

Campaign to raise minimum wage launched



In this file photo, Paul Chislett of the Windsor Worker's Action Centre, hits the streets with some volunteers following an informational rally Friday April 27, 2012. (NICK BRANCACCIO/The Windsor Star)



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MINIMUM WAGES IN CANADA AND NEIGHBOURING U.S. STATES

Alberta: \$9.75

B.C.: \$10.25

Manitoba: \$10.25

New Brunswick: \$10.00

Newfoundland: \$10.00

Northwest Territories: \$10.00

Nova Scotia: \$10.30

Nunavut: \$11.00

Ontario: \$10.25

P.E.I.: \$10.00

Quebec: \$10.15

Saskatchewan: \$10.00

Yukon: \$9.00

The following is In U.S. dollars

Michigan: \$7.40

Ohio: \$7.85

Indiana: \$7.25

New York: \$7.25

Minnesota: 6:15

Wisconsin: \$7.25

Illinois: \$8.25

A coalition of labour, workers' rights, anti-poverty and social justice groups will launch the Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage Wednesday by holding a day of action in several cities across the province.

The goal is to lobby the provincial government to boost the minimum wage to \$14 per hour. The minimum wage in Ontario is \$10.25 and hasn't been raised in three years.

The Windsor-area campaign will launch in September and days of action will be held on the 14th day of each month across Ontario until the government panel studying what to do with the minimum wage issues its report this winter.

"It used to be the minimum wage was a stepping stone to a better job, but now it has become a living wage for so many people," said Paul Chislett, president of the Windsor Workers' Action Centre that is organizing local activities.

"It's taking several jobs to add up to something. Workers are fearful and it speaks to the relationship between workers and employers."

Days of action activities Wednesday are planned in Toronto, Ottawa, Oshawa, Hamilton, Peterborough, Guelph, the York region, Kitchener-Waterloo and Sudbury.

Chislett said the Windsor campaign will follow similar formats of lobbying, educating and advocating when the campaign begins here.

He admits the \$14 figure is one he knows catches people's attention.

"It wasn't just picked out of a hat," Chislett said.

"It's achievable and would help people rise out of poverty. It's 10 per cent above what would put people at the poverty line."

Chislett said he understands the anxiety talk of such a minimum wage creates for small business, but said after the initial adjustment he feels the benefits of such a move would ripple through the economy in terms of greater spending power for people.

Though he would prefer to jump the rate to \$14 quickly, Chislett admitted the government is likely to phase in any increases.

An increase to \$14 would give Ontario the highest minimum wage in North America. The top rate currently in Canada is Nunavut at \$11.00 while Washington State tops the American list at \$9.19 U.S.

Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce president Matt Marchand preferred not to offer a comment about the proposed \$14 per hour rate, but did welcome the process the government has launched.

“Everyone has the right to voice their opinion and when the Ontario Chamber of Commerce finishes consulting with its membership it will certainly express that opinion,” Marchand said.

“I do think it’s good that the government is consulting with all groups to create a mechanism on how to handle the minimum wage. We have to make sure we maintain a competitive position.”

Retired University of Windsor business professor Alfie Morgan calls the issue of raising the minimum wage a ‘hand grenade.’

“It’s (\$14 per hour) not unreasonable considering the rise in the cost of living,” Morgan said. “You can’t live on \$10.25 even if you’re lucky enough to find a job.

“However, the No. 1 victim of this will be small business. You’re asking them to take a 40 per cent increase in labour costs.

“Regrettably, 98 per cent of businesses in Canada have one to five employees. There will be casualties.”

Morgan said with Windsor being a border community it’s particularly vulnerable to companies setting up shop in Michigan, where the minimum wage is \$7.40 U.S., and shipping product across the border if the imbalance in labour costs gets too significant.

Morgan said another issue in the wage debate are corporations who pay minimum wage despite being highly profitable.

“They should be ashamed of themselves for not paying better wages considering the huge cash amounts they’re sitting on,” Morgan said.

“This is why in the United States you are seeing a movement to force profitable corporations to pay \$14 an hour. They have the ability to pay.”

Morgan said the complexity of the minimum wage debate might require a tiered solution based on the employer’s size and ability to pay.

Several American states already have similar set-ups based on the number of employees or annual revenues.

If the government prefers to keep the minimum low, Morgan believes income supplements might become necessary for people to survive in the face of the rising cost of living.

“The cost of a wage hike will be passed onto the consumer or the taxpayer gets hit for income supplements,” Morgan said.

“In the end, it’s the same person that gets the bill.”