

Losing Ground:

The Slow Decline of
Workers' Rights and
Privileges in Alberta
1975 - 2000

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 2 |
| 1 Life at Work | 3 |
| A. What's Happening to the Job Market | 3 |
| B. Are Wages Getting Better? | 5 |
| C. Rights at Work | 9 |
| The right to organize | 9 |
| Employment standards | 11 |
| How safe is work | 12 |
| | |
| 11 The Civil Society | |
| A. Protection from Loss Job | 13 |
| From unemployment insurance to | |
| employment insurance | 14 |
| B. Testing the social safety net | 16 |
| C. Suffering in silence: | |
| The plight of Alberta seniors | 17 |
| D. How safe are our communities | 18 |
| E. Teaching our children well? | 19 |
| F. Health Care at the crossroads | 21 |
| | |
| Conclusion | 23 |
| | |
| Recommendations | 25 |

INTRODUCTION

In previous generations of Alberta working men and women there was an expectation or at least a strong hope that the lot in life of working people and their families was going to continue improving in the future.

In the last half of the twentieth century, it seemed that these hopes were finally being realized. Social welfare, Unemployment Insurance, social housing, urban sewer and water systems, Medicare, public education and many other public and social benefits combined to radically improve the lives of working people in Alberta.

A dramatic rise in the unionization rate in the post-war era nation-wide had produced tangible workplace benefits and increases in real wages for union members and spin-off wage increases for non-union workers.

During the past decades, however, things have changed. Recessions in the mid 1980's and early 1990's, combined with huge cuts in public and social spending, sent unemployment figures up, wages down and public benefits plummeting.

The dismantling of the welfare state with its mix of

public enterprise and services and regulated economic and social life accelerated under pressure from free trade agreements and corporate and right-wing political influence.

This booklet examines what effects this has had on the lives of working people in Alberta. In a sense, it represents a snapshot of daily life for workers that is then compared to a similar snapshot taken 25 years ago in 1975. This provides the perspective of an historic view that compares the lives and working conditions faced by two different generations of Alberta workers and their families.

From this comparison, it is possible to look at long-term trends, which will provide some idea of what struggles the future holds. Future challenges for working people can be assessed and suggestions for courses of action debated.

I. LIFE AT WORK

Albertans spend the best hours of the day, most days of the week at work. The first part of this booklet looks at various aspects of work. Factors such as work-time, employment, safety on the job, wages and basic rights at work are compared between 1975 and today (or as near to today as statistical sources allow).

The basic question is: are Albertans lives at work better or worse?

A. WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE JOB MARKET?

The single most important factor in a worker's life is their job. If you have a good job, you will be able to enjoy the limitless possibilities of our consumer-based, market-driven economy.

A good job pays a decent wage sufficient to allow home ownership, the possibility of raising a family without hardship, and a degree of economic security.

Good jobs are permanent, full-time and well-paid. Where are the good jobs? Generally, they are in the goods producing sectors. Jobs in manufacturing, transportation, utilities, construction, and primary production (forestry, mining, oil and natural gas) have all traditionally been

good jobs. Jobs in public administration (government sector), while not as well-paid, have been considered secure and comparatively well paid.

Jobs in the wholesale and retail trade sector, the financial sector and the service sector, on the other hand, have traditionally been less well paid and less secure.

Unfortunately for young Albertans today, the job market looks quite different than it did a generation ago in 1975. The service sector now accounts for 42.2% of all jobs in Alberta. Although important sources of good jobs like the manufacturing and construction sectors have expanded at the same pace as the workforce, important "good job" sectors like transportation, communications and utilities, and public administration have not kept pace.

Alberta: Labour Force by Industry 1975 and 2001

| Sector | 1975 Employed (000's) | % of Total Employment | 2001 (March) Employed (000's) | % of Total Employment |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Agriculture | 111 | 14.1 | 60.1 | 3.7 |
| Primary Industries | 28 | 3.6 | 102.1 | 6.3 |
| Manufacturing | 71 | 9.0 | 144.6 | 8.9 |
| Construction | 64 | 8.1 | 135 | 8.4 |
| Transportation, Communication, Utilities | 69 | 8.8 | 110.4 | 6.8 |
| Trade | 147 | 18.7 | 236.5 | 14.6 |
| Finance, Insurance, Real Estate | 36 | 4.6 | 84.8 | 5.2 |
| Services | 206 | 26.1 | 681.5 | 42.2 |
| Public Administration | 57 | 7.2 | 60.8 | 3.8 |
| Total Employed | 788 | | 1,615.80 | |

Source: *Labour Force Annual Averages 1975-1983, Statistics Canada 71-529 and Labour Force Information, Statistics Canada 71-001 March 2001*

In fact, the government sector is only employing about 5000 more people than it did in 1975 – although the employed workforce has more than doubled – increasing by 837,000 workers.

It's clear that, for young Albertans today, the job market is much worse than it was 25 years ago. There is a greater proportion of low-paying and insecure jobs – and the trend shows no signs of abating.

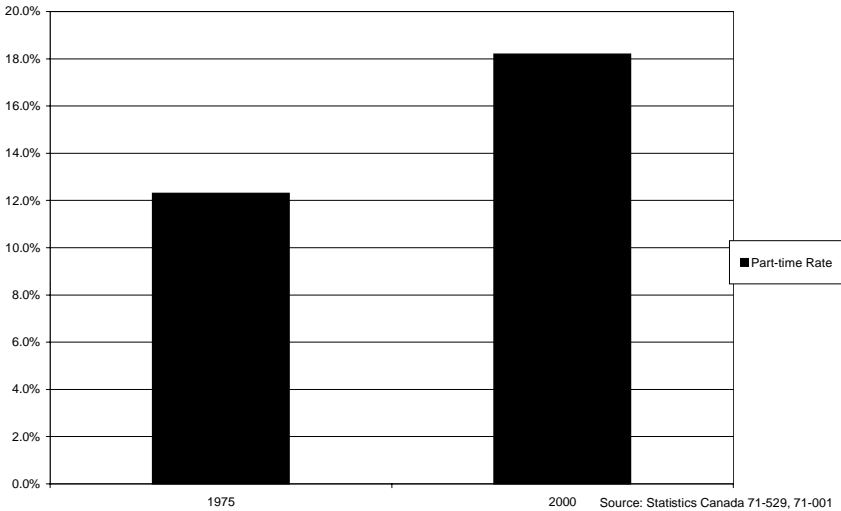
The Rise of Insecure Employment

One of the most serious problems with jobs in the service-

producing sectors is the prevalence of part-time employment. Part-time work obviously produces smaller weekly paycheques and a reduced standard of living.

But there is another, overlooked effect of a large part-time workforce. Workers who are employed part-time have far less job security. Instead of having to train a replacement worker, employers can simply increase other part-timers hours when a worker leaves. This undermines a workers ability to negotiate better pay and working conditions. Quite simply, part-time workers are more expendable than full-time workers.

Alberta: Part-time workers as Percentage of All Employees



There are 295,000 part-time workers in Alberta today – 200,000 more than there was a generation ago. Nearly one in five workers is a part-time employee. In 1975 only 12% of Albertans worked part-time.

Over half of all part-time workers are women over the age of twenty-four. Over a third of part-timers (105,800 out of 294,600), are youth under the age of twenty-five.

B. ARE WAGES GETTING BETTER?

With a booming economy and low unemployment,

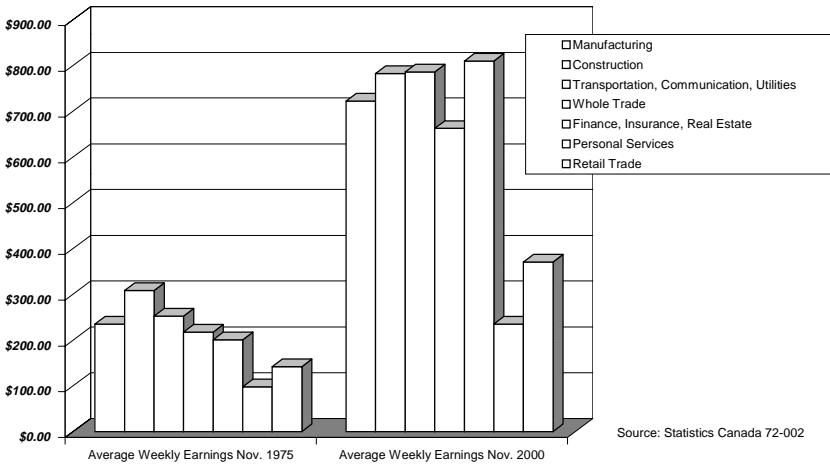
there are good reasons to expect that wages should also be rising. The question is are we really gaining any ground? Are wages any higher today than in 1975?

At a casual glance, the expectation that wages are improving over time seems justified. However, the effects of inflation on wages have to be accounted for. The cost-of-living is, after all, substantially higher today than it was in 1975.

Once the 1975 weekly earnings are corrected to current (2000) dollars, a far different picture emerges.

Workers in Alberta, in most industries are making less in real

Alberta: Average Weekly Earnings by Industry (Current \$)



Price Index

1975 2000

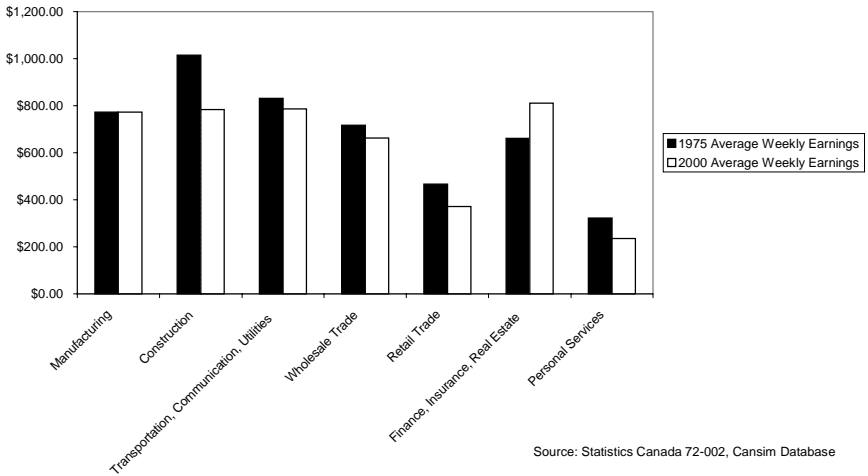
2000=100

| Year | CPI-Alberta |
|------|-------------|
| 1971 | 26 |
| 1975 | 35.7 |
| 1980 | 54.7 |
| 1985 | 76.5 |
| 1990 | 93.1 |
| 1992 | 100 |
| 1995 | 105 |
| 1999 | 113.4 |
| 2000 | 117.4 |

Source: Cansim Database

***Note: The CPI for 1971-1975 was calculated by averaging the CPI for Edmonton and Calgary**

Alberta: Average Weekly Earnings by Industry (Constant 2000 \$)



weekly earnings than they were twenty-five years ago.

In the broadest overview, the average Alberta weekly wage,

including overtime has declined from \$681.97 in 1975 to \$642.81 in 2000 in real (2000) dollars. This represents a 5.7% drop in real weekly wages.

Union vs Non-Union W ages Canada, March 2001

| | Union | Non-Union |
|--------------------------------|----------|-----------|
| Average weekly wages | \$719.94 | \$587.91 |
| Average Hourly wages | 19.77 | 15.92 |
| Part-time average weekly wages | 339.45 | 178.67 |
| Part-time average weekly hours | 19.1 | 16.1 |
| Part-time average hourly wages | 17.77 | 11.1 |

Source: Labour Force Information StatsCan 71-001, March 17, 2001

C. RIGHTS AT WORK

THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE

One of the most important rights workers have is the right to join a union and bargain collectively.

The right to unionize is important for many reasons.

First and foremost, union membership and union coverage (includes those who are covered by a collective agreement but who do not belong to their union) provides a substantial financial benefit.

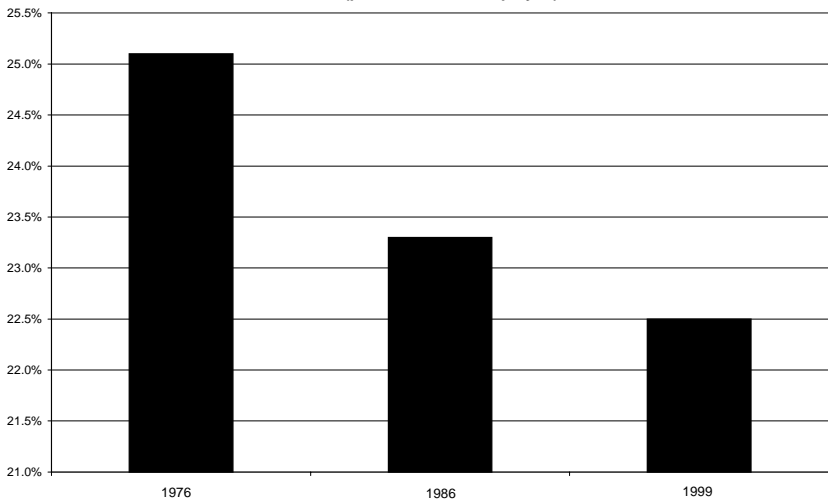
Nationally, average weekly wages for unionized workers are 18.3% higher than for non-union workers. Average hourly wages showed an even greater gap with union workers enjoying 19.5% higher average wages.

But the wage difference is most striking for part-time workers. Unionized part-time workers not only earned 37.5% more than their non-union counterparts, they also averaged three more hours per week. This gave them 47.4% higher average weekly wages.

Unionized workers also enjoy superior pensions and benefits

Union Membership in Alberta

(per cent of total employed)



Source: Statistics Canada 71-001, Cansim Database

and safer workplaces. [see: Now More Than Ever; Gil McGowan; Alberta Federation of Labour; 1999].

Aside from the monetary advantages, union membership also protects workers from unfair, arbitrary and discriminatory treatment on the job. Unions uphold workers' dignity – a benefit that is beyond price.

Given all the benefits of union membership, it would be reasonable to assume that the unionization rate in Alberta has gone up over time.

Rather than going up over time, union membership has actually declined in Alberta. Workers entering the labour market in Alberta today have a smaller chance of working in a union job than people did in 1975.

The reasons for this decline are complex, and include the transformation of employment to

the traditionally harder to organize service sector.

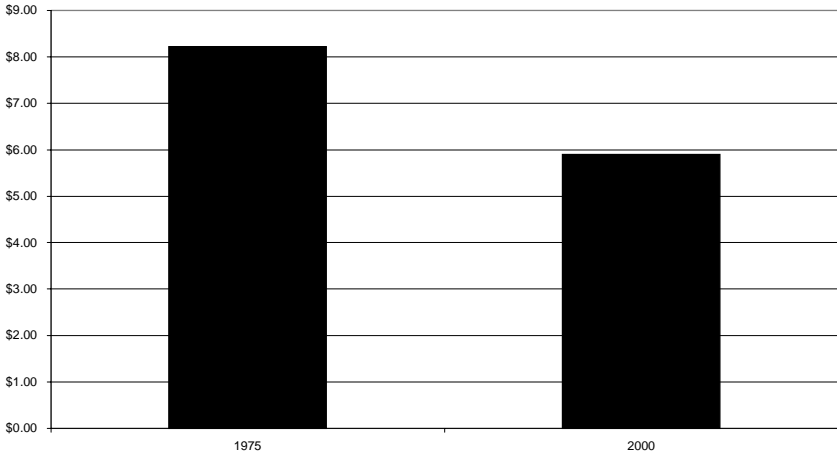
However, the main cause is the restrictive provisions of the Alberta Labour Code. In 1975 a simple majority of workers at a jobsite could simply sign cards and they would be certified.

Today, workers must show 40% support after which there is a mandatory vote. During the period between application and vote employers have a window of opportunity to campaign against the union. With no effective penalties against unfair employer tactics in certification drives, and no “mandatory first agreement arbitration” clause (Alberta is one of only three provinces without this provision), it is small wonder that union membership has declined.

The fact remains the Alberta labour laws in 1975 protected workers' rights to join a union better than our current legislation.

Alberta Minimum Wage

(constant 2000\$)



Source: Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Cansim Database

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS: THE BASIC RIGHTS OF WORKERS

Alberta's basic floor of rights for workers is contained in the Employment Standards Code and its accompanying Regulations.

Alberta's basic provisions for overtime, vacations, general holidays and standard worktime follow the general national pattern.

However, since the system is complaint driven, a worker has to expose themselves to employer reactions, which can include

dismissal in order to serve their rights.

In a real sense, Alberta workers' basic rights are so badly protected that they could be considered loose codes of employer conduct rather than inherent rights.

Perhaps the most important employment standard regulation, especially for young workers, is the minimum wage.

Minimum wage levels set the wage for entry level, low skill jobs – and influence the rest of the labour market accordingly.

Alberta's minimum wage in 1975 was \$2.50 per hour –

which represents about \$8.20 per hour in today’s money. That is over 50% higher than today’s minimum wage.

**HOW SAFE IS WORK?
THE RIGHT TO A SAFE AND
HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENT**

There are two major components to occupational health and safety. The first deals with prevention – the maintenance of safe workplaces. The second, the workers’ compensation system, supports workers who have become injured or sick on the job.

Occupational health and safety is one of the few areas of worklife that has actually improved since 1975. In 1975 there were not general occupational health and safety regulations in place, and it showed.

***Alberta Workplace
Accidents***

Since the enactment of general regulations in 1976 there was a substantial improvement in workplace safety. That year a new Division of Occupational Health and Safety was created with a budget of \$2.79 million. Two years later, it became a separate department – which, by 1985, had over 250 staff and a \$12 million budget. Full programs of inspection, research, education and support services were provided.

Since 1986, however, the Department has ceased to exist – and is now a small component of Human Resources and Employment.

The Workers’ Compensation system in Alberta provides no fault insurance against workplace

Alberta Workplace Accidents

| | Fatality Rate (per 100,000 employees) | Claims | % of all Employees | Lost Time Claims | % of all Employees |
|------|---|--------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1975 | 15.1 | 87,642 | 11.1% | 124,013 | 9.5% |
| 2000 | 9.1 | 33,500 | 4.3% | 36,900 | 2.8% |

Source: Alberta Workers Compensation Board

injury and disease. There is no quantifiable way to compare operations between 1975 and 2000. However, a recent outcry by injured workers has convinced the government to run two investigations into the operations of the Board.

In summary, the current generation enjoys a measurably safer workplace – thanks largely to a real government investment in the area between 1976 and 1986.

I THE CIVIL SOCIETY

Outside of the workplace, many things effect our overall quality of life. This section examines our health care and education systems, the social safety net and community security. Again, by comparing 1975 with today, we can get some idea of how our society is actually changing.

A. PROTECTION FROM JOB LOSS

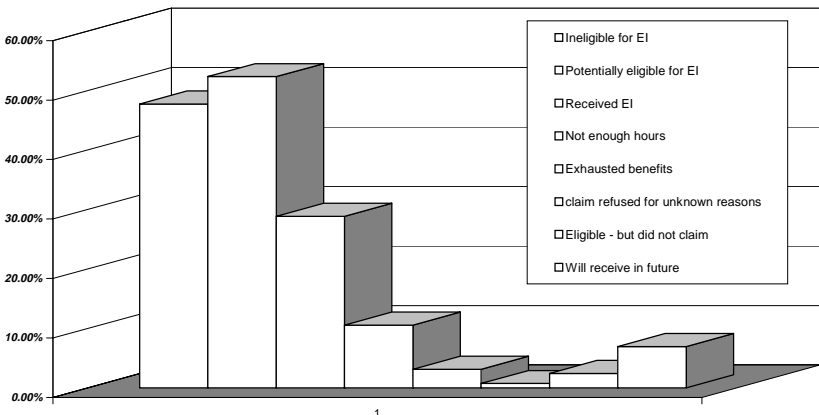
FROM UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE TO EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

One of the biggest fears of working people is sudden job loss. Unemployment can be an economic disaster for working

families. Without income, working people risk losing their homes and worldly goods. But they also suffer psychological trauma and stress that leads to increased incident of family breakup and suicide.

That's why unemployment insurance that provides temporary financial support to the

**Canada: Total Unemployed by EI Status
1998**



Source: Statistics Canada. Report on the Minimum Results of the EI Coverage Survey 1998

unemployed is so critical to workers.

However, there has been a marked deterioration in the protection provided by Canada's national system of support for the unemployed in the past generation.

In 1975, the average number of claimants in Alberta was

at a minimum of 20% of maximum insurable earnings in the past year to qualify. Benefits were 66.67% of insurable earnings.

Today, the benefit is only 55% of average insurable earnings over the past 20 weeks – including periods of unemployment within that time. People

Alberta Net Contributions to UI/EI (\$1998 millions)

| | 1975 | 1998 |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Total Premiums Paid | 481 | 1,815 |
| Total Benefits Collected | 267 | 705 |
| Net Loss to Alberta | 114 | 1110 |
| Total Benefits as % of Total Premiums | 55.5% | 38.8% |

Source: *Provincial Economic Accounts, StatsCan 13-213PIB*

35,000 – virtually identical to the average number of unemployed Albertans that year. National figures support this notion of universal coverage. In 1975 over 92% of unemployed Canadians drew unemployment insurance benefits.

By 1998, only 28% of unemployed Canadians were actually receiving EI benefits. The reasons for this are many. In 1975 a claimant only had to have paid 8 weeks of premiums

who quit their job voluntarily or are fired for just cause are ineligible for benefits – and benefit duration has been shortened.

The increasing difficulty in qualifying for EI and the reduced benefits have created a huge loss to the Alberta economy. In 1998 Alberta's net contributions to EI was over a billion dollars – and benefits collected represented only 38.8% of premiums paid.

The dismantling of unemploy-

ment insurance is a ticking time bomb for Alberta workers. Right now, with unemployment at less than 5%, it is not so noticeable. But, when the next cyclical round of high unemployment hits, unemployed workers are going to be in serious trouble.

B. TESTING THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

With the disintegration of the EI system, for many Alberta workers the last resort is social assistance. Unemployed workers who do not qualify for EI or who have exhausted their benefits, single parents with dependent children, and other Albertans who cannot work for a variety of reasons depend upon the provincial government to support them.

Social welfare is an absolute necessity in a market driven economy. It is the only permanent barrier between the unemployed and homelessness, starvation and death. As the income of last resort, it is imperative that social welfare benefits are adequate to meet the basic needs of recipients. The National Council on Welfare makes a convincing

argument that social assistance recipients should receive enough support to maintain them at least at the poverty line.

With unemployment rates in 1975 significantly lower (4.1%) than in 1999 (5.7%), you would expect a smaller proportion of the population to be on social assistance in 1975. However, less than half as much of the population were receiving assistance in 1999 than were assisted in 1975.

Furthermore, the level of basic assistance has dropped – with current benefits for food, clothing, household and personal needs and transportation 17.8% lower than in 1975 in constant (1999) dollars.

Basic shelter provisions are supposed to be based upon local rental costs – and that was true in 1975. However, the maximum shelter allowance in 1999 for a single parent with a child under six was \$428 per month. According to the Edmonton Social Planning Council, available low-cost housing in Edmonton now exceeds \$500 per month. This means that single parents on welfare must use up some of their already inadequate food, clothing and household allowance

Alberta Social Welfare

(1975 and 1999)

| | 1975 | 1999 |
|---|----------|----------|
| Persons Assisted | 92,268 | 71,900 |
| % of total population | 5.2% | 2.4% |
| Maximum basic monthly allowance: single parent-one child under six (\$1999) unemployment rate | \$390.71 | \$321.00 |

Source: Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Alberta Regulations 92/75. National Council on Welfare, Welfare Incomes 1999

in order to have a place to live.

It is clear that unemployed Albertans are in much worse shape now than they were a generation ago. The programs are inadequate and the coverage is low.

C. SUFFERING IN SILENCE: THE FLIGHT OF ALBERTA SENIORS

One of the consequences of Alberta's low unionization rate is a lack of pension coverage for Alberta seniors.

There is a direct correlation between unionization rate and pension coverage because, outside of management personnel, virtually the only workers who get pensions are union

members.

In Alberta, only 25.6% of the workforce has a registered pension plan – the lowest in Canada. At 22.5%, Alberta also has the lowest unionization rate in Canada. Newfoundland, which has the highest unionization rate, also has the highest level of pension coverage.

For the three quarters of Alberta workers who have no pension plan, there is only the Canada Pension Plan to fall back on upon requirement.

In 1999, Old Age Security payments averaged about \$411 per month. If that is the sole source of income, pensioners also receive the full amount of the Guaranteed Income Supplement – which in 1998 was \$491 a month.

In 1999, 103,800 of all

Alberta retirees received a GIS supplement – 37% of all pensioners. For elderly Albertans in need, the provincial government provides an additional maximum benefit of \$2,350 per year.

The consequences for many Alberta seniors is income below the poverty line. For retirees in Edmonton, government income fell \$3,395 below the poverty line in 1998.

The last twenty-five years saw, first a dramatic improvement in the poverty levels among seniors. However, beginning in 1996, it became clear that no future improvements were being considered at either the federal or provincial levels.

For many current older

workers in Alberta (all of those without pension plans) this means they have nothing to look forward to upon retirement except poverty.

D. HOW SAFE ARE OUR COMMUNITIES

Another of the very real concerns working people have is the safety of their communities. With the sensational “entertainment” style of current news reporting, it is easy to see why so many Albertans are concerned with crime and neighborhood security.

However, Alberta is actually a

Alberta Crime Rates

| | 1975 | | 1999 | |
|------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Violent Crimes | | Rate (per 100,000) | | Rate (per 100,000) |
| murder | 42 | 2.4 | 55 | 1.9 |
| attempted murder | 47 | 2.7 | 31 | 1.1 |
| manslaughter | 14 | 0.8 | 6 | 0.2 |
| assault | 11,447 | 647.4 | 24,339 | 820.9 |
| sexual assault | 1,031 | 48.3 | 2,715 | 91.6 |
| robbery | 1450 | 82 | 2,542 | 85.7 |
| Property Crimes | | | | |
| breaking and entering | 21,897 | 1,238.50 | 29,287 | 987.8 |
| motor vehicle theft | 8,414 | 475.9 | 14,847 | 500.1 |
| frauds | 11,590 | 655.5 | 13,223 | 446 |
| All Offences | 238,876 | 13,511.20 | 277,995 | 9,375.90 |

Source: Statistics Canada 85-205

safer place to live today than it was in 1975. Murder rates are down. Manslaughter rates are down. The breaking and entering rate is twenty per cent lower today than it was in 1975. Thefts are down and frauds are down.

Robbery is up very slightly, as is motor vehicle theft. On one bleak note, the sexual assault rate is up 90% and the assault rate, generally, is up 27%.

The overall crime rate, however, is 30% lower today than it was in 1975.

E TEACHING OUR CHILDREN WELL?

Public education has always been strongly supported by the labour movement. Working people wanted their children to

have the opportunity for a better life that literacy and education provides.

Albertans have long been proud of their public school system (kindergarten to Grade 12) and their vocational institutes, community colleges and universities.

But how have our K-12 school system and advanced education system fared over time?

Classroom sizes are a real problem in Alberta schools. A straight division of total educators to total students in 1997/98 shows a pupil-teacher ratio of 19.31 to one. This figure includes school administrators and educational support services. Actually classroom sizes are much higher. Another Statistics Canada method of establishing the figure shows a lower figure of 17.8 to 1 – but that is still

Alberta Student Teacher Ratios

K-12

| | 1975 | 1997/98 |
|----------------------|---------|---------|
| Educators K-12 | 23,093 | 29,161 |
| Enrollment K-12 | 421,785 | 563,170 |
| Pupils/educator K-12 | 18.26 | 19.31 |

Source: *Alberta Statistical Review, 1976, Alberta Treasury; Education in Canada, Statistics Canada 81-229*

the highest in Canada.

In 1975, every school had access to staff psychologists, speech therapists, librarians and other educational resource people. Now they don't. Twenty-five years ago, teachers had blocks of free time for lesson planning and marking – now they do that in the evenings and on the weekends.

At our advanced educational institutions, the story is the same: increased class sizes coupled with shrinking resources.

Real undergraduate fees for a student in Arts and Sciences rose 166% between 1975 and 2000,

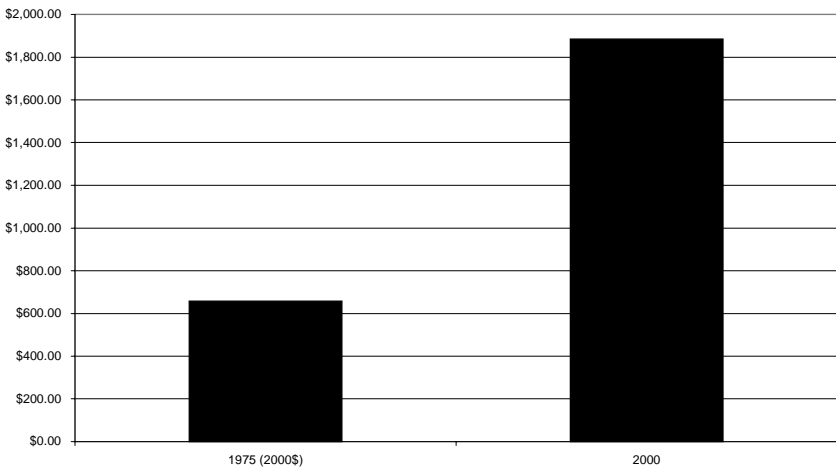
from approximately \$755 per term to over \$2000 per term in 2000 dollars. If you added rent, food, books and tuition costs for a full-term (September through April) enrollment at the University for an undergraduate, it would cost well over \$10,000.

It's getting to the point where working Albertans will no longer be able to afford advanced education for their children – and no summer job is going to provide a student with that amount of savings.

In the past twenty-five years, there has been a decline in the quality of education, and for

University of Alberta: Single term tuition fees

Undergraduate Arts & Sciences



Source: University of Alberta Registrars Office

post-secondary schooling, a decline in accessibility.

E HEALTHCARE AT THE CROSSROADS

In 1975, the Medicare system in Canada was a well-funded system, universally appreciated and without serious flaws.

Since that time, the federal government has changed its dollar for dollar funding agreement with the provinces to a set transfer amount – which has shrunk in real (constant) dollars over time.

The federal government also extended the patent protection for pharmaceuticals, undermining Canada's low-cost generic drugs industry and contributing to skyrocketing pharmaceutical costs.

Cutbacks in health care funding by the Alberta government caused bed and ward

closures in hospitals, increased waiting lists and overloaded emergency wards.

Alberta is below the national average for both general practitioners per 100,000 people and specialists per 100,000 people. Alberta has 85 GPs and 76 specialists per 100,000 – the national average is 94 GPs and 91 specialists.

Alberta has also led the way with privatizing health care. Private clinics do surgeries on an out patient basis that used to be done in the public system. Early hospital release policies have downloaded the cost of care, including drugs, onto families.

By 1998 Alberta families were spending more money on health care than anyone else in Canada – both in actual dollars and as a per cent of their after tax spending.

Although the system is clearly under immense financial pressure, the good news is that

Alberta Health Spending 1999

| | Alberta | Canadian Average |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Per capita health spending | \$2,380 (3rd lowest in Canada) | \$2,513 |
| Health spending as % of GDP | 7.1% (lowest in Canada) | 9.20% |

Source: Statistical Report on the Health of Canadians, StatsCan 82-570

Average Household Spending on Health Care -- 1998

| | Average per Household (current dollars) | % of Family after tax spending |
|------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| NWF | \$913 | 2.7% |
| ONT | \$1,049 | 2.3% |
| NB | \$1,081 | 3.2% |
| QUE | \$1,106 | 3.2% |
| PEI | \$1,129 | 3.3% |
| NS | \$1,129 | 3.2% |
| MAN | \$1,147 | 3.1% |
| SASK | \$1,163 | 3.2% |
| CANADA (average) | \$1,191 | 2.9% |
| BC | \$1,499 | 3.5% |
| ALTA | \$1,693 | 3.8% |

Source: *Statistical Report on the Health of Canadians 1999. Statistics Canada 82-570*

general health outcomes are actually better today. Infant mortality rates (per 1000 live births) are down from 14.9 in 1975 to 4.8 in 1997. Life expectancy for both men and women has continued to rise.

How much of these improvements are due to superior medical technology and practice,

better nutrition and increased public awareness is unknown. However, in terms of government support for health care, and generally government's willingness to put health before budgetary concerns, it is clear that Albertans were better off twenty-five years ago.

CONCLUSION: EBB TIDE

THE SLOW DECLINE OF WORKERS' RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES IN ALBERTA

Between 1975 and 1999, the Alberta economy flourished. In just twenty-five years, real (constant dollar) Gross Domestic Product grew by 141.3%. The total economic activity (GDP) generated per person increased by 43.9%, and real corporate profits increased by 56.2%.

But, that phenomenal economic growth and increase in provincial wealth did not trickle down to working people and their families.

As we have seen, real wages for most Albertans actually declined during this period.

And, despite the fact that workplaces are measurably safer today than they were 25 years ago, there has been a recent decline in government commitment to occupational health and safety – and growing discontent with the Workers' Compensation Board.

Real minimum wages in Alberta are grossly inadequate and are actually a third lower than in 1975. Restrictive changes to the labour laws have caused a decline in Alberta's unionization rate.

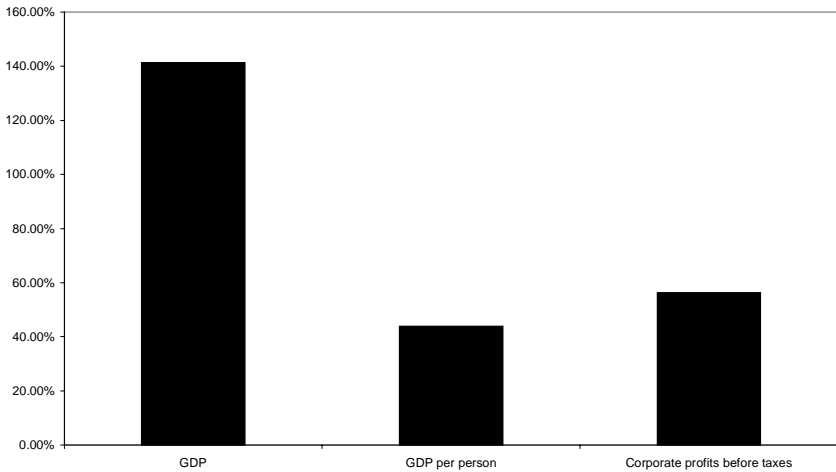
The social safety net that supports working people who are unemployed is in tatters. Employment insurance supports less than 30% of unemployed Albertans – it used to support over 90%. Social assistance levels are far lower than twenty-five years ago – and are totally inadequate, creating real poverty and hardship for Albertans in need.

Although our society and our communities are safer than in previous generations, the real deterioration of government support of our education and health care systems has caused a decline in working people's quality of life and a drain on their pocketbooks.

This long, slow, measurable loss of workers' rights has many causes. The increasing political

Alberta Economic Growth 1975 - 2000

Percent increase in Constant 1992\$



Source: Alberta Economic Accounts 1999, Alberta Treasury

power of big business most typified by the new international free trade agreements has undermined workers' ability to bargain.

Corporate concentration in the media has created a culture where workers' voices and the labour movement are marginalized and ignored.

The undermining of the authority of democratic institutions and the fragmentation of labour's political solidarity have also contributed to the loss of workers' rights.

While this measurable decline in workers' rights and standard

of living has been taking place, working people and their institutions have been frozen in time.

Unions organize the same way they did in 1975. They interact with their rank-and-file members and with other unions the same way they did twenty-five years ago. Political action and relationships with labour's official political arm, the New Democratic, remain much as they were in the past.

Meanwhile, the world is changing – and not for the better from a worker's perspective in most cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, and foremost, working people have to come to terms with the facts. If you don't admit the bridge is burning, you're going to have to learn to swim.

All of labour's current strategies, tactics and ideologies must be re-examined. They aren't working.

We need to develop a new form of communication, of organizing, of political action and of education. We need to reconstruct our movement and regenerate labour solidarity.

Most of all, we need to convince people about just how much they will benefit from union

membership. We must reverse the trend of declining union membership by finding ways to successfully organize workers, especially young workers, in the growing service sector.

If we fail to realize that labour is in a state of crisis and that working people are losing out in Alberta today – then twenty-five years from now our current society will look like a utopia.

