

# Union minimum wage proposal sparks outrage

BY ANGELA HALL, LEADER-POST    DECEMBER 4, 2009

A union's proposal that Saskatchewan workers under 21 get paid a lower minimum wage than older workers has sparked outrage from a provincial umbrella group for organized labour.

But the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) says its recent submission to the province's minimum wage board must be looked at in its entirety, noting it calls for an overall increase in the minimum wage.

"We're also suggesting that they raise the minimum wage significantly -- by at least 63 cents," said CLAC regional director Brad Bent, explaining the increase would be based on a more precise measurement of citizens' ability to pay for household expenses that what is currently used.

He acknowledged the union also suggests the minimum wage rate be discounted by 10 per cent for young people, with CLAC contending it would encourage companies to hire young workers and also discourage early withdrawal from school.

"We want to ensure they're getting the life skills, the work experience ... not so they stay at a minimum wage but they gain that experience, that employers will employ them for that period of time, that they will have skills necessary then to move on to apprenticeship programs and skilled labour as a journeyman or move into school," Bent said.

"As an overall package we're asking for a lot more money to be invested into the people of Saskatchewan."

However, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, which does not count CLAC as a member, blasted the proposal, saying a provincial two-tier minimum wage would open the door to "unscrupulous employers" and exploit young workers.

Federation president Larry Hubich said it's violation of workers' rights to discriminate based on age, and noted many young workers face financial burdens such as school or expenses associated with starting a household.

"Any union that would advocate a reduction in the minimum wage in my view is not a real union. That's a so-called union," Hubich said.

The provincial minimum wage board reviews the minimum wage, currently set at \$9.25 an hour, every two years.

Advanced Education, Employment and Labour Minister Rob Norris said he looks forward to receiving

the board's report, but that he doesn't see moving to a system with different minimum wages based on age.

While CLAC is already stirring controversy, it doesn't yet represent workers in Saskatchewan, although Bent said they are looking for opportunities.

CLAC -- criticized by groups such as the SFL as being company friendly -- will be permitted to organize in Saskatchewan's construction sector when the Saskatchewan Party government's Bill 80, opposed by the NDP and trade unions in the province, passes next spring.

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