

Falling Behind: Service and Wage Decline at the City of Winnipeg

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Introduction

THE CITY OF Winnipeg is experiencing difficulty retaining and recruiting employees to deliver key public services due to low wages in select positions. City service wages have not kept pace with the cost of living over time and the recent steep rise in the cost of living means workers' real incomes have fallen substantially. Widespread job vacancies compromise the City's ability to deliver services citizens rely on. During the summer of 2022, the City closed wading pools and splash pads, failed to reduce 311 wait times, and restricted public library hours due to staffing shortages.

Real wage declines across City of Winnipeg positions means the City is not paying workers a wage necessary to cover the basic cost of living. A total of thirty City of Winnipeg positions represented by CUPE Local 500 currently pay below a 2022 living wage of \$18.34/hr. There is building pressure on the city to rectify this trend. Staffing shortages and underfunding compromise the city's ability to run services at their intended capacity.

Declining real wages for city workers connects with trends seen across the country in which public sector workers are forced to bear the weight of austerity agendas pursued by right-wing politicians (Fanelli, 2016; Ross and Savage, 2013). Successive rounds of tax cuts are often paid for through service cuts and wage restraint for public sector staff, intensifying the decline of public services. The fourteen year tax freeze from 1998–2012 along with annual cuts to business taxes have constricted revenue in Winnipeg over the last two decades. At the same time, the City of Winnipeg has given up its position as a high-standard setting employer.

Currently, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 500, which represents City of Winnipeg workers in civic services, community services, public works and water and waste, is negotiating with the City of Winnipeg for new collective agreements. Last July, members voted 93 percent in favour of a strike mandate, which conveys that CUPE 500 members are prepared to engage in actions to reach a fair and reasonable settlement. With the upcoming City of Winnipeg election on October 26, 2022, this report provides important information for voters and candidates on staffing challenges at key city departments in Winnipeg.

This report begins with an analysis of select positions that the City of Winnipeg is currently finding difficult recruiting and retaining workers. This will include a review of wages offered, wage scales, and historical wage increases. The second section will provide a contextual analysis of staffing recruitment and retention issues gripping City of Winnipeg departments offering low wage work. The third, and most integral section, will explore the erosion of real wages relative to the abrupt rise in the cost of living. This section will highlight how sharp increases in the cost of living over the past two years have intensified issues of short staffing and underfunding in City of Winnipeg departments to a critical degree.

Low Wages Across City Departments

THE TABLE BELOW provides a list of 10 positions the City of Winnipeg is currently struggling to fill,¹ including position title, class code, step levels,² and bi-weekly wage. These positions are found within range of civic departments, particularly recreation, libraries, and the 311 contact-centre. Furthermore, many of these positions are concentrated within the trades sector, such as electricians, mechanics, and carpenters. Some of the wages listed below currently fall below a Winnipeg living wage, which was calculated as \$18.34/hr in 2022 (Harney et al., 2022). This includes 311 Customer Service Representatives (steps 1,2, and 3) who respond to public inquiries and Recreation Technicians who operate City of Winnipeg recreational programs for youth. Of all the positions under the CUPE Local 500 collective agreement, a total of 30 positions pay below a 2022 living wage.

The city is also struggling to recruit and retain staff in positions which require education and training certifications. These positions include tradespersons, mechanics, and librarians. The wages in these positions have not remained competitive across departments or relative to training required. For example, trades positions typically require apprenticeship training, demanding several years of financial and physical investment. Wage inequalities for positions like mechanics have opened up between city departments, mirroring the underfunding of particular departments. This appears to further exacerbate recruitment and retention issues as City staff

TABLE 1 Selection of CUPE Local 500 Positions and Steps

Position Title	Step	Class Code	2019 Wage (Hourly @ 40hrs/week)	2019 Wage (Bi-weekly)
311 Customer Service Representative	1	391	\$14.11	\$1,128.80
	2	391	\$15.57	\$1,245.60
	3	391	\$17.05	\$1,364.00
	4	391	\$18.50	\$1,480.00
	5	391	\$20.00	\$1,600.00
	6	391	\$20.49	\$1,639.20
Carpenter	1	330	\$32.59	\$2,607.20
Electrician – General	1	631	\$34.30	\$2,744.00
	2	631	\$35.91	\$2,872.80
Legal Assistant	1	2281	\$20.32	\$1,625.40
	2	2281	\$21.21	\$1,696.80
	3	2281	\$21.99	\$1,759.10
	4	2281	\$22.86	\$1,828.40
	5	2281	\$23.78	\$1,902.60
Light Vehicle Mechanic	1	1635	\$30.91	\$2,472.80
Refrigeration Mechanic	1	1641	\$33.22	\$2,657.60
Power Engineer – Pools	1	661	\$25.42	\$2,033.60
	2	661	\$26.22	\$2,097.60
	3	661	\$26.94	\$2,155.20
Technician – Recreation A	1	2501	\$11.64	\$931.20
Attendant – Arena 1	1	101	\$23.49	\$1,879.20
Librarian – Grade 1	1	1441	\$27.50	\$2,200.10
	2	1441	\$28.86	\$2,308.60
	3	1441	\$29.65	\$2,372.30
	4	1441	\$30.54	\$2,443.00
	5	1441	\$31.31	\$2,504.60
	6	1441	\$32.07	\$2,565.50

seek to leave underfunded departments in favor of the departments where higher wages are offered. Librarian positions, where applicants must hold a two-year Master’s degree in Library & Information Sciences, currently earn between \$27–32 dollars an hour depending on step level. Historically, these positions have secured wage increases of 2.00 percent on average.

Staffing Shortages in City of Winnipeg Departments

THERE IS IMMEDIATE pressure on the City to rectify falling real wages to retain and recruit more workers. Short-staffing across City departments has led to escalating 311 wait times, cut operational hours, and delayed programming (Pursaga, 2022) for City services central to the daily lives of Winnipeggers. In particular, library, 311, and outdoor recreation services have borne the brunt of the consequences stemming from falling wages and subsequent staffing shortages.

Launched in 2009, the 311 contact centre provides reliable and accurate information for non-emergency services for City of Winnipeg residents. Since its inception, the service has transformed into an all encompassing information request platform. In 2022, the city set a target to reduce wait times from five and a half minutes to three. However, wait times for 311 service calls have surged to an average of 11 minutes and 31 seconds in 2021, a nearly 50 percent increase from 2020. Currently, the entry-level wage for a 311 customer service representative is \$14.11 per hour.

Librarian shortages along with operation budget cuts have forced libraries to reduce their hours over the past two years. As of April 25th, eighty-two library positions were vacant. Under current schedules, four of the 22 libraries are open on Saturday, and none are open on Sunday. Eleven libraries are

closed three or more days a week (Depatie, 2022). Since 2017, wage freezes have prevented librarians from receiving a wage increase greater than 1.5 percent per year.

Library branches serve as vital community hubs, contributing to the leisure, literacy needs, and well-being of Winnipeg communities (Harney et al., 2022). They are not only important for the wealth of literature they provide us, but the role they play in promoting social inclusion, regional identity, and social mobility. The City of Winnipeg has recently taken promising steps toward social inclusion in libraries by providing specially-designed spaces that house Indigenous resources and programming for children and adults. This past April, the City of Winnipeg launched the brand new Community Connections space at the Millennium Library in downtown Winnipeg, intended to serve as a safe space for visitors who face homelessness and poverty. These are wise investments: a 2016 report evaluating the social return of public libraries in Dryden found that a near \$300,000 public investment yielded close to \$5.5 million in total economic impact. Similar investments should be made in library staffing (Broad et al., 2019).

The city also finds itself unable to recruit recreational summer positions at public pools and splash pads. Amid the hottest part of summer, Happyland Pool in St. Boniface closed due to a shortage of lifeguards. (Maclean, 2022) Climate change for cities spells colder winters and hotter summers. The increasing frequency and duration of heat waves will increase the demand for cooling centres and put demand on emergency services and health systems (The Canadian Press, 2021). The city relies on summer students to fill Recreation Technician positions. These students take responsibility for summer programming events for youth and operate several aquatic wading pool facilities. However, at the minimum wage of \$11.95 per hour, the city is not finding the appropriate staff to fill these positions.

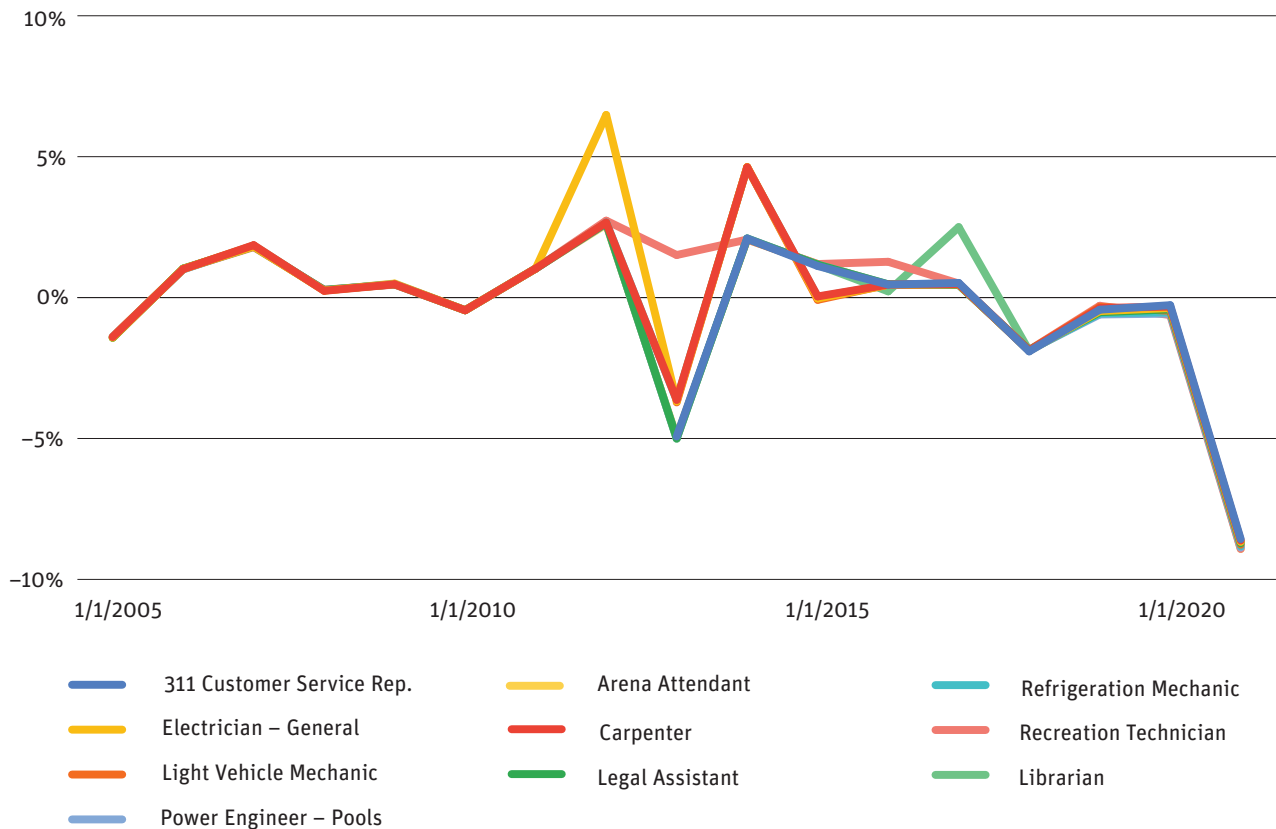
The Rising Cost of Living

IT'S NORMAL AFTER receiving a raise to feel a sense of pride accompanied by feelings of security, thinking that the next phone bill, grocery haul, or rent payment won't take up as much of the monthly budget. This, unfortunately, hasn't been the case for many City of Winnipeg workers who, along with many non-unionized workers, have seen the value of their wages diminish considerably over the course of the pandemic. Up until 2016, CUPE Local 500 achieved small, yet meaningful wage increases reflecting rises in the cost of living, measured by the Consumer Price Index.³ However, a consistent decline in real wage growth over the past six years has squeezed out the value of previously effective wage increases.

The graph below⁴ depicts annual percent changes in the real wages of the selected positions (entry-level). In 2005, CUPE 500 members secured tepid real wage gains between 1 and 3 percent. From 2007 to 2017, real wage fluctuations were variable, meaning real wage losses were restored in the following years. This span of years resulted in little to no change in the purchasing power of wages.

The rate at which real wages are eroding is accelerating. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the precipitous rise in the cost of living, real wages have plummeted. Looking through the past five years, real wage growth is consistently negative, reaching minus two percent in 2017, and in 2022 down roughly nine percent. This has greatly impacted the incomes of frontline workers at core city departments. For example, Light Vehicle Mechanics have seen a real wage decline of roughly \$2.50 per hour since 2002,

FIGURE 1 Percent Change in Real Wages: City of Winnipeg (Entry Level Wages)



Source: Services and Winnipeg, “Collective Agreements - Human Resource Services – City of Winnipeg.”

Note: One line is visible at the beginning and end of the graph as nominal wage increases were identical across positions in these years. Light Vehicle Mechanic and 311 Customer Service real wage trend lines begin in 2012, reflecting the availability of data for these positions.

311 Customer Service Representatives have lost \$1.25 per hour, and Librarians \$1.17 per hour. These positions have seen a real wage decline of roughly \$1 per hour on average, which yields an additional income of roughly \$2,000 per year. Furthermore, if wages had kept up with inflationary increases, the average wages of these positions would be \$9.47 higher than they are today.⁵

Inflationary pressures have become much more severe since the beginning of 2021. Therefore, immediately increasing the purchasing power of wages calls for significant action from the city, not through blind hope for a “cooling of the economy.” The only way to restore the purchasing power of these wages is to increase their nominal value closer to the rate of inflation, which is currently up 8.8 percent since last summer (Government of Manitoba, 2022).

This historical erosion of real wages across City of Winnipeg positions is clear,⁶ and calls into question the city’s historical reputation as a provider of “golden standard” jobs with attractive wages. As mentioned earlier,

thirty City of Winnipeg positions under Local 500 currently pays below a living wage of \$18.34/hr. At the same time, many city workers have lost their long-standing wage competitiveness with private sector counterparts. The ladder is especially true for trades workers whose wages have levelled out with national averages measured by the National Occupational Classification (NOC).⁷

Eleven trade positions under the CUPE Local 500 collective agreements were available for comparable growth since 2003. This includes a wide variety of foremen, electricians, carpenters, and engineers. Three additional positions represented by the Winnipeg Police Association were available for comparison. This includes the Supervisor of Vehicle Services, Mechanic, and Assistant Mechanic positions. These three positions represented by the Winnipeg Police Association currently enjoy astronomically high wage premiums⁸ of \$5 to \$19 an hour higher than the provincial average.

In October 2003, the average trades, transport and equipment operators, and related occupations (subset 7-1 & 7-2) paid \$17.65 per hour and \$19.11 per hour, respectively. Wage premiums ranged from \$1.21 per hour for a Power Engineer and \$7.53 per hour for Electrical Maintenance and Construction Foremans. Those premiums have now declined to minus \$5.47 and \$5.21, respectively. Consistent wage premium declines remain the dominant theme across CUPE Local 500 trades positions.⁹ Wage premium is the amount that wages for a given group exceed those of workers performing similar jobs.

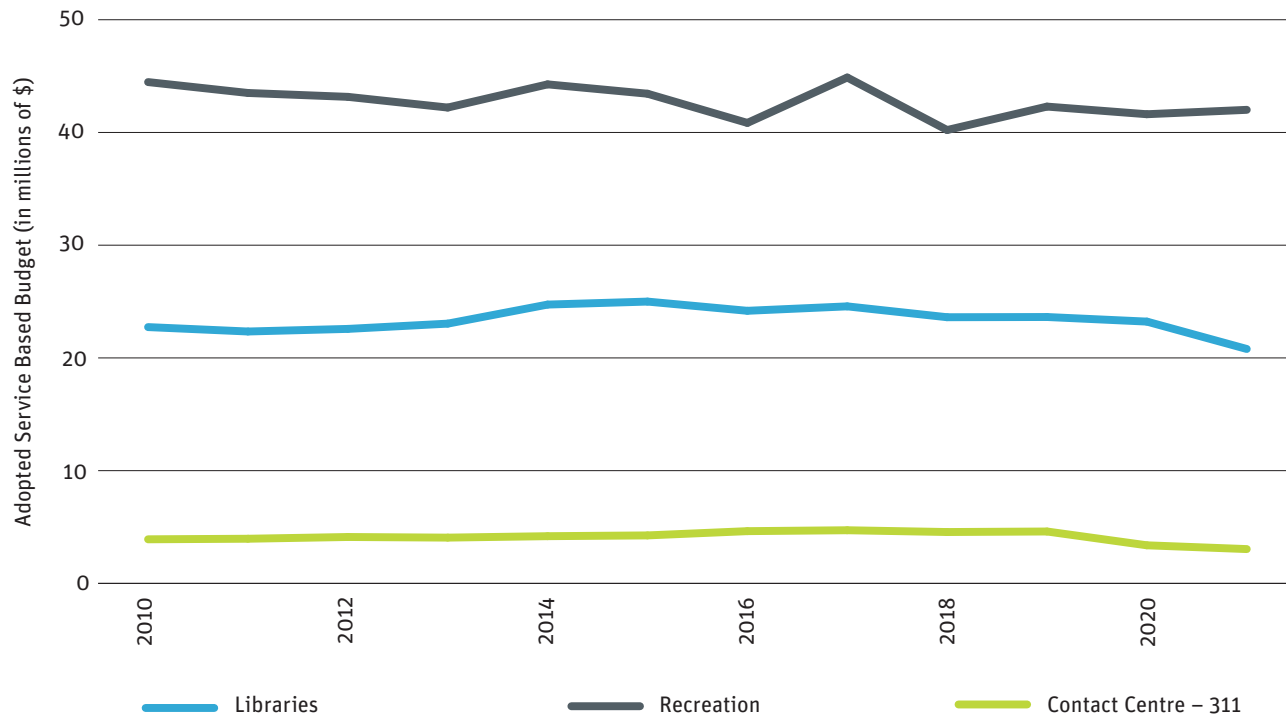
Twenty years later, city wages in these positions are no longer competitive to attract workers. Throughout the 20-year period, wage growth for trades positions at Local 500 was 30 percent less than NOC wage growth of roughly 70 percent.¹⁰ The previous standard \$3– \$7 dollar an hour city wage premiums are now concentrated in only a handful of positions. All trades positions under Local 500 have seen considerable decreases in wages premiums, a historically central component of municipal work.

Decline in Civic Investment in Select City Departments

STAFFING SHORTAGES AND eroding real wages run parallel to compressed budgets and reductions in civic employment. (City of Winnipeg Budget Documents, 2022) The chart below shows operation budget growth¹¹ at the City of Winnipeg recreation, library, and 311 contact centre departments. Since 2010, changes in departmental operational budgets suggest that these core city services fall at the bottom of the priority list. In real terms, recreation funding has fallen 8.5 percent, libraries 5.5 percent, and funding for 311 has lost roughly a quarter of its budget since its inception in 2009.

The City of Winnipeg has also made a point of reducing the number of civic employees in these departments. Since 2010, the number of staff employed in libraries decreased by 26 percent, and recreation has seen a similar decrease in staffing of 23 percent. While reducing the workforce size can save the city money within operational budgets, this approach can become costly when the city faces short-staffing issues and the quality of public services declines.

FIGURE 2 Operational Budget Growth (Adjusted for Inflation)



Source: Department, City of Winnipeg Finance, and City of Winnipeg. "Documents – Corporate Finance – City Of Winnipeg." https://winnipeg.ca/finance/documents_page.stm#Budgets.

Conclusion

THE CITY OF Winnipeg continues to struggle with recruitment and retention efforts in core city services. The real value of the wages of many CUPE Local 500 positions are less than what they were 15 years ago. With Manitoba posting its lowest unemployment rates in its recorded history, counting on a reserve army of unemployed individuals to fill these positions is wishful thinking. To run civic services at their intended capacity, the City of Winnipeg must rethink the distribution of departmental operational budgets and how it affects the wages for to frontline staff.

CUPE Local 500 is currently negotiating with the city on a new collective agreement. President Gord Delbrige stated the city is offering members less than a two percent increase in each year of the four-year term. (CBC News, 2022). If the city wishes to act upon recruitment and retention struggles in core city departments, revising salary schedules more in-tune with the rising cost of living is a must. Manitoba recently announced a phased-in increase of the minimum wage, which will reach \$15/hr by 2023. This will boost the wages of some positions at the City of Winnipeg, such as recreation technicians and 311 Representatives, up to the minimum. However, \$15/hr doesn't come close to a living wage, which is \$18.34/hour in 2022 (Harney et al., 2022). By this token, it's expected that the city will continue to struggle with recruitment and retention for low-wage positions. This past summer highlighted the initial consequences of lagging public investment relative to the growing demands of City residents. Coming out of the pandemic, there is momentum for governments to make bold, courageous decisions reflecting

significant short-run investment in pursuit of long-term social return. It is the hope that the next mayor of Winnipeg will act upon this sentiment (*From Pandemic to Recovery*, 2020).

Appendix:

1. The average wage of the selected positions is \$20.67/hour. Using the Consumer Price Index, we are able to calculate how well wages have kept up with the cost of living. The graph below illustrates this. The blue line represents the nominal wage, that is, the face value of the wages each year. Note the decrease in 2010 was due to the addition of 311 Customer Service Representatives, which dragged down the average wage. The red line represents the real wage, that is, the value of the wages each year in terms of the goods and services they can buy. The yellow line represents the difference between the average nominal wage, and the average real wage of these positions, which is currently \$9.47/hr. It should be noted that CUPE Local 500 are currently in negotiations with the City of Winnipeg. Once a contract is reached, workers may receive retro-pay for previous years gone without wage increases. In this case, the difference between the nominal and real wage will change.
2. City of Winnipeg employees have seen the value of their wage premiums erode over the past 20 years. The table below shows by how much these wage premiums have decreased since 2019. Wage premiums were retrieved by taking wage figures from historical and current CUPE Local 500 collective agreements then subtracting the respective National Occupancy Classification wage rate. Each position, to varying extents, have seen a decrease in their premiums.

FIGURE 3 Nominal Wages Outpacing Real Wages

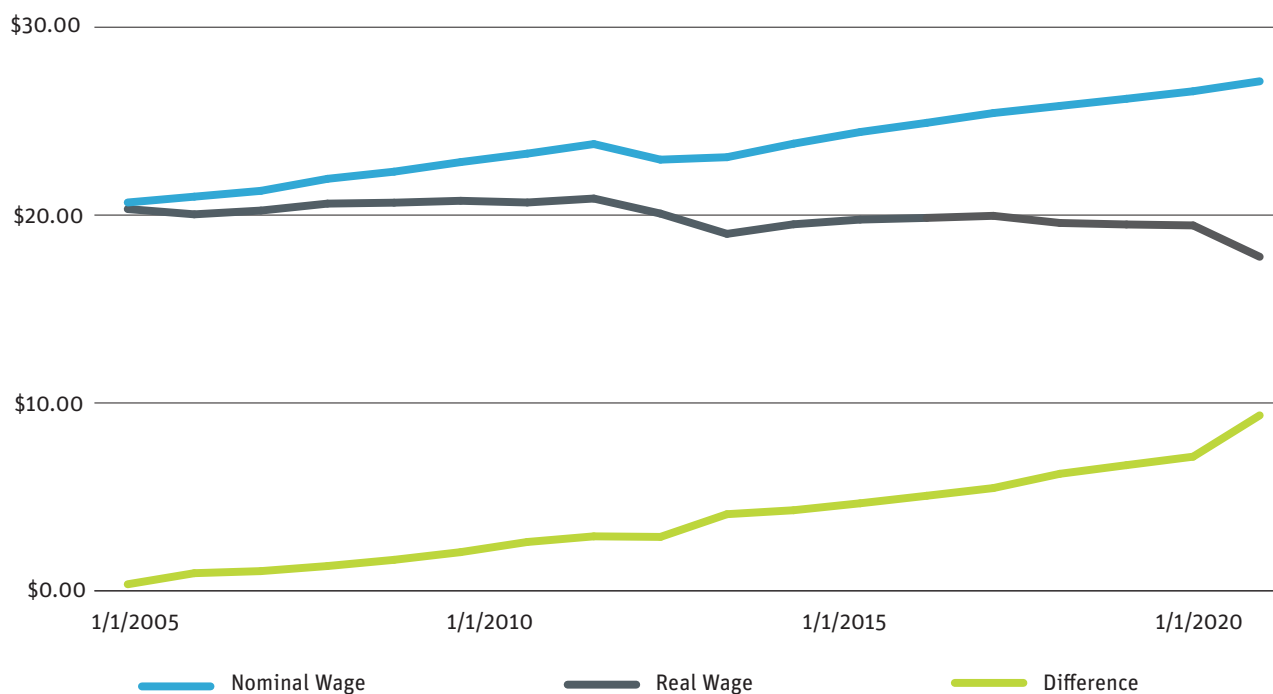
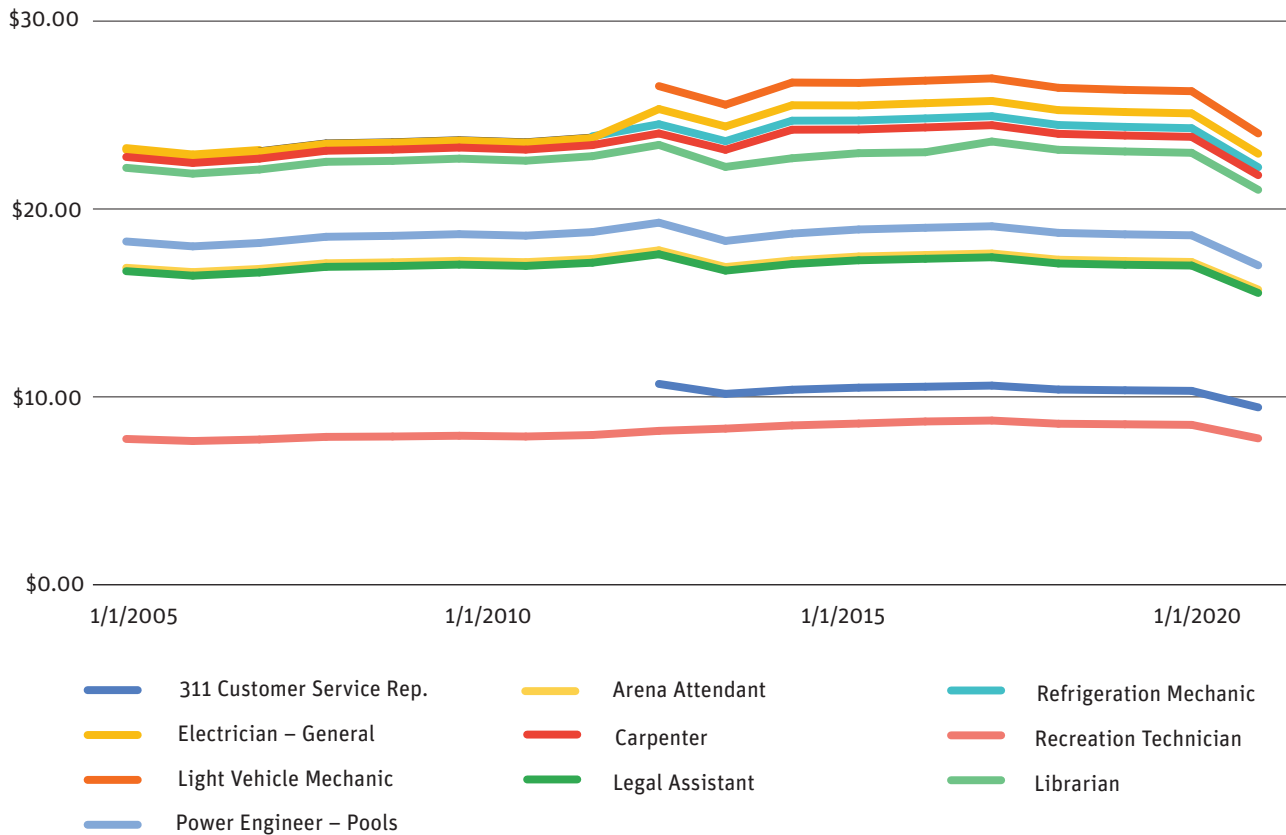


TABLE 2 Wage Premium Growth – CUPE Local 500 Trades Positions

Position Description	Class Code	2003 Premium	2019 Premium	Change
Foreman Garage	806	\$5.88	\$4.90	-16.67%
Foreman Machine Shop	822	\$6.07	\$4.85	-20.10%
Foreman Electrical Maintenance and Construction	801	\$7.53	\$5.21	-30.81%
Foreman Electrician	803	\$7.53	\$4.01	-46.75%
Electrician – General	631	\$5.89	\$3.41	-42.11%
Refrigeration Mechanic	1641	\$4.87	\$2.29	-52.98%
Carpenter	330	\$5.51	\$1.70	-69.15%
Foreman Grade 3	813	\$5.53	\$1.69	-69.44%
Foreman Grade 2	812	\$4.08	-\$0.28	-106.86%
Foreman Grade 1	811	\$3.09	-\$1.64	-153.07%
Power Engineer – Pools	661	\$1.21	-\$5.47	-552.07%

Note: Wage premium is the amount that wages for a given group exceed those of workers performing similar jobs.

FIGURE 4 Real Wage Growth: City of Winnipeg (Entry Level Wages)



3. The real wage growth for the select entry-level positions at the City of Winnipeg was calculated using most recent wage statistics from CUPE Local 500 collective agreements and the Consumer Price Index. The graph below depicts real growth for each individual position at the City of Winnipeg. Note the addition of the 311 Customer Service Representative and Light Vehicle Mechanic position in 2010.
4. The selected and compared positions at the City of Winnipeg fall under NOC 72 & 73. The average hourly rate for Industrial, electrical, and construction trades in Manitoba was \$17.65 in 2003, and \$30.89 in 2019, a growth rate of roughly 75 percent. The average hourly rate for maintenance and equipment operation trades in Manitoba was \$19.11 in 2003, and \$30.93 in 2019, a growth rate of roughly 62 percent. Of the eleven comparable positions with available data, the average growth rate for these positions totalled 40.88 percent from 2003 to 2019.

TABLE 3 National Occupational Classification Trades Wage Growth

National Occupational Classification (NOC)	Average Hourly Rate (2019)	Average Hourly Rate (2003)	NOC Wage Growth
Industrial, electrical and construction trades [72]	\$30.89	\$17.65	75.01%
Maintenance and equipment operation trades [73]	\$30.93	\$19.11	61.85%

TABLE 4 CUPE Local 500 Trades Wage Growth

Position Description	Class Code	FT Hourly Rate (2019)	FT Hourly Rate (2003)	Growth Rate
Foreman Garage	806	\$35.83	\$24.99	43.38%
Foreman Machine Shop	822	\$35.78	\$25.18	42.10%
Foreman Electrical Maintenance and Construction	801	\$36.10	\$25.18	43.37%
Foreman Electrician	803	\$34.90	\$25.18	38.60%
Electrician – General	631	\$34.30	\$23.54	45.71%
Refrigeration Mechanic	1641	\$33.22	\$23.98	38.53%
Carpenter	330	\$32.59	\$23.16	40.72%
Foreman Grade 3	813	\$32.58	\$23.18	40.55%
Foreman Grade 2	812	\$30.61	\$21.73	40.87%
Foreman Grade 1	811	\$29.25	\$20.74	41.03%
Power Engineer – Pools	661	\$25.42	\$18.86	34.78%
			Average Growth Rate	40.88%

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Endnotes

1 These positions included in the analyses were meant to achieve a representative fill of CUPE 500 workers, selecting a variety of key positions including those that are very difficult for the city to fill.

2 Steps indicate the level of experience and responsibility within each position. Most commonly ranging between 1–6, higher steps translate to higher wages. Employees are eligible for annual incremental increases on the basis of merit.

3 The Consumer Price Index, or CPI, represents changes in prices as experienced by Canadian consumers. It measures price changes by comparing, through time, the cost of a fixed basket of goods and services. The basket includes expenses such as groceries, eating out, rent, mortgage payments, insurance, and many other common expenses. Using this method, we can compare how much the prices of staple consumer goods have increased since a particular base year. In this case, 2002 is a base year set to 100. For example, if the CPI were 105 in 2003, then prices within the basket of goods increased by an average of 5 percent.

4 Percent change in the real wages of the positions from 2004–2008 & 2017–2022 overlap.

5 See Appendix note 1

6 See Appendix note 2

7 The National Occupational Classification is the national reference for occupations in Canada. The basic principle of the classification is the kind of work performed. Job titles are identified and grouped primarily in terms of work usually performed, this being determined by the tasks, duties, employment requirements, and responsibilities associated with each occupation. Statistics Canada promptly provides wage data on each classification when recordable.

8 Wage premiums here refers to the dollar difference between NOC average and City of Winnipeg wages.

9 See Appendix note 2

10 See Appendix Note 4

11 Operating budgets reflect how much money the City spends to keep programs and services running on an ongoing basis. They contrast with capital budgets, which represent a finite amount of money to be invested in specific projects.



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