

## Labour Day Message 2006

*“Premier Campbell, give low income British Columbians a raise.”*



JIM SINCLAIR  
President  
B.C. Federation of Labour

Here’s a Labour Day challenge to Premier Gordon Campbell: give low income British Columbians a raise.

BC’s unions are challenging the Premier to take three simple steps to tackle inequality, poverty and homelessness: first, eliminate the training wage; second, raise the minimum wage, and third, increase welfare payments.

Polls show that despite strong economic growth, a majority of British Columbians feel the benefits are passing them by. They’re right.

In May 2006, Statistics Canada figures showed that BC’s average wage for full-time workers is below the Canadian average. So are personal savings and per person disposable income.

Premier Campbell may believe BC is the “best place on earth,” but that’s hard to square with the fact that BC has the highest poverty rate in Canada.

While working families struggle, corporate profits are rising. Profits increased 33 percent in BC in 2005 compared to 17 percent in the rest of Canada. During the last 15 years, corporate profits have risen to record levels as a share of provincial GDP while labour income slumped to the lowest level in 45 years. CEOs like Telus’ Darren Entwistle took home a \$14 million pay increase last year, equal to the entire annual salary of 350 average British Columbians.

The government has even handed raises of more than 20 percent to political staff. What about regular folks? Premier, it’s time to give average working British Columbians a raise.

The minimum wage changes won’t cost taxpayers a cent, but would eliminate a policy that discriminates against young people, subsidizes bad employers and does nothing for youth unemployment.

Raising welfare rates would directly assist the poorest British Columbians, reducing homelessness and begging. What's more, Premier Campbell, these changes would challenge the belief that your government supports the rich at the expense of working families and the poor.

That may be a tough sell, considering that the government's 2001 tax cuts gave as much to the province's 11,300 richest citizens – those earning more than \$250,000 a year -- as they did to the 1.8 million earning under \$30,000 a year. These changes were followed the next year by cuts to welfare, including elimination of the earnings exemption that allowed welfare recipients to earn a little wage income.

Elimination of the training wage and increase in the \$8 minimum to \$10 an hour are just part of a five-part plan advocated by BC's unions to protect the incomes and security of working families and the poor. Combined with the increase to welfare payments, they are a straightforward way to help those left behind in this "new era of hope and prosperity."

Our proposals are aimed particularly at the more than 700,000 British Columbians earning under \$16 an hour, most of them not in unions. (The union advantage remains strong in BC. Union workers earned an average \$23.04 an hour in 2005, \$5.46 an hour higher than the average non-union worker.)

Our plan calls for:

- The best employment standards in Canada, not the worst;
- Safe workplaces; including new regulations to protect forest workers and those working alone;
- Balanced labour laws that include respecting the rights of workers to join unions without employer intimidation and firings;
- Universal child care; and
- Decent pension protection for all.

These changes won't make everything right but they would send a signal to British Columbians that our government does give a damn about the most vulnerable and underpaid people in our province. Now that would be a Labour Day worth celebrating.