

# A MILLION REASONS

## A MILLION WORKERS NEED A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THEIR INCOME

More than a million workers in the Toronto region earn less than \$29,800 per year<sup>1</sup>. In key sectors of the economy – healthcare, manufacturing, retail, hospitality, clerical and service work – there are hard-working women and men who deserve much better. Many of them are new Canadians, but many have been here for generations. Most are workers of colour or women. They all share one thing in common – the work they do is undervalued and underpaid.

During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century working families in Toronto suffered serious setbacks. The real pay of two income families dropped 13% in real dollars; those with only one earner dropped 18%. Thousands of well-paid manufacturing jobs disappeared due to free trade, while cuts to the public sector took away many more jobs that used to offer decent wages and benefits.

In contrast, corporate profits have exploded – a 20% increase last year brought them to the highest percentage of GDP in **Canadian history**<sup>2</sup>.

For the labour movement, the challenge is to find ways to help workers upgrade their incomes in the face of globalization and constant restructuring. Young people and new Canadians – the workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – need to see the essential role of unions in bettering standards for working families and their communities.

There are key elements that will be part of reaching these goals:

- **A fight for good jobs:** From economic strategies to protect well-paid jobs in manufacturing and other key sectors, to stopping privatization and outsourcing in the public sector – we have a right to stand up for the jobs that provide good incomes for ourselves and our neighbours. And we have the right to demand that valuable work such as homecare, childcare and social services are paid according to the skills required.
- **Bargaining to raise standards:** Jobs that are underpaid will only be improved through aggressive bargaining strategies. Sectoral agreements or pattern bargaining will require tremendous solidarity from those involved and others in the community. Some unions have broken ground by bargaining employer recognition or neutrality around future organizing. Our best-paid members need to share their strength with those among us who are earning the least.
- **Mass union organizing:** Setting our sights on increasing union density in greater Toronto by only 1% means organizing 23,000 new members immediately. To achieve that goal, we need to devote far more resources and engage our members to reach out to those who lack representation. Restoring rights for all workers starts with fixing labour laws and enforcing employment standards.

- Restoring the “social wage”: Universal social programs – from healthcare to unemployment insurance to pensions – are the product of years of struggle<sup>3</sup>. Past generations fought to ensure that working people didn’t have to rely on charity. They forged a comprehensive system of social services that served everyone and provided the basis for justice and equality.

In the face of corporate pressure to downsize and “re-invent” government, we need to deepen the understanding of how vital the social wage is to core Canadian values of a just society.

These key tasks are integral to the plan of action outlined in Labour Council's Strategic Directions 2004-2010. In coming months, campaigns by our affiliates and our community partners will demand attention and resources. If we see those efforts within the context of an overall goal of lifting the incomes of a million workers, the basis for our solidarity will be assured. More importantly, the value of unions to the next generation of workers in Toronto will be there for all to see.



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<sup>1</sup> out of a workforce of 2.4 million, 85% are full-time; the low income cut-off for a family of four in Toronto is \$36,500

<sup>2</sup> profits in 2004 represented 14% of the Gross Domestic Product

<sup>3</sup> social wage refers to social benefits that come from a wide range of programs: healthcare, WCB, EI, housing assistance, welfare, subsidized childcare, Canada pension, etc. In most cases these were first negotiated in collective agreements, then labour and popular movements bargained politically to have them implemented as public programs.