

The Fight for \$15 campaign, and potential for labour renewal in Canada

Labour scholars have drawn attention to how economic restructuring, caused flexibilization, and direct measures to limit the role of trade unions in society. Unions, as a result, have been forced to endure massive concessions due to their weakness in an era of neoliberalism. As witnessed in the growing crisis of inequality since the financial crisis of 2008. Where the share of global wealth has become ever more concentrated. This has exposed the crisis of labour to develop the strategies necessary to challenge neoliberalism which has resulted in increasing inequality globally.

In Canada over the past two years the movement to increase the minimum wage has gained momentum as inequality has grown. Minimum wage campaigns such as the Fight for \$15 among fast food workers in the United States who are racialized, and precarious had become an inspiration to the labour activists. While trade unions have engaged in campaigns to combat inequality to increase the minimum wage in the United States, this has not been the case in Canada.

This paper seeks to engage with the critical scholarship on labour renewal, and the “fight for \$15.00” minimum wage in Canada, as a broad based campaign rooted in an inclusive understanding of class. In Canada, what is unique to the movement, to increase the minimum wage is that it is workers centers, community groups, and not trade unions at the forefront of this movement. While workers centers have traditionally filled the gap left by trade unions by organizing in specific communities, or sectors dominated by precarious, low-wage immigrant workers. The shift in Canada by the Workers Action Centre in Toronto, and the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal to take the lead in such a broader campaign can have significant meaning for the question of labour renewal.

Particularly in a time where there is critical reflection on how trade unions need to transform themselves into broader organizations that can be relevant and reflective of the realities of working people. The crisis of labour extends beyond the neoliberal offensive weakening their power in society, but has made them defensive and focused on their existing membership, thus excluding more marginalized, and precarious workers who are immigrants, women and racialized. The fight for \$15 campaign than becomes a crucial tool for labour renewal that extends beyond combatting inequality. It has the ability of rebuilding a vision of class that is inclusive and transformative by putting the demands of those segments of the working class at the centre of the movement who would be the most impacted by any campaign to combat inequality. The paper will also discuss how the campaign helps to build immigrant worker leadership beyond the workplace which is vital in an era of precarious work, which makes increasingly the possibilities of industrial organizing difficult.

The methodology in this paper will be based both on interviews and the first hand experiences of organizers at the Workers Action Centre, and the Immigrant Workers Centre. This paper also stems out of my own engagement with the Fight for \$15 campaign in Canada.

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