



Saskatchewan



Notes

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How to Make Work Work for All of Saskatchewan

— by Nick Bonokoski

A good way to improve the lives of the people in Saskatchewan is to improve their working lives. This requires ensuring that good jobs are being created in the province, that all people that work here are treated and compensated fairly, and that the work that is done in Saskatchewan benefits all the people of Saskatchewan. There are no absolute standards for good jobs; different people like different types of work. A good job is something where workers feel challenged and excited by the work that they do. Their jobs are not a chore but something to look forward to because they are important to them and their communities.

Considering that so many people enjoy different types of work for different reasons, it is difficult to come up with a way to ensure that the jobs that are created in Saskatchewan are good jobs. This can be done by ensuring the rights that all workers are entitled to are fair, and that workers have the ability to take action when their rights are violated. Saskatchewan workers' rights are contained in numerous pieces of legislation. The most prominent are *The Trade Union Act*, *The Occupational Health and Safety Act*, and *The Labour Standards Act*.

What's Wrong With Workers' Rights in Saskatchewan?

Some of the rights contained in these Acts are the right to refuse unsafe work, the right to a minimum wage, and the right to join a union. Unfortunately workers' rights in Saskatchewan leave a lot to be desired. For instance, under labour standards, bosses can fire workers for any reason, or no reason at all as long as they give appropriate notice. This is unacceptable, so obviously the act needs improvement.

Improvements can be made to *The Labour Standards Act* with little effort. In 1994 the Government of Saskatchewan passed a Most Available Hours bill but they have refused to put it before the Crown for royal assent which is required for a bill to become a law in Canada. The bill requires that part time hours keep going to the most senior, qualified employees until they are working forty hours a week. Employees have the option to refuse hours if they want to keep working part time. This ensures that employers must provide people with full time work rather than part time employment, which forces people to work a number of jobs to survive.¹

Some people need to work forty hours, or more, because of the poverty level minimum wage in Saskatchewan which today is \$6.65 an hour. If you work for forty hours a week, fifty two weeks a year, at \$6.65 an hour, you will make \$13,382 that year. According to Statistics Canada the low income cutoff for somebody living in Saskatchewan in 2002 ranges from \$13,334 in rural areas to \$16,548 in cities over 100,000 people.² As we can see from the numbers the only places where minimum wages are not poverty wages are in rural areas.

In response to recent increases to the minimum wage the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) wrote to the Minister of Labour and suggested, “the government must examine practical policy alternatives to increasing the minimum wage in order to provide more income to low-income earners without jeopardizing employment and hours of work. CFIB believes that increasing the personal and spousal exemptions are effective means of increasing the income of low income earners”.³ If the before tax income of minimum wage workers is below the poverty line, reducing their taxes to zero is not going to raise their income above the poverty line. Tax cuts will not help the poor; raising the minimum wage will.

It Is 2003. Do You Know What Your Government Is Investing In?

Considering labour standards in the province are minimal one would assume that the Government of Saskatchewan would only invest

in businesses that were covered by The Labour Standards Act. Unfortunately this is not the case. In 2001 the Crown Investments Corporation invested \$15,132,000 in Big Sky Farms Inc., an industrial hog operation, and now owns 40% of the company. While these industrial hog operations do not remotely resemble farms they were until very recently not covered by The Labour Standards Act because farm workers are not covered by the act.

Governments could ensure workers’ rights are respected by only investing in operations with unionized workers. Unions do a good job of protecting workers’ rights on the job by negotiating collective agreements with employers that improve workers’ rights, outline workers’ responsibilities, and ensure workers can respond when their rights are violated.

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In The Price We Pay for Corporate Hogs, Marlene Halverson reports that at industrial hog operations in the U.S. “gaseous emissions from the anaerobic decomposition of liquefied manure have led to human and animal fatalities”.⁵ Industrial hog operations also have terrible environmental effects, treat pigs like machines, and divide communities.⁶ This is not the type of business government should invest in.

The Big Picture

A government behaving in the manner described above is no big surprise. Over the past twenty years governments in Canada have suffered from a bout of the “neo-conservative flu”. Symptoms include cutting spending, slashing social programs, an obsession with inflation, widening the gap between the rich and the poor, slow economic growth, and giant corporate profits. This “national flu” takes place in the context of a global epidemic that has seen other national governments develop similar policies and entrench them in international investor rights agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). NAFTA allows corporations to sue governments, close factories whenever they choose, and move factories wherever they want. In addition to this, technology and politics have created gigantic pools of electronic money that speeds around the globe daily through international financial transactions. This huge pool of floating capital gives investors near veto power over government policy due to the ease of pulling money out of an economy in an instant.⁷ The national neo-conservative policies and the international investor rights agreements work well together. As the Canadian head of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) said, “these free trade agreements are designed to force adjustment to our societies”, and that governments should speed the change by “reducing the social benefits that encourage the unemployed to turn down low-paying jobs”.⁸

What Should Be Done?

Considering the powers that invest are doing all they can to reduce social benefits it is time for people to start fighting back. In Saskatchewan this means that people need to start pushing government to implement progressive policies. There are many options: the four day work week; increased money towards education and training; enforcement of a progressive labour standards act; anti-scab legislation; and a minimum wage that helps people improve their lives rather than trapping them in poverty. The list of possible progressive policies is endless.

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Governments have the power to implement a wide array of progressive policies. This means they need to play a role in changing today’s international economy. Corporations and investors hold a lot of power but it is power that has been granted to them by governments, and it is power that can be taken away by governments. To do this governments need to stop signing investor rights agreements, start ripping up the ones that have been signed, and place controls on international financial transactions. The reality of capital flight requires that governments invest money in things like crown corporations or local cooperatives. Businesses that are tied to communities do not pose a capital flight risk, and they benefit the places in which they operate.

When governments invest in good, union jobs that pay high wages and are community development focused, rather than profit focused, these jobs will grow local economies and sustain innovative communities...Crown corporations are an effective means of ensuring that innovation that takes place in Saskatchewan will benefit the people of Saskatchewan. And if that innovation helps the fight against environmental degradation it will benefit both Saskatchewan, and the rest of the planet.

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The Government of Saskatchewan can ensure that Saskatchewan is this kind of province by creating good jobs, protecting workers' rights by enforcing *The Trade Union Act*, *The Occupational Health and Safety Act*, and *The Labour Standards Act*, and by ensuring that workers' rights legislation covers all workers with minimum standards that ensure workers are safe, respected, and prosperous.

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Even by investing through its crowns in public ventures the government cannot guarantee that all jobs in Saskatchewan are good jobs. It can ensure that good jobs are the only type of jobs that it invests in. People want to live in a province that is characterized by a fair economy, with a fair distribution of wealth, which contributes to local and global prosperity. The Government of Saskatchewan can ensure that Saskatchewan is this kind of province by creating good jobs, protecting workers' rights by enforcing *The Trade Union Act*, *The Occupational Health and Safety Act*, and *The Labour Standards Act*, and by ensuring that workers' rights legislation covers all workers with minimum standards that ensure workers are safe, respected, and prosperous. This is a recipe for good jobs, and a healthy, vibrant, and innovative economy. ❖

1. Information in this paragraph obtained in an interview with Paul Guillet, Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union Representative, Jan. 21, 2003.
2. Bernard Paquet, "Low Income Cutoffs from 1992 to 2001 and Low Income Measures from 1991 to 2002", (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2002), p. 37. The 2001 figures have been adjusted for inflation in order to arrive at the figures for 2002.
3. Marilyn Braun-Poullon, Director, Provincial Affairs, Saskatchewan, of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, letter to Labour Minister Deb Higgins, dated Oct. 3, 2002, available at [http://216.123.166.150/media/webpub/field/Saskatchewan/100302\(7\)_e.pdf](http://216.123.166.150/media/webpub/field/Saskatchewan/100302(7)_e.pdf).
4. <http://gtds.gov.sk.ca>. Search for Conservation Officer and Labour Standards Officer.
5. Marlene Halverson, *The Price We Pay for Corporate Hogs*, (Minneapolis: Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2000), p. 7.
6. W-Five, "Raising a Stink: The Controversy over Pig Farms," aired Nov. 15, 2002. Transcript available at http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/1037381239499_32790439//. And *Ibid*.
7. There is tons of reading material on what is covered with unfortunate brevity in this paragraph. See, Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, Toronto: Knopf Press, 1999. Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, New York: The New Press, 2002. www.zmag.net, search the site for "globalization." www.policyalternatives.ca. www.canadians.org, click on "trade campaign."
8. Cited in David Crane, Toronto Star, May 3, 1997, p. c3. Quoted in Bruce Campbell, "CUFTA/NAFTA and North American Labour Markets: A Comparative Inquiry" in *Pulling Apart: The Deterioration of Employment and Income in North America Under Free Trade*, (Ottawa: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, 1999), p. 7.

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