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EDITORIAL

Respect for Workers by Jackie Flanagan



I WAS AN INSTRUCTOR AT MOUNT ROYAL College for 18 years. Before my first class each morning I had coffee and toast and a brief visit with Edna, who worked in the cafeteria. We did different jobs, but we were both employees of the college, committed to the same purpose of serving students. Her friendly smile and cheerful greeting lifted my spirits and helped me to go into class feeling good about life. She was kind to students also. She got to know them by name and lent an ear when they were depressed or struggling. Then one day she wasn't there. She had been made "redundant." The college had contracted out food services and in her place was a brisk uniformed employee of a private for-profit company. Until Edna was gone, I didn't realize just how much she contributed to the welcoming warmth of the place.

A hospital social worker tells a similar story about helpful janitors who were a part of the healing environment, part of the team, until they were let go. Rather than pay benefits and a living wage, institutions find it cheaper to contract these services out to companies, which can pay workers low wages. Decent jobs, meaningful jobs, become bad jobs. Since hospitals and schools are public institutions, this saves taxpayers money and is considered an acceptable and even laudable practice.

So we have government surpluses and people without jobs. We have large numbers of low-paid, diminished workers, and a government awash in money.

We seem to overlook the difference it makes to an institution when all workers are valued, when all work is respected and decently paid. It's easy to forget that every person who loses a job is still an Albertan, and still needs to live.

Cost cutting and privatization have also meant loss of jobs in the civil service. Steve West's perspective on the privatization of liquor stores was: "It

doesn't take a government employee to stick a bottle in a paper bag." Whatever one thinks about public or private ownership of liquor stores, what comes across loud and clear is West's contempt for and ignorance about the work.

In the private sector, acquisitions and mergers also result in "downsizing" and job loss for white collar workers. The primary consideration is profitability for the shareholders, not loyalty to the employees or appreciation of their contribution. Those who keep their jobs work longer and harder and with greater anxiety. Alberta has the highest worker productivity in Canada, but it seems to have been achieved at some cost to the people.

For years we also had the lowest minimum wage in the country at \$5.90 an hour. Lately we've been promised an increase to \$7, if business is not too inconvenienced. Concern for the interests of business rather than workers is the hallmark of this government. The government has the power to set policy that serves workers, and to enact legislation to help workers. Instead, all responsibility is placed on the workers themselves. When former Minister of Human Resources Clint Dunford was questioned about the minimum wage, he responded: "If someone is working at a minimum wage job, they should seriously consider looking for another job."

What is the point of huge government surpluses if Alberta is not a good place to live and work? Why do those who claim that it is such a great place choose to ignore the bleak reality for many working people?