

**TEA BREAK**



by Jim Evoy

Poor people gonna rise up and take what's theirs. —Tracy Chapman

The salary and expense money of a member of the Legislative Assembly is \$55,000 per year. Territorial cabinet ministers make just under \$100,000 and the government leader makes a little more than a hundred grand. For MLAs, not bad for a few months work, and for ministers, well, throw in the all the little extras and we've got some of the highest paid legislators in the land.

The minimum wage in the NWT is \$5 an hour. With the high cost of living in the north this is an insult to our working people. Five bucks an hour is legislated poverty at best. It comes to \$10,250 a year, folks. The last increase was in 1986 and only after much public outcry, relating mainly to rip-off artists in the seismic industry.

The minimum wage and workplace regulations are set by the lowly Labor Standards Act. It applies to most people working in the NWT. Territorial officials enforce the law and the Labor Standards Board hears appeals.

The Yukon has a minimum wage of \$5.97 an hour. The cost of living in Whitehorse is about 20 per cent lower than in Yellowknife yet their minimum

# Minimum wage hike overdue

wage is 20 per cent higher than ours. Get the point? Or maybe get the shaft is more like it!

In Ontario, where the cost of living is at least 35 per cent lower than the NWT, the minimum wage was just increased to \$5.40 per hour. Saying it would help the working poor, the former Liberal government announced in June it would raise the wage on October 1. However, the recently elected NDP says the increase wasn't enough. By tying the minimum wage to 60 per cent of the average industrial base wage, it will further increase to \$7 per hour.

But back in the land of snow and ice and everything nice our minimum wage is conveniently stuck at \$5. Convenient for the business community, that is. Now, not too many workers are paid the minimum wage but wages are often influenced by it. For example, some companies have a policy of paying one or two dollars over the rate while others might pay double. So one way or the other, many workers and their families are affected by a pay standard pegged at five loonies an hour by the Government Not Wanting Trouble (GNWT). Trouble with their corporate friends, I suspect.

Single moms are forced to hold two and sometimes three low-wage jobs to support themselves and the kids. The total hours they have to work is against the law.

Students and sometimes children are exploited in the name of employers helping to educate our young. Working

after school is one thing, but getting shafted after class is another.

Overtime is generally not paid in the service industry and collecting vacation pay can be an exercise in futility.

Not surprisingly, native people are generally more affected by the minimum wage and the other backward aspects of our regressive labor laws in the NWT. Among the reasons are that more native people work in seasonal occupations and fewer of them belong to labor unions than their non-native counterparts.

These abuses are occurring in a land where aboriginal people have a majority in the legislature. I suppose the real question is, "Who is in control of the legislature?"

Those most affected by starvation wages and the accompanying bad legislation are not vocal and militant advocates for labor law improvements — they can't afford to be. Most people at the low end of the totem pole can only rely on their elected representatives for help. In this case, their MLAs. If they await changes from bureaucratic experts, they will wait until hell freezes over.

The bureaucrats and deputy-ministers tend to look only at the "big picture" — that being their own pay, perks and promotions. It's a sad situation when people with no background in labor issues whatsoever are put in charge of departments that deal solely with workers' issues. Shame.

The seventh session of the 11th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories convened this week. Its agenda does not include changes to the Labor Standards Act. Changes to this act are necessary to increase the minimum wage.

These changes have been promised, some as far back as 1986, and have once again been shunted aside by the likes of the Dental Profession Act and the Financial Agreement Act. Good stuff if you happen to be a dentist or an accountant. Most people aren't. Most voters aren't either, guys!

What the hell gives? Once again northern workers come last. Enough is enough! It's time the MLAs took the hammer back from the cabinet. Start earning your pay and looking after your constituents instead of chasing that cabinet carrot!

The public might not be all that sophisticated but we're not all that

dumb either. Many of us suspect that the minimum wage increase will be conveniently timed to coincide with next fall's territorial election. And all the credit will go to the ministers, and their boundless generosity.

The minimum wage needs to be substantially increased during this session. Now, not next year! Employers' profits may be windfall, but some of it comes at the expense of people who are poorly paid. It's got to stop.

But maybe we can give our MLAs and ministers a better reason for raising the minimum wage: some are going to be thrown out on their butts after the next election and we wouldn't want them getting a job that pays starvation wages, would we?

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