minimum wage is set as a “floor” and is not tied to the poverty line or otherwise determined by some measurement of adequacy. This has not always been the case however. In the nineteenth century, as governments contracted with private firms to undertake infrastructure construction, they adopted a minimum wage policy, also known as a fair wage, with the intent to “protect workers from aggressive competition in the bidding process, which always resulted in corners being cut on wages and safety standards” (Hennessy et al., 2013: 11). In the 1920s, minimum wage policy evolved beyond this narrow frame to apply to women and child workers. And by the late 1930s it applied to all workers. Until the mid-1970s and the onset of a global economic crisis, minimum wages both in Canada and the United States more were much closer to the average industrial wage.

For example, in Ontario in 1965 the minimum wage was \$1, but this was 42 per cent of the average industrial wage. From 1975 to 1995, there were wide fluctuations in this correspondence, followed by a damaging freeze on the rate between 1995 and 2004.

The consequence was that the minimum wage lost 15 per cent of its purchasing power (Hennessy et al., 2013: 12). By 2013, the average minimum wage corresponded to just 46 per cent of average hourly earnings (Statistics Canada, 2014).

One clear problem with the minimum wage history is that the lack of any explicit policy goal, whether to reflect the average industrial wage, to ensure work is paid above the poverty line, or to take wages out of competition. This results in an improvised and politically driven process in wage determination. In contrast, the **living wage** concept is rather distinct from the minimum wage in important ways. The LW “sets a higher test” in that it “reflects what earners in a family need to bring home based on the actual costs of living in a specific community.” (Living Wage Canada, n.d). With roughly one million Canadians earning the minimum wage, and close to another million earning less than \$15 per hour, the LW movement is a call to private and public sector employers to pay wages sufficient enough to provide a modicum of social and financial security (Evans and Fanelli, 2016; Fanelli and Shields, 2016). Unlike the minimum wage, economic need is a central component of the LW. The Canadian Living Wage Framework assumes a family unit composed of two working adults with two dependent children. A basket of goods and services to meet this family’s needs is constructed consisting of such items as food, clothing, rent, transportation, child care, non-government funded health care expenses, adult education, and measures that facilitate a decent life, like the ability to participate in your community or a monthly family night out.

The Living Wage Movement as a Political Strategy

The shift in the balance of political and economic power in favour of business, which began in the 1970s and matured through the 1980s, resulted in a weakening of both trade unions and the political

willingness of governments to intervene in markets. This was followed by the erosion of social services spending and a rise in a whole range of precarious and low-paying employment. The notable rise in low-wage work, defined as those earning less than 1.5 times the minimum wage, in part accounts for the dramatic rise in LW movements. Whereas **precarious work** accounted for 13 per cent of all employment in 1989, this rose to more than 20 per cent by 2007. Between 2008 and 2013, part-time jobs grew at twice the rate of full-time work (5.9 per cent versus 3.3 per cent), and accounted for 40 per cent of all job growth. In other words, a glaring 72 per cent of all net new jobs created during this time fall into precarious or low-paid categories (CLC, 2014).

Rapidly increasing income inequality has followed. Between 1980 and 2005, the earnings of the bottom 20 per cent of Canadian workers dropped 21 per cent, while the earnings of the top 20 per cent increased by 16 per cent (Block 2013: 1). The wealthiest 10 per cent of Canadians own more than 50 per cent of the national wealth, while the richest 86 Canadians alone own more than the bottom 11.4 million. The LW movement is as much a response to deteriorating labour market conditions as it is a reaction to mounting social inequality.

These labour market conditions are not unique to Canada. LW movements, most notably in the United States and the United Kingdom, emerged in response to comparable conditions. The first contemporary LW movement emerged in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1994 where a grassroots community-based campaign led to a local LW policy. By 2002, similar laws had been passed in more than 90 US municipalities. And in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, many more cities and some states have adopted such policies (Greenberg 2008: 76). The UK LW movement began in 2001 with the formation of the London Citizens community alliance. This, too, was a broad coalition that lobbied local government and employers to implement LW policies that provided a worker with a sufficient income to live in expensive London. The UK movement achieved its most significant victory

in 2015 when the finance minister announced a significant rise in the minimum wage to £7.20 (about \$12.50CDN) an hour for all workers over the age of 25 beginning in 2016, and rising by approximately 6 percent per year to £9.00 (\$15.60) an hour by 2020. Canadian LW campaigns resemble their counterparts in their variation and grassroots-oriented outlook. While the specific makeup of LW campaigns varies, they often include segments of organized labour both in the private and public spheres, faith-based groups, charities, non-profit, and public interest organizations. Women, immigrant, and racialized communities have often been at the forefront of organizing and implementation, since they are disproportionately represented in low-waged work. Tactics can also differ quite widely, including door-to-door canvassing, public hearings and rallies, as well as direct actions such as squares occupations, sit-ins and other forms of civil disobedience. To a greater or lesser degree, LW campaigns share the following: (1) an annual calculation of the local LW; (2) advocating for a municipal LW policy to apply to direct employees and the employees of contractors; and (3) lobbying employers to adopt the LW as the minimum rate of pay. As Figure 21.1 illustrates, across Canada there is a growing mismatch between minimum wages and LW. British Columbia and Ontario provide vivid examples of recent efforts to raise the minimum wage to an LW.

The first Canadian LW campaign originated in British Columbia. In 2001, the BC government ripped up the collective agreement with the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU). Eight-thousand workers saw their wages cut by 40 per cent through outsourcing. The union, together with the BC Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, understood through that experience how susceptible the wages of workers, even public sector workers, were to the caprice of governments. Modelled on the London Citizens' LW campaign, the BC CCPA, along with a coalition of unions and community groups, initiated the Living Wage for Families Campaign in 2008, which put forward \$15 as a basic LW.

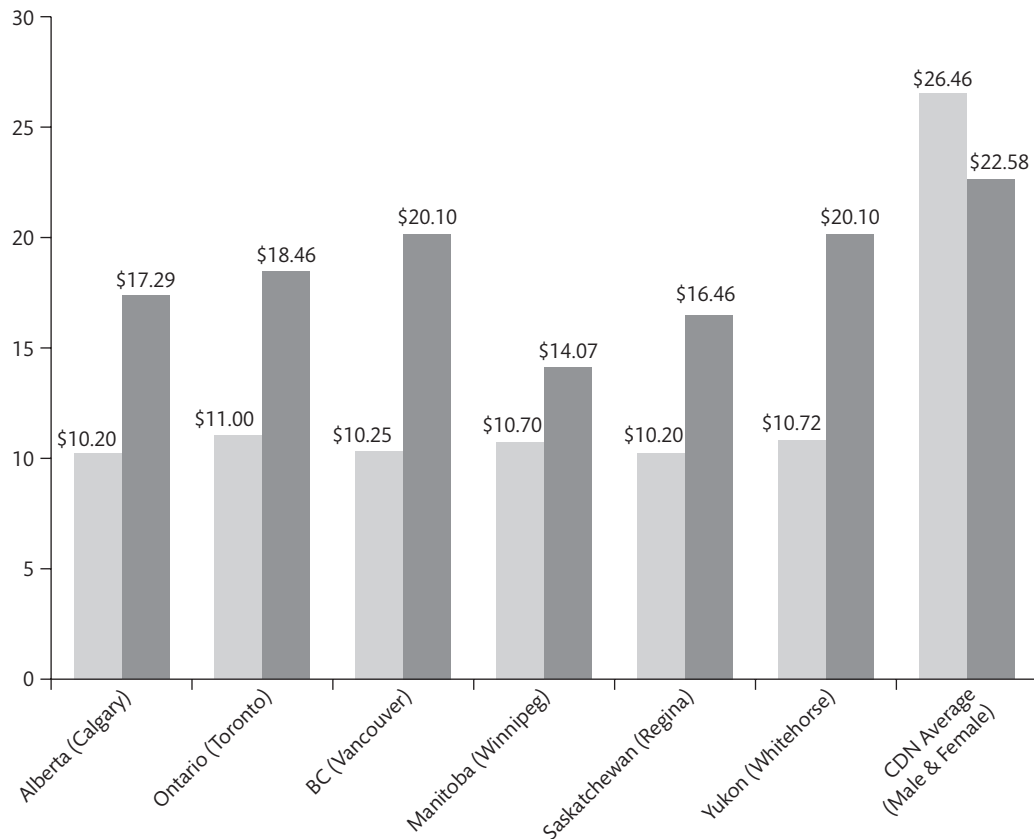


FIGURE 21.1 Minimum Wage vs. Living Wage (Select CDN Cities) Hourly Pay

Source: Living Wage Canada, n.d.

In British Columbia, where two-thirds of minimum wage workers are women and 47 per cent of minimum wage workers are 25 or older, roughly 25 per cent of the total provincial workforce earns less than \$15 per hour. In 2011, the City of New Westminster, a municipality within the Greater Vancouver Area, became Canada's first government to adopt an LW 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 an LW of \$17.31, but it has yet to be implemented. Between 2001 and 2011, BC's minimum wage rose from \$8 to \$9.50, however this still

failed to keep pace with more than a decade of real hourly wage erosion.

In Ontario, activists have made some important strides as well. Between 2004 and 2010, the minimum wage was raised from \$6.85 to \$10.25. It was frozen, however, for the next three years, which eroded real purchasing power. In 2012, a coalition of more than a dozen advocacy groups and trade unionists came together to form the Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage to \$14. Under mounting pressure from social justice, labour, and community-based organizations, in June 2014 the general minimum wage increased to \$11 and in November 2014 it was indexed to inflation. The minimum wage rose to \$11.25 in October 2015.

Under pressure from the Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage, the government of Ontario also established a minimum wage advisory panel set to undertake a formal review of the province's labour and employment standards legislation in a bid to better protect people in low-waged and precarious work.

Conclusion

By challenging the conventional wisdom of neoliberalism, the LW movement has stimulated a broader

public debate about low-waged work and social inequality. Beyond the legislative reforms, Canadian LW movements have also been significant in their ability to provide a point of unity between unionized and non-unionized workers. While still in its very early stages, between 40 and 50 LW campaigns have been launched across Canada and are at varying stages of development. If the LW movement continues to grow, it may well be able to exert a greater influence over public policy, ameliorating the conditions of precarious work.

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22

Freedom as an Ethical Principle for Sociology

Carmen Grillo

Should sociologists diagnose and treat society's ills? Should they be the vanguard of social change, or should they point out the origins of political ideas and

encourage ethical reflection? These questions about sociology's ethical, moral, and political purpose have haunted the discipline since its inception (See