

**ADDRESSING YOUTH
UNEMPLOYMENT
& UNDER-
EMPLOYMENT**

Submission to the Premier's Council on Youth Opportunities

February 27, 2014 | Toronto, Ontario

Addressing Youth Unemployment and Underemployment: Submission to the Premier's Council on Youth Opportunities, Government of Ontario

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Acknowledgement of Contributors

This document has been prepared collaboratively by the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario, Ontario Common Front, Ontario Federation of Labour, Unifor and Workers United Canada Council, with contributions and feedback from the Workers' Action Centre, Parkdale Community Legal Services, United Food and Commercial Workers, Public Service Alliance of Canada, Canadian Labour Congress, CUPE-Ontario, Canadian Apprenticeship Forum and Students Against Unpaid Internship Scams.



Background

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In Ontario, the recent recession and the austerity measures that followed have had a disproportionate impact on young people. Their struggles foretell a broader low-wage future for all Ontarians if our government does not change course. The scope and depth of the challenges facing young workers demand a new, progressive approach to public policy and managing the economy. Young people across the province are calling on the provincial government to put job creation and the well-being of people and communities ahead of deficit reduction and corporate profits.

In 2013, Ontario's youth unemployment was at 16 percent, more than double the general rate and well above the national youth unemployment rate of 13.7 percent. Ontario's job market for young people is the worst in the country outside of Atlantic Canada.¹ In the hardest hit regions of the province, including Windsor, Oshawa, Brantford and London, youth unemployment is over 20 percent. Even more worrisome is the employment rate: only half of young Ontarians have paid employment. The employment rate is even lower in Toronto at only 43.5 percent, which is likely driving young people out of the province to look for work.² Just to return to pre-recession levels of employment, over 89,000 jobs still need to be created for young people in Ontario.³ The so-called economic recovery is in reality leaving young workers behind.

Not only are youth having difficulty finding work, but those who do are often forced to work multiple part-time or contract jobs and are stuck in jobs for which they are over-qualified. Some estimates suggest that more than one in four young people in Canada are underemployed.⁴ A full one third of post-secondary graduates aged 25 to 29 move into low-skilled jobs after graduation,⁵ while about half of all youth work in retail and hospitality – sectors that are notorious for part-time hours, low pay (often minimum wage), a lack of job security and inadequate skills training.⁶ Making matters worse, more and more young people are hanging on to these jobs longer as they struggle to find stable, meaningful long-term employment that utilizes their skills and education.

A major contributing factor to the challenges young people face in the labour market is the growth of precarious and low-wage work in the economy as a whole. In Ontario, 33 percent of workers are in precarious jobs,* which are characterized primarily by job insecurity and lack of benefits.⁷ The percentage of workers earning minimum wage has doubled in Ontario in less than 10 years. We presently have over 500,000 workers⁸ making minimum wage, while almost a million workers make less than \$14.25 an hour.⁹

The challenges facing young people in Ontario today are magnified for those from equity-seeking groups, such as aboriginal youth, youth of colour, youth with disabilities, LGBTQ youth and immigrant youth, who live in a society that often does not acknowledge their history or value their experiences. Discrimination based on race, language and other factors can create barriers to finding employment, while involvement with the criminal justice system or living in neighbourhoods without access to effective and affordable transportation can also create challenges for capable youth looking for employment. Racialized and newcomer youth, as well as youth living in poverty, face higher risks of unemployment. For example, in 2006, youth unemployment rates for Aboriginals were 21 percent compared to 14 percent for the non-Aboriginal population.¹⁰

To compound the issue of unemployment and underemployment, young people also face other financial challenges as a result of government policies that threaten public services and social programs. For example, inadequate pensions and cuts to Old Age Security and Employment Insurance will have a greater impact on young workers who will have lower wages, a longer working life and less support for themselves and their families. In addition, post-secondary education is becoming more and more expensive, leaving students with record high levels of debt.

To cope with financial pressures and shifts in the labour market, more young people are staying at home longer. In 2011, 42.3 percent of young adults aged 20 to 29 in Canada lived with their parents, much higher than 32.1 percent in 1991 and 26.9 percent in 1981. In Ontario, the number is even higher, with 50.6 percent of people aged 20 to 29 living at home in 2011.¹¹ This is just one indication that growing numbers of young people are delaying decisions related to home ownership, family planning and saving for retirement, the impacts of which reverberate throughout the economy.

* When precarious work is measured as workers who experience three of these four indicators: no pension plan, small-sized employer, no union coverage and low income.

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There is a strong appetite for solutions to youth unemployment and underemployment. Unless there is bold action now, today's youth will be the first generation to face a lower quality of life than their parents.

Process

In the spring of 2013 the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL)'s Young Workers Committee responded to the growing challenges facing youth in Ontario. Working with labour, student and community groups, the Committee organized a solutions-based forum to spark a conversation about progressive solutions to the youth employment crisis in Ontario.

On September 27, the "Enough with Youth Un(der)employment!" Forum was co-hosted by the OFL, Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario, Unifor, United Food and Commercial Workers, Canadian Labour Congress and Workers United Canada Council. Over 80 young workers and leaders from across Ontario gathered at Ryerson University to discuss solutions to youth unemployment and underemployment.* On the same day, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Ontario Office released groundbreaking research on youth unemployment in Ontario that revealed the scale of the challenge we face.**

Informed by their own experiences with unemployment and underemployment, participants at the Forum outlined areas in need of consideration by the province. The recommendations that are laid out in this document draw from and build upon that discussion and feedback.

Going Forward

A structural inequality between younger and older workers is taking hold in the Ontario economy. To address the full scope of this problem, the provincial government must make a meaningful shift in their approach to boosting the economy and strengthening the labour market. Ontario needs to reject austerity and chart a new path forward – one that sees government embrace its role as a key driver of the economy.

* To see a recap of event, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NB8N2O53V0>

** The full paper is available here: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/young-and-jobless>

1. Job Creation for Youth

Despite all the attention being paid to addressing the so-called skills gap,¹² the real challenge facing our economy is a jobs gap. Recent data shows that there are seven unemployed Ontarians for every job vacancy in the province.¹³ To ensure a bright future for the next generation the provincial government must make job creation a top priority, with a specific focus on young workers.

Link Local Infrastructure Spending to Youth Job Creation

The Ontario government has allocated \$35 billion over three years to modernize infrastructure.¹⁴ This would be an opportune time to link these monies with an aggressive push toward youth job creation and training.

The Ontario government should establish a policy guideline requiring successful bidders of publicly-funded local infrastructure projects to allocate a portion of the jobs (e.g. 20 percent) to workers under the age of 30. This could be accomplished through future Request For Proposal requirements or through the expanded use of Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) that focus on communities of unemployed and vulnerable youth, such as the one currently being negotiated by community and labour groups with Metrolinx in the construction of the Eglinton-Scarborough Crosstown Line.

Recommendation:

A portion of all jobs created by future public infrastructure projects should be allocated for young workers. This threshold should be determined for each project by government, labour, and community representatives and should at a minimum match the percentage of young workers in the labour force.

Expand the Ontario Youth Employment Fund to Support Long-Term Jobs

At the core of the Ontario government's Youth Jobs Strategy is the \$195 million Youth Employment Fund. The Fund is designed to boost the number of young workers on employer payrolls, primarily through wage subsidies. It must be closely monitored, with job outcomes reported to the public. According to the government's own estimates, in its first five months the program provided 5,792 four to six month job and training opportunities for young workers.¹⁵ As a whole, the Youth Jobs Strategy aims to help 30,000 young Ontarians gain work experience. This is insufficient, given the scope of the crisis.

Recommendation:

The Youth Employment Fund should be expanded and extended beyond its two-year time frame and be accompanied by additional guidelines that ensure that the positions created provide decent wages, offer a training component and create genuine opportunities for advancement and permanent employment.

Expand Job Opportunities in the Public Sector

Extending incentives to the private sector in a push to put youth into jobs is important, but an examination of what government can do as an employer is also important. Today, fewer than 20,000 young workers are employed in public administration jobs – a far cry from the mid-1970s, when government directly employed nearly 50,000 young workers. The average number of young workers employed in summer jobs has also taken a hit. In 2013, 65,000 fewer young workers were employed, compared to summer employment levels in 2007.¹⁶

The Québec government recently announced an ambitious “community service” employment project to help build skills and foster community engagement through paid employment, with funds increasing incrementally over three years and topping out at \$10 million per year. The jobs created would be oriented towards providing benefits to the community and will likely take place in public institutions, such as schools and community centres.¹⁷ As an employer the Ontario government should develop a similar initiative to help deliver the skills, training and

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employment experience young people need, especially during summer months. The program should focus on vulnerable communities and regions, towns or cities with the highest levels of youth unemployment, and could be facilitated through the province's current Jobs for Youth and Aboriginal Youth Work Exchange Programs.

/// Recommendation:

Launch an ambitious, multi-year youth summer employment initiative designed to create training and employment opportunities for young Ontarians throughout the public sector.

2. Ensuring Young Workers Have Good Jobs

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In today's economy, young workers are increasingly likely to be working in jobs that are low-paid, insecure and without access to benefits. To meaningfully address the needs of Ontario's youth, the reality of the changing employment landscape must be considered and action must be taken to mitigate the growth of low-wage and precarious employment in both the short and long-term.

Increase the Minimum Wage

The recent announcement that Ontario's minimum wage will increase to \$11 per hour still leaves full-time workers living 16 percent below the poverty line.¹⁸ This does not even account for those unable to find full-time employment. A \$14 per hour minimum wage would lift full-time workers above the poverty line.¹⁹

Over 60 percent of all minimum wage earners are under the age of 25.²⁰ A higher minimum wage will allow young Ontarians to earn a decent wage. In today's context of a 'jobs gap' and rising tuition fees, a higher minimum wage could help set young Ontarians on a path towards independence and self-sufficiency by allowing them to live independent of their parents and to pay off education-related debts.

The current differential minimum wage for students under the age of 18 who work less than 28 hours a week is unfair for young workers. A higher minimum wage for all young workers would ensure equal pay for equal work and promote greater financial security and stability earlier in a young worker's life.

//// Recommendation:

Raise the minimum wage to \$14 per hour and eliminate the student minimum wage so that all young workers earn a decent wage.

Update and Enforce Employment Standards

The majority of Ontario's young workers rely on employment standards to protect their rights at work. When violations take place it is too often up to individual workers to ensure their rights are protected. However, most workers don't take this step for fear of reprisal – including being fired – and the lack of legal support. This often leaves young workers to put up with substandard conditions until they can find another job. Making matters worse, there is no real cost to employers who violate employment standards. In 2009-2010, 20,762 claims were investigated, finding that employers owed \$64.4 million to workers. Yet only 86 fines and 298 tickets (of only \$360 each) were issued.²¹ There must be a real financial deterrent to stop employers from violating employment standards.

Ours is a fast-changing world of work that is increasingly part-time and centred around contracts, with many workers employed indirectly through temporary agencies. Despite this reality, our labour laws are still based almost exclusively on a standard employment relationship developed decades ago. Employers take advantage of these huge gaps to create new forms of work that shift costs and liabilities for employment onto intermediaries and workers themselves. For example, by misclassifying workers as independent contractors employers shift costs and liabilities down the chain of production. A lack of empowerment in the workplace also leads to young workers being at a higher risk of injury and death on the job.

The gaps in the *Employment Standards Act* have also enabled employers to drive down wages and working conditions for part-time, contract and temporary workers relative to full-time permanent workers. Ontario lags behind many jurisdictions that have moved to establish a framework of equality among workers doing the same work but under different forms of employment (i.e. temporary, contract, part-time or casual). The United Kingdom and many other European countries* have recognized the need to regulate temporary agency work to ensure equal pay and working conditions.²² Québec has also taken important steps to ensure equality between part-time and full-time workers by prohibiting employers from paying lower wages to workers doing the same tasks simply because the person usually works fewer hours.²³

* Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, UK, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.

Recommendations:

Commit additional resources to targeted proactive enforcement of employment standards and health and safety regulations in sectors with high youth employment.

Update the *Employment Standards Act* to include stiffer penalties for violations, ensure that all workers are classified as employees unless the employer provides proof to the contrary, and guarantee no worker is paid less for performing the same tasks in the same workplace regardless of their form of employment.

Expand Organizing Rights

Union organizing is widely acknowledged as an effective strategy for turning bad jobs into good jobs, lifting workers out of poverty and protecting workers' rights. However, unfavourable labour law and shifts in workplace environments have increased the barriers to union organizing. For example, workplaces are no longer predominantly large single locations. With the expansion of the service sector, workplaces are increasingly smaller and geographically spread out, which decreases the likelihood that workers get to know each other.²⁴ The increasing rate of temporary employment also means more workers are experiencing shorter job tenure.

To ensure every young worker has the right to join a union, labour law needs to be updated to reflect the changing labour market and provide better protection from employer intimidation and reprisal. Research shows that being required to hold mandatory union certification votes makes it more difficult for workers to organize, especially those working in small and disparate workplaces with high turn-over and large numbers of part-time workers.²⁵ Young workers often find themselves working in these kinds of environments and would benefit from the implementation of card-check certification across all sectors of the Ontario economy. Having a majority of employees sign union membership cards should be sufficient to express a desire to join a union and get certified.

Many important labour law reforms are also included in *Bill 129, Labour Relations Amendment Act (Employee Rights)*, such as protecting successor rights in the contract sector, early disclosure of employee lists, reinstatement during organizing campaigns, neutral and off-site voting, re-employment after strike and posting employee bill of rights posters in workplaces.²⁶ These measures would go a long way to support organizing efforts and help ensure every young worker in Ontario has the right to join a union.

Recommendation:

Immediately pass and implement Bill 129 and extend card-based union certification to all workers in Ontario.

3. Supporting Education and Training

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An educated and skilled workforce is a crucial pillar of a thriving economy. As Ontario faces an aging population and a decline in labour force growth, long-term investments must be made in education, employment supports and skills training to improve productivity, spur innovation and foster an inclusive labour market. Accessible education and training can also help to increase social and economic equality. Ontario's education and training strategy must reflect a vision of the future where opportunities for good jobs are available to all Ontarians, especially those facing barriers.

Make Public Education Accessible to All

While employment numbers lag and jobs become increasingly precarious, young people in Ontario are also facing high tuition fees for post-secondary education and record levels of student debt. The average debt after a four-year degree in Canada for a student with public and private debt is \$37,000.²⁷ High tuition fees have a disproportionate impact on lower income families, limiting their ability to access post-secondary education. The participation of students from families with income over \$100,000 is 81 percent, while participation for those families with incomes below \$25,000 is only 58 percent.²⁸ With an estimated 70 percent of jobs now requiring post-secondary education,²⁹ access to education directly impacts young peoples' chance of finding employment.

Reducing, and ultimately eliminating, tuition fees would dramatically lower student debt and help ensure equal opportunity in the labour market for all Ontarians.

//// Recommendation:

Tuition fees for all students and all programs should be reduced by 30 percent over three years. Funds dedicated to the Ontario Tuition Grant and provincial education tax credits should be reallocated toward this reduction.

Address Unpaid Internships

In the context of high youth unemployment, employers are exploiting young workers by using unpaid internships to access free labour. The idea of unpaid labour is fundamentally unfair and inequitable for people trying to enter the workforce, but there are an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 unpaid interns in Canada.³⁰ The proliferation of unpaid internships also has negative consequences for the economy when it displaces paid work and the associated income tax that could be generated to pay for government programs. In addition, the reliance on unpaid work reduces the availability of entry-level jobs and provides employers with a disincentive for investing in on-the-job training. The result is that financial risk is shifted to young workers themselves.

To better protect unpaid interns, steps must be taken to clarify the rules, eliminate exclusions and improve enforcement. For example, *Bill 146, Stronger Workplaces for a Stronger Economy Act, 2014*, which is currently before the House, should be passed and implemented so that interns are covered by the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. Further, most non-academic unpaid internships in Ontario are illegal under current laws.³¹ However, since enforcement is complaint-based, employers face little recourse. Making matters worse, young workers are less likely to have the necessary resources to file a complaint or take legal action against their employer, while they may also be hesitant to do so because it could compromise their chances of obtaining a paid position in their field.

Recent graduates trying to gain relevant work experience make up a significant portion of unpaid interns, but unpaid co-ops, placements and internships are also widely integrated in academic programming at Ontario colleges and universities. If public institutions were required to make clear guidelines about these programs public, it would provide increased accountability and better protection for young workers.

Recommendations:

Invest in the collection of data about the incidence of unpaid internships in Ontario and commit additional resources to proactive enforcement of the legal restrictions surrounding unpaid internships.

Review and clarify all policies and statutes affecting young workers in the school-to-work transition with a view to eliminating gaps, ambiguities and exclusions that result in unpaid interns doing work they should be paid to do.

Require all public institutions to release clear guidelines and standards about internship, co-op and work placement programs, especially when these programs are linked to academic requirements.

Support Apprenticeships:

Apprenticeships are an important process through which skills and expertise are passed on from one generation to another. Ensuring their continued success is a joint responsibility of employers, government and unions. Mechanisms and incentives to ensure employers are investing in training and apprenticeships are crucial. In Québec, employers are required to invest one percent of their payroll in education and training for their employees.³²

Measures should be taken to value all post-secondary education routes equally, including apprenticeship and skills-based training. By educating teachers about career opportunities for their students in the skilled trades and reinstating mandatory introduction to trades classes in the public education system, more interest and respect can be fostered for the trades. Furthermore, it could also help impress upon future tradespeople the importance of math, science and problem-solving skills to these occupations and ensure that students who want to pursue the trades are not streamed out of academic programming.

Recommendations:

Implement a training levy in Ontario to ensure employers are investing in apprenticeships and other training.

Support measures that contribute to valuing all post-secondary routes equally, including re-incorporating the skilled trades into the elementary and secondary school curriculum.

Appendix: Response to Youth Jobs Strategy

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In the 2013 Ontario Budget, the government unveiled a Youth Jobs Strategy. Although the 30,000 jobs it aims to create for young people is a step in the right direction, it will fall short of the over 89,000 jobs needed just to return the province to 2008 youth employment rates.

At the heart of the Youth Jobs Strategy is the Youth Employment Fund, which provides \$195 million in funding for wage subsidies and training, upgrading or equipment for young workers. One of the strengths of the Fund is that it is intended to focus on areas with high youth unemployment, including at-risk youth, Aboriginal youth, recent immigrants, visible minority youth and youth in rural and northern communities. If measures are taken to ensure that the youth jobs created through this initiative have decent pay and opportunities for training and advancement, it could have a very positive impact for thousands of young Ontarians.

The Youth Jobs Strategy also includes a Business-Labour Connectivity and Training Fund. The \$25 million fund is for pilot initiatives that include youth training programs. Until the applications for funding through this initiative are reviewed, it will be difficult to understand its potential impact.

Other elements of the Youth Jobs Strategy are problematic because they emphasize industry partnership and entrepreneurship. Through the Ontario Youth Innovation Fund, the government is focusing on expanding commercial activity in Ontario's colleges and universities through increased funding to campus "accelerator centres." These centers are designed to link students to businesses and will result in post-secondary institutions subsidizing private research and providing cheap student labour and public resources to companies.

The \$45 million Ontario Youth Entrepreneurship Fund is focused on encouraging youth to start businesses. Pursuing a strategy of having young people create jobs for themselves by taking large financial risks in a tough economy must be approached cautiously, especially given the reality that many young people have record levels of debt and minimal labour market experience. Focusing on entrepreneurship represents a dangerous shift of responsibility for addressing the youth employment crisis from government and employers to young people themselves.

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