

John Belcarz/Dan Zeidler Memorial Scholarship Submission

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Unions are increasingly under attack in Canada, both on the government side and the private sector side. The federal government has recently brought in laws that will cut benefits to retirees and more and more employees are being told their jobs are “surplus.” On the private side, the news is full of reports of companies downsizing and workers being laid off. It is a tough time for employees trying to keep their unionized jobs and for young people trying to find good, full-time employment.

As a grade12 student, I have begun to seriously explore my future options as I enter post-secondary education. The continued assault on unions may drive my employment decisions down a narrower path if I am to consider benefits, pensions and full-time unionized employment for a better quality of life in the distant future for both me and my family as opposed to perhaps following the path of where my passions lie. As a society, we have to work together to consider everyone’s best interests in order for us to properly function in an environment where the costs and benefits for companies and workers are balanced. We can’t move forward as a society unless we give people of all income levels a chance to reap the rewards of hard work. It starts with the federal government and trickles down to private sector.

The federal government’s budget last month looked at cutting costs in many ways but a large part of what the Harper government did involved cutting benefits to government employees and those who have retired from the government. Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced plans to double the amount that people retired from the federal government will pay for their health premiums. That’s expected to save the government about \$7 billion dollars over several years.

“There are always trade offs,” Treasury Board President Tony Clement is quoted as saying (iPolitics, February 26), “and I think the unions and the agents on the other side know that I am being reasonable so that some of this does not have to be cast in stone at this particular moment. It will be cast in stone if it is part of a budget implementation bill so we’ve got between now and the period when that is introduced to work out whatever deal we can workout.”

But that's not how the union representing those retirees saw it. Gary Oberg is the president of the National Association of Federal Retirees.

"When one says negotiate and then he says in the other sentence to go to 50/50, where's the negotiation," asked the retired RCMP officer.

And it's not just retirees. Postal workers are angry over sweeping changes to Canada Post that will eliminate door-to-door delivery for Canadians in the next 5 years and eliminate postal carrier jobs with it. Veterans are angry over the closure of several Veterans Affairs offices. The cuts have prompted protests throughout the country and sit-ins at Veterans Affairs offices. Postal workers have taken to the streets and even scientists have been demonstrating, worried about their ability to speak freely about their work. In September of last year, hundreds of scientists protested outside of Parliament Hill in their white lab coats, demanding that the Harper government stop muzzling them.

"They want us to put aside what we're doing and shift our efforts towards industry, and to force us to do that (as) they shift their money towards earmarked projects," Bela Joos, a University of Ottawa physics professor is quoted as saying in Canadian Press (September 16, 2013).

It is all part of a bigger picture called the workforce adjustment that is affecting unionized jobs across this country. The Canadian Public Service Alliance of Canada says that as of February of this year, more than 22-thousand members had received notices that they could be losing their jobs.

Similar things are happening in the private sector throughout Canada. Statistics Canada reported in December that Canada lost 45,900 jobs, which pushed the unemployment rate to 7.2 percent. (CBC, January 10, 2014). Ontario lost the most jobs, at 39,000 and the most troubling part was that the bulk of the jobs lost were full-time. Those are jobs with benefits and pensions. Blackberry was among those companies laying off full time workers. It said it was slashing its workforce by 40 percent or about 4,500 people. Sears Canada said it was also letting go workers. In Saskatchewan, the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan announced plans to cut more than one thousand jobs in that province and in New Brunswick and Florida. Loblaws announced it was cutting 275 jobs last October.

Even here in Ottawa, we are seeing full-time jobs being lost. The Ottawa Citizen announced cuts recently that will see several full-time positions gone. And just last year, CTV Ottawa laid off several people. The same is true for Sun Media and Rogers Communications.

“It’s never a good thing when journalists are laid off,” said the Ottawa Citizen editor Andrew Potter. Companies are interested in reducing their costs and, in many cases, that means getting rid of long-time employees making good money, with benefits and pensions.

All these cuts and all this uncertainty are having a great impact on students looking for full time work or even considering what they want to do in the future. It is affecting low-income wage earners who are hoping for a better future. And it is increasing the wage gap between the rich and the poor. With housing prices at an all time high and wage increases hovering around the 1 or 2 percent range, more and more Canadians are struggling to make ends meet. Food banks are seeing an increase in demand for their services, especially among those considered the “working poor.” We know the baby boomers are aging and demands for health care and long-term care are on the rise. The question is, who will be able to afford those costs without good, unionized full-time work? In the short term, governments and companies may gain by getting rid of unions, pensions and high-paying jobs but in the long run, they may end up paying for those decisions down the road when a growing number of people are living below the poverty line.