Kendra Levi-Paul asks New Brunswickers and their government to open their hearts and demand change for First Nations children

By OSCAR BAKER

Eleven-year-old Kendra Levi-Paul is asking the Government of New Brunswick to have a heart and fully enact Jordan’s Principle to guarantee First Nations children equal access to education, health care, and social services in Canada.

Standing on the steps of the Legislative Assembly on February 13, when temperatures reached -13 degrees Celsius with the windchill, Levi-Paul told the small crowd who came out to support her that “equality doesn’t always mean equal.” Joining her were youth performers T.J. Sock, Mason and Madison Milliea, as well as Aq̱támGaag Tsegunset Augustine who danced in traditional regalia. They were joined by Indigenous drummers who sang chants and drummed as they demanded change.

“We need better education and to protect the rights of the children and Indigenous people,” said Levi-Paul, who is Mi’kmaq and Wolastoq. Her parents are from New Brunswick’s two largest reserves, Eelispetg and Tobique First Nation and the sixth grader attends school in Listuguj First Nation in Quebec after moving there from Eelispetg.

“I would like our schools to be beautifully furnished spaces. Hundreds of people had to be turned away. In Listuguj, I saw spaces that were so small that they don’t even fit 30 students.”

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It's time for a higher N.B. minimum wage

By JEAN-CLAUDE BASQUE

It is time for New Brunswick to increase its minimum wage. And contrary to the view of opponents, there are many convincing arguments for adopting this policy change.

Consider that for the past 15 years, the number of workers at the minimum wage has fluctuated between six and ten per cent of the labour force. The majority of these workers have always been women. The percentage of teenagers, however, has decreased over the years, which means that almost sixty per cent of today's minimum-wage workers are twenty years and older.

The salary of minimum-wage workers has constantly fallen under the poverty line. Working conditions offered to minimum-wage workers are outdated. As 90 per cent of workers at the minimum wage are not unionized, their workplace falls under employment standards adopted by the provincial government. These standards are really basic and do not provide much coverage.

Presently, under the Employment Standards Act and Regulations, most minimum-wage workers don’t have sick leave, child care, family responsibilities or compassionate care paid leaves. They are only paid a half of the minimum-wage for hours worked after 44 hours during a work week. They get four per cent of vacation pay if they worked less than eight years and six per cent of vacation pay after eight years.

Most of the time, workers must pay for the required employers’ uniform since there is no mention in the Regulations that they have the right to the uniform. Each time there is talk of increasing the minimum wage or bringing forward better employer standards, we hear strong voices from the business community opposing these changes. One of their main arguments is that small and medium-sized businesses cannot absorb the increase in wages.

It is interesting to note that when you check this argument against the facts, we get a completely different picture. Indeed, between 2008 and 2018, the province has increased the minimum wage 12 times and the sky has not fallen. Further research into Statistics Canada’s database on the number of establishments by enterprise size reveals that for small and medium-sized businesses, the number of employees has increased in the last ten years.

This certainly goes against the urban myth that minimum-wage wages are just for teenagers. The same data shows that job losses occurred in large enterprises that employ 500 workers or more. This situation can be explained in part by the devastation of our industrial base, especially in the forestry sector, with the closing of pulp and paper mills and sawmills, the 2008-9 financial crisis, and the fluctuation of the Canadian dollar, but certainly not by increases to the minimum wage.

Raising the minimum wage brings a wide range of benefits for workers and their families, as well as for employers and the economy of the province.

First and foremost, any increase to the minimum wage puts more dollars in workers’ pockets. Minimum-wage workers and their families are struggling to provide for their basic needs. The cost of food, heating and rent increases every year. These are not luxuries; they are everyday necessities.

Extra income would enable workers to provide more necessities rather than having to choose what essential needs will have to be sacrificed. Not only does the family unit benefit from having a decent revenue, but the entire community benefits as well. Community services such as food banks, soup kitchens, school breakfast programs, and housing programs won’t be run thin on resources. There will be a decrease in the need for government help such as subsidies.

Higher wages will result in a lower turnover rate, which saves money for employers. Employers with higher wages will stay longer and become more knowledgeable and confident; therefore, they will increase their productivity. Higher wages also mean these workers, who have more money in their pockets, will spend it in their local economy, since workers at minimum wage aren’t going out of the country on vacation or investing in RRSPs. Increasing a worker’s minimum wage will bring more consumers in the economy, which will translate into more economic growth for his region and his community.

A minimum wage increase is a win-win situation, since it helps not only the employee, but also the employer and the economy.

Hopefully, the province will follow the lead of Alberta, Ontario and now British Columbia and plan right now to increase our minimum wage to $15 an hour, be it over the next four years. It should also review our employment standards to reflect the ever-changing needs of workers and their families. Most certainly, these two actions would go a long way to attain one of the goals of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. In August 2018, Boushie was shot dead by Stanley with a handgun on his farm while out for a drive with his friends. Photo by Charles LeBlanc.