

Good Jobs for All

Alternatives to Austerity and Inequality

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ABOUT US

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Introduction

Since the financial crisis (2008-2009), income inequality and low-wage work have continue to increase in most advanced industrial countries, most notably in Canada and the United States (OECD 2008, 2015). In Canada and other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries since the 1990s, more than half of all job creation has been in the form on poorly paid non-standard employment, and more households than ever are in working poverty (OECD 2015). Throughout the OECD, the share of atypical employment in the overall OECD workforce (part-time and fixed-term employment) has grown from an average of around 10 percent to country-specific levels of an average of 34 percent of all employment. At the same time, in recent decades, it is estimated that some 40 percent of households have seen no benefit from economic growth, and many in labour markets have even seen their incomes fall. Moreover, public social spending has not kept pace with deteriorating social and labour market conditions.

These striking changes to work have occurred alongside dramatic growth in income inequality. The share of top 1 percent in total earned income has soared from approximately 6 percent in 1974 to more than 10 percent in 2010 across the OECD (Atkinson and Piketty 2007; Saez and Veall 2007; Veall 2012). If capital gains like investment and dividend income are included, the share of income that the top 1 percent of earners have received has gone from just over 9 percent to 17 percent (Atkinson and Piketty 2010). This trend was most marked in the United States, where the share of the richest 1 percent in all pre-tax income more than doubled, reaching 23 percent in 2011 (OECD 2014), but rich households also did well in Canada, where the top 1 percent income share rose from 8.8 percent in 1980 to 15.6 percent in 2007, before declining slightly in 2010. Now the gap between the rich and the poor is at its highest level in thirty years.

Can these trends be reversed? Is it inevitable that inequality continue to grow and that the jobs and incomes of the many continue to decline? Is 'Austerity' and making do with less, while the wealthy few sees their incomes grow by leaps and bounds, the best that citizens can hope for? Certainly the growing awareness of inequality, its consequences, and the range of policy solutions readily available would suggest a growing understanding that governments should take action to counter the widening income gap. Over the past few years, in the wake of the financial crisis, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, has published numerous reports on the deepening of income inequality and low-wage work and the need for regulatory changes that will improve jobs and incomes (OECD 2011a, 2014, 2015). The International Monetary Fund similarly has shifted some of its policy stances, advocating for institutional solutions that ensure economic growth is more broadly shared and that governments take a lead role in supporting education and skills training through public investment. Reducing

inequality and improving economic growth, they now claim, are 'two sides of the same coin' (Berg and Ostry 2011; Dabla-Norris et al. 2015). Such shifts in views by important institutions to more balanced policy positions underscores how widespread a problem inequality has become, and how pressing is the need for a new policy agenda to address its many aspects.

So too did the Occupy Wall Street movement highlight how widespread public antipathy has become toward income inequality and the influence of moneyed interests over politics (Hardt and Negri 2011). In the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008-09, global protests erupted in 2011-12 targeting policies that supported banks while failing to protect people's jobs and homes. The protests captured the public mood that many public policies have been reshaped to the benefit of the wealthy few (Gitlin 2012). By undertaking this activism, the protestors brought the problems of inequality into the public eye, where many have begun to realize that rising inequality is not simply a result of impersonal market forces, but rather a symptom of a politics that too often favors the few at the expense of the vast majority of working people (Stiglitz 2013).

Such developments certainly have led to a resurgence of interest in the problem of inequality, and contributed to a growing sense that just solutions are not only wanted, but needed. In policy circles, inequality has now entered into the academic lexicon at levels from the international to the local, and across fields from the economic to the political and the social (Atkinson 2015; Piketty 2014). More and more scholars, researchers, and activists are highlighting the problem of inequality and the necessity for more worker-friendly laws and policies because of the political and social benefits that high wages and redistributive tax and transfer systems provide to citizens. Health researchers Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2011) have demonstrated how inequality is damaging the social fabric of many societies, and how better work and social policies are essential to reversing the mushrooming of health and social problems that plague unequal societies. The economists Richard Reich (2015) and Joseph Stiglitz (2013) have underscored the many economic problems of inequality, and emphasized time and again that unequal economies are undermined by rent-seeking and the lack of stable economic demand, as these erode investment, innovation, and productivity. Only public policies that reinstate progressive taxation and limit corporate power, they argue, will create the stable economies that generate prosperity for all citizens.

As another line of attack, labour market researchers and sociologists have shown the benefits of higher rates of unionization, stricter labour laws, and better public social and training programs. The ten-year comparative Sage research program on low-wage work concluded that countries with strong collective bargaining systems were critical to ensuring income equality and reducing low-wage work (Gautie and Schmitt 2010). But just as important in countries where bargaining systems were not as comprehensive, governments whose policies supported high minimum and median wages were also able to minimize wage

inequality and the impacts of low pay (Schmitt 2012; Schulten 2014). Training and childcare programs, meanwhile, deliver a range of non-wage benefits to citizens that ensure men and women, young and old, can find a job while easing the strain of work-life balance on families. They also serve to lower long-term social costs associated with inequality and poverty, while substantially improving standards of living and productivity (Atkinson 2015; Crouch 2015; Morel, Palier, and Palime 2012).

Moreover, in contrast to supply-side economic arguments that have long suggested that there is a policy trade off between 'high-road' wages and worker-friendly policies and growth in employment, much recent international research has shown that no such relationships exist. Countries like Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, for example, not only have the most egalitarian labour markets, but also the highest aggregate levels of employment. The United States, however, not only has limited labour and employment regulations, along with the largest low-wage workforce; it has among the worst aggregate employment rates and the lowest levels of employment among youth and those with low educational attainment (OECD 2015). These developments have strongly underscored that there is no trade off between employment and more 'inclusive' labour laws and policies that ensure broad-based prosperity. Rather, better labour market protections and more 'inclusive' institutions are typical to economies that have higher capital intensity, better productivity, and a better-educated and more secure workforce, with far fewer social problems (Kenworthy 2008).

Finally, recent research has also highlighted that dealing with labour market problems will require more than simply childcare, education, and better-targeted social policies – as postulated by theories of New Social Risks (NSR)(Bonoli and Natali 2011; Cantillon and Vandenbroucke 2013). NSR arguments have recently claimed that many of the old risks that workers used to face, such as unemployment, low wages, and lack of pensions or health care, are a thing of the past or – at least –are not major problems facing a 21st century workforce. So much has changed, it is claimed, with less hierarchical work systems and increased social mobility, that government money and priority should be redirected away from unemployment insurance and labour law enforcement and towards child care that supports women and employment, as well as towards education and active labour market training so that individuals could retrain when needed. Such a shift in public policy, it is now often argued, offers the best pathway out of poverty, allowing workers to enter into labour markets and lead a more productive life.

But as the outcomes of the financial crisis have demonstrated, employment security is still very much critical to any economic and political agenda that addresses globalization and inequality. With the collapse of banks and mortgage markets, individuals could hardly be seen as the ones responsible for ensuring their employment, nor would any level of education improve employability once businesses had shut their doors (Crouch 2011a). As corporations continued to shift

investment and employment to other parts of the world, it was also clear that more social investment and childcare programs would hardly be sufficient for tackling inequality or the unequal distributions of income that were at the heart of the crisis.

It has become equally apparent that the official emphasis on deregulation – or the simple removal of labour market issues from the policy agenda – has only worsened labour market outcomes. More people have become unemployed, more are now underemployed, and more workers are subject to non-standard employment and low-wage work than ever before (OECD 2015; Standing 2014). Indeed, with the growth of markets and more powerful global firms, low-wage work and insecure employment have been part and parcel of firm strategies to expand workplace flexibility, outsource, and increase temporary employment (Doogan 2009). Weaker labour laws have also contributed to the loss of job security and wage suppression as firms have sought to take advantage of institutional changes to lower costs. Nor have global credit markets provided any alternative source of income security, with rising debt levels and ever more volatile financial markets providing little certainty to individuals facing job loss or uncertain work lives.

Consequently, the risks of unemployment, low earnings, and job insecurity are as present as ever. As in the 1930s, governments confront the prospects of inequality and labour insecurity undermining consumer demand and consumer confidence. In these circumstances, what economists such as Robert Reich (2015) and the Nobel prize-winning Joseph Stiglitz (2011, 2013) and many others are advocating is a range of labour-supportive reforms, from strong labour laws and collective bargaining institutions, to income supporting employment insurance systems, to restrictions on working hours and arbitrary dismissal. Public pensions that provide stable incomes in retirement are also a necessity to create economies that work for citizens rather than business elites. All these reforms are needed, they arque – just as much as training and childcare policies – to restore economies to good health and improve the working conditions of the majority of citizens. Labour laws, bargaining institutions, and employment protection are not only essential in moderating the excesses of capitalism and curbing the worst tendencies of global competition; they are also critical for redistributing income to workers and providing the macro-economic demand that drives economic growth.

Better Labour Law and Increased Minimum Wages

Given that a path to sustainable economic growth and job creation continues to elude policy makers, what kinds of policies would be beneficial for economic growth and more equitable income distribution? Income from waged work and self-employment continues to account for the vast majority of individual and family income – typically more than 80 percent (Salverda and Haas 2014). This mean's that worker's and their families' well-being depends on what they earn from

work. But it also means that is the institutions that regulate labour markets – labour law and collective bargaining, minimum wages, and regulations on employment contract – that are most crucial for ensuring more equitable distributions of income.

Most current economic policy focuses on reducing labour costs and reforming labour law and regulation so that employer's can increase the 'flexibility' of their labour forces and hire more part-time and temporary employees. However, if improvements were to reverse this focus, and seek a more expansive wage policy then not only would wages begin to better track productivity growth but also increase the overall wage share and boost aggregate demand. Certainly governments can seek to increase employment direct job creation policies. But it is clear that unless governments also provide workers with sufficient power over their jobs and incomes, it is unlikely that good jobs and improved incomes will result.

Over the past several decades, unions have declined as has the bargaining coverage of collective agreements (Baccaro and Avdagic 2014; Crouch 2014). The financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures targeting labour reforms have often made this situation even more difficult (Schulten and Muller 2014; Hermann 2014; UNIFOR 2015). Reversing this will require governments building far more accommodating institutional context for workers to join unions and benefit from negotiated wages. In North America, this will mean at a minimum:

- 1. the reinstatement of worker's right to organize new workplaces without employer interference, as well as;
- 2. new legislative initiatives to ensure that workers have access to arbitration to ensure that new contracts are signed. Existing labour laws in many provinces and states currently constrain the abilities of workers to certify new workplaces. New organizing and certification procedures will provide the first step for workers to counter wider trends of poorer job quality and lower wages.
- 3. Also required will be stronger labour boards with real enforcement mechanisms to ensure that employers abide by laws.

Equally important are improved minimum wages, and minimum wages that are pegged at a basic standard of two-thirds of the national/provincial median wage. Minimum wages are supposed to provide a minimum level of earnings for those at the bottom of the pay scale. But over the past few decades, more workers are working at or near the minimum wage, and in most states and provinces, minimum wages have fallen well below fifty percent of local median hourly wages (Block 2015; Minimum Wage Advisory Panel 2014). Economic policy today often stresses the costs of raising minimum wages, arguing that employers cannot afford any increase to labour costs. But there is substantial empirical evidence for the negligible effect on overall employment, and often many positive effects from more

workers entering the labour market. In addition, at the macro-economic level, higher minimum wages, improved minimum ages would improve consumption and aggregate demand.

4. Introduce a basic minimum wage tied to two-thirds of the national/provincial median wage.

To improve jobs and income distribution, better labour market institutions are required. Better labor law and minimum wages will help prevent some of the erosion in better paying jobs, and help in the creation of additional higher quality jobs. With better labour market institutions in place, workers will have more opportunity to exercise some say over their work activities and permit them some possibility to participate in wider decisions about their work lives.

Enhanced Economic Security

The growth in low-wage and precarious employment presents a number of challenges to workers and their families. To help workers deal with this insecurity and unpredictability, better income supports and public services are required to protect people. Economists have continued to insist over the past few decades that unemployment insurance and training programs were to be reduced, to incentivize the unemployed to take what jobs they could find (Standing 2002). Other policy recommendations that officials implemented included reducing other forms of social protection to a minimum for fear that these would impede job creation and firm hiring, especially in the service sector (Janoski, Luke, and Oliver 2014; Standing 2002). However, making these changes has not improved labour market outcomes, and the financial crisis has far more profound consequences for employment than cutbacks to income benefits. Now in-work poverty has increased, and the vulnerability of all workers to poverty has deepened. Enhancing economic security would reverse these trends.

5. Expanded and improved unemployment insurance.

Better unemployment insurance is vital given current high levels of unemployment, job insecurity, and the inadequacy of current benefit programs. In Canada, less than 45 percent of the unemployed qualify for unemployment insurance benefits, and benefits are lower and last for shorter periods of time (Grundy and Laliberte Rudman 2016; Porter 2015). Moreover, those in non-standard

employment are at a notable disadvantage, as they lack the work hours required to qualify for benefits. This has led more workers to fall into working 'poverty traps' where they lack the income and security necessary to make ends meet, and are often forced into a series of low-wage jobs with low-pay and no benefits.

Improving unemployment insurance would thus have a number of benefits. First, it would help those workers who have lost jobs avoid major income losses. Unemployment insurance was initially conceived as insurance against the risk of job loss. Reinstating this principle would be a first step in ensuring more adequate benefits as well as providing a better base for stabilizing demand and distributing income to the poor. Second, extending access to unemployment benefits to all workers in non-standard and low-wage work would give these workers far greater income security, and far more likely to escape long-term poverty. Countries with better and more accessible benefits, such as Denmark and Sweden, have the lost rates of income poverty and working poverty.

6. Universal Child Care

A basic public service that ensures equality is the provision of universal childcare. Canada and the United States currently rank near the bottom among all advanced industrial countries in terms of their provision of childcare and family supports. Yet the benefits of universal child care are well known (OECD 2007), increasing numbers of working mothers, better wages for women, improved social integration, and far lower levels of family and child poverty. Canada and the United States, though, continue have among the highest rates of family poverty and the highest rates of poverty among single mothers. Introducing universal public child care, along with better maternity benefits, and enhanced family benefits would significantly enhance economic security.

The potential for universal childcare and better family policies clearly exists. The debates in its favor since the 1960s are long-standing, and feminist movements have long pressed for its introduction in Canada and elsewhere (Friendly and Prentice 2009). Moreover, the increase in women's labour market participation and their segmentation in in precarious, non-standard employment, have all provided reasons for worker and their families to push for improved family and care policies. That universal child care continues to be at the front of many progressive political agendas, also means that it remains highly recognized issue (Bonoli 2013).

Political Mobilization

As many have noted, the problem is not in the lack of progressive policy options or evidence that supports the benefits of worker-friendly policies for societies and economies. The problem is in politics - and above all the power of business to influence democracy and public policy (Crouch 2013; Luce 2014). Today, many businesses have the power to simply threaten to relocate to friendlier regulatory environments. Firms also regularly back political campaigns, lobby, conduct advocacy and advertising campaigns, and fund research that supports their interest. And in the wake of the financial crisis, business lobbies have spent unprecedented amounts of money denouncing government regulation while also calling for greater 'austerity' in government spending, and the retrenchment of social spending alongside greater labour market flexibility (Evans and Mcbride forthcoming). Consequently, despite citizen concerns about the problems of unregulated labour markets, public officials have too often clung to the belief that any measures that offer people better incomes and greater security will only harm the bottom line of business, undermine firms' ability to compete and therefore to employ people. Such a view presents a fundamental hurdle to a more progressive policy agenda.

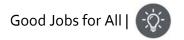
An equally large challenge is that many social democratic parties have argued that labour laws and employment protections are no longer needed and can therefore be dropped from their political agenda (Evans and Schmidt 2012; Keating and McCrone 2013; Sassoon 2010). In part, this reversal can be explained by the decline of industry and blue collar unions, which eroded the support base of social democratic parties and forced parties of the left to look for electoral support among the less organized and more affluent, including from businesses, in order to compete electorally against better-financed parties of the right. The result has been that many social democratic parties have become increasingly silent on issues of labour market inequality and the need to counter corporate power, and have often cut their institutional ties to organized labour. This presents a second major problem to the development of an alternative democratic politics.

Then there are the obstacles facing organized labour, especially in Canada and the United States, in reconstituting itself into an organized political force that can mobilize citizens and counterbalance corporate interests (Peters 2012; Rosenfeld 2014). In the past, unions were often able to motivate workers to volunteer in elections, work in communities, and educate others about political issues. Throughout the post-war period, many unions used their organizing abilities to provide a counterweight to the efforts of business, and press for pro-labour legislation. Increasingly, this is no longer true. Unions have seen their membership decline, especially in the private sector, and even when they have backed political parties and candidates, they have seen little return for their efforts. This is a situation that increasingly parallels the 1930s and the Great Depression, when limited union power coincided with great employer latitude and ever-rising levels of inequality (Milkman 2013). This weakening of labour's power means that average

citizens often lack a critical organization that can bring everyday people into politics and that can champion laws and policies to reduce inequality.

Countering these problems will certainly be a challenge for workers and citizens, and there is no quick fix on the horizon. Both activists and labour organizers face the everyday challenge of organizing and retaining the resources necessary to maintain a foothold in politics long enough to make politicians listen. But if the right policy battles are chosen – ones that not only change programs but change the way people think and act – and if social movements can find a common purpose in rebuilding and reinventing democracy for all, then citizens can get their troubled democracies back on track. Organized labour is one of the most likely associations to have the power and capacity to do this work either in alliance with other movements or with political parties. But for a more egalitarian society to emerge, tremendous political will and organizing are required among many citizens and social movements.

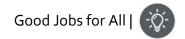
On their own, labour markets do not ensure living wages, decent benefits, or long-term security. Nor do labour markets ensure that income will be distributed in ways that promote a stable economy. Restoring democracy and tackling inequality in workplaces and governments will thus have to take place on multiple fronts. Yet central to this restoration must be replacing the current models inequality and low-low-wage insecure employment with 'good jobs for all'. Equally critical is that citizens develop the laws, regulations, and public policies that will build the common good and that foster broad prosperity. A serious challenge to neoliberalism and austerity will require nothing less.



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