

Ontario to raise minimum wage, ensure equal pay for part-time workers



CHRIS THOMPSON, WINDSOR STAR

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Brian Hogan, president of the Windsor District Labour Council, is seen in this November 2016 photo. *JASON KRYK / WINDSOR STAR*

Local reaction is generally positive to the Liberal government's promise of sweeping changes to labour laws that would benefit millions of workers, including raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2019, ensuring equal pay for part-time employees and increasing vacation entitlements.

"There's a lot of good here, for sure," said Brian Hogan, president of the Windsor and District Labour Council. "We congratulate the Liberals and a pat on the back to Ontario workers making their voice heard through the process."

Premier Kathleen Wynne made the announcement at a campaign-style media event Tuesday, surrounded by supporters in construction and health-care unions, and activists who had called for the minimum wage increase.

Ten per cent of Ontario workers currently make the minimum wage, Wynne said, and 30 per cent make less than \$15 an hour.

"That's millions of people, many of them supporting a family on a wage that just doesn't go far enough," she said. "They're raising children, saving up for their education, wondering if they'll ever be able to get ahead on the monthly budget, let alone own a home."

Hogan said he's particularly happy with the proposed changes to regulations regarding precarious work and equal pay for part-time and temporary workers.

"That's very good, fair scheduling, those kinds of things," Hogan said.

Matt Marchand, president and CEO of the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber has been part of a successful living wage campaign for years.

"We have a very generous and progressive business community here in Windsor-Essex and we're one of the leaders in that regard," Marchand said.

However, there is some concern about the impact the changes could have on small businesses and the agricultural sector.

"Our small business community and our agricultural community have endured tremendous costs in terms of an increase in electricity prices, the carbon tax," said Marchand.

“We’re also concerned about our cost structure and the ability to keep people employed and hire as many people as we can here in the region.”

The minimum wage increase will be phased-in gradually. It will rise with inflation, as scheduled, from \$11.40 currently to \$11.60 in October. Then, the government plans to bump it up to \$14 an hour on Jan. 1, 2018 and \$15 the following year.

Wynne also announced plans to ensure part-time workers will get equal pay for doing work equal to full-time staff, and that the minimum vacation entitlement will be increased. Instead of getting two weeks of vacation, workers will be able to get three weeks of paid vacation a year after five years with a company.

The proposed changes are in response to a government-commissioned report released last week that included 173 recommendations addressing precarious work.

The Changing Workplaces review concluded that new technology, a shrinking manufacturing sector and fewer union jobs, among other factors, have left approximately one-third of Ontario’s 6.6 million workers vulnerable.

The province’s changes to workplace laws will also establish fairer rules for scheduling, including making employers pay three hours of wages if they cancel a shift with fewer than 48 hours notice, Wynne said.

Personal emergency leave would also be expanded. Currently it is only available to employees at companies with more than 50 people, but proposed legislation would ensure all employees in the province get 10 days per year, two of them paid, Wynne said.

“Change in the workplace isn’t just on the horizon, it’s here,” Wynne said. “People are working longer, jobs are less secure, benefits are harder to come by and protections are fewer and fewer.”

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