

Child poverty increases across Canada

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Several recent reports have shown that for many of the most vulnerable sections of the Canadian population, conditions are worse today than at the height of the 2008-9 financial crisis.

Nationally, 1.3 million children are living in poverty, Campaign 2000 revealed in a report released late last month. This represents 19 percent of all Canadian children or almost one in every five.

The highest child poverty rate is on the island of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, once a center of steel-making and coal-mining, where one in three children are poor. This rises to 42 percent among children six and under. Overall the child poverty rate in Nova Scotia is 22 percent, a more than 10 percent increase from 2013.

In Ontario, Canada's most populous province, the child poverty rate now stands at 20 percent, an almost five-percentage point increase from the 15.2 percent rate recorded seven years ago. The trade union-supported provincial Liberal government presides over minimum wage rates and levels of social benefits that fall far below the official poverty line.

The growth of child poverty provides a devastating indictment of the entire political establishment, which has worked tirelessly to uphold the interests of the ruling elite at the expense of working people. In 1989, when the child poverty rate was 15.8 percent, the House of Commons, at the urging of then New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Ed Broadbent, unanimously adopted a motion ostensibly committing the politicians to eradicating child poverty by 2000. Instead, in the intervening 26 years, all of the establishment parties have taken measures when holding federal or provincial office to expand corporate power and the wealth of the rich while undermining living standards for the vast majority.

Campaign 2000 was established in 1991, when it was already clear that Canada's governments were making no progress towards the poverty-elimination goal the House of Commons had proclaimed two years earlier.

Significantly, the province with the highest rate of child poverty, at 29 percent, is Manitoba, which since 1989 has

been governed by the social-democratic NDP. During its more than decade-and-a-half in office, the NDP has slashed public spending, while cutting taxes for big business and the rich, and presided over a chronic crisis in family services and child care that has cost the lives of many children and youth.

These measures were taken as part of the ruling elite's broader strategy of eliminating the welfare state measures that it was forced to concede to working people as the result of the massive social struggles of the last century.

The federal Liberal government of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin that held power from 1993 to 2006 imposed the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history, including major reductions to the transfers to provinces and territories used for funding healthcare, post-secondary education, and social welfare programs. This was followed by a series of generous income, corporate and capital gains tax handouts to big business, the rich and super-rich. The Conservative government of Stephen Harper sped down the trail blazed for them by the Liberals, implementing wave after wave of public service cuts in the name of balancing the budget.

Child poverty in Manitoba is a "chronic nightmare," declared the "Manitoba Child and Family Report Card 2015," which was issued as a companion report to Campaign 2000's national survey. The authors of the "Report Card" are wedded to the perspective of lobbying the big business politicians to undertake measures to mitigate the deepening crisis. But even they have been compelled to sharply criticize the Manitoba NDP government. In 2009, the NDP government introduced a poverty reduction strategy, followed two years later by the passage of a "poverty reduction" act. "The problem," declared the report, "with all these resolutions, motions, strategies and acts is that they stop at declaring intent."

The Manitoba Report Card also pointed to the debilitating impact poverty has on young people: "Children in poverty are more likely to experience impaired cognitive, emotional and social development, to suffer from poor health status and increased risk of poor

health in childhood and throughout their lives, (and) to have poor school performance and less satisfying careers.”

Child poverty figures are also above the national average in British Columbia, with 20.4 percent living below the poverty line. A report by First Call on provincial poverty rates noted that over 50 percent of BC children in single parent families live in poverty.

In last week’s Throne Speech, the newly-elected federal Liberal government vowed to tackle child poverty by creating a new “Canada Child Benefit,” which will provide a modest income increase for poorer families. Even if the Liberals fulfill this promise—the government has already warned that its financial projections are being thrown askew by Canada’s economic slowdown—it will do nothing to overturn the decades of attacks on the public and social services upon which millions of low-income Canadians rely.

One expression of the poverty crisis is the growing difficulty that hundreds of thousands are having in putting food on the table. According to a separate report from Food Banks Canada, the use of food banks across the country over the past year rose, with over 850,000 people using them each month to feed themselves or their families. Over 30 percent of that number was made up by children. “This is troubling,” Katharine Schmidt, Food Banks Canada director, told CBC. “The number increased this year again for the second year in a row. In fact, we’re 26 percent higher today in terms of food bank use than we were in 2008 when the global economic downturn happened.”

In Alberta, where the economy has been in a downward spiral due to the collapse of oil prices, food bank use shot up by over 20 percent during the past year. The province has also witnessed a doubling in the rate of employment insurance claims since a year ago as thousands of lay-offs have been announced in the oil, energy and related sectors.

Large numbers of those using food banks are part of the ever-expanding “working poor”; people who, in spite of having one or multiple jobs do not earn enough to feed their families and provide them with basic necessities. According to figures from the Canadian Press, minimum wage rates have stagnated and even fallen back in relation to the cost of basic foodstuffs, which have exploded over the past fifteen years.

In 2000, a litre of milk cost \$1.41 but that has now risen to \$2.48, an increase of 75 percent. A loaf of bread was up 126 percent, from \$1.31 in 2000 to \$2.96 in 2015 and

minced beef rose by 232 percent from \$3.90 to \$12.96 per kilo. Meanwhile, the minimum wage saw an increase over the past fifteen years of only 52 percent, from \$6.90 per hour to \$10.55.

This has had an impact on widening sections of the population. According to a Statistics Canada report released earlier this year, over 1 million households suffered from food insecurity in 2012, meaning that they lacked the money to either purchase sufficient amounts or a wide enough variety of food. A separate study, carried out by PROOF, a research organization which campaigns to reduce food insecurity, calculated that in 2013, well over 3 million individuals, including close to 1 million children under the age of 18, lived in households which experienced food insecurity. This equates to approximately one in six children.

Revealing the complete inadequacy of social welfare provisions, the PROOF report noted that fully 68 percent of those in receipt of social assistance were food insecure, and 33.7 percent of those claiming employment insurance (EI). However, the statistics showed that having a job did not remove the risk of not being able to afford food, with 61 percent of the households designated as food insecure relying on wages for their income.

The food crisis is particularly acute in Canada’s three northern territories, the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Food Banks Canada estimates that more than 4.4 percent of the population in the three territories relies on food banks to eat. According to the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics, food prices are twice as high in the territory than the Canadian average. Forty-five percent of households in the territory were food insecure in 2012.



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