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Open letter to Brian Gallant, Premier of New Brunswick

Mr. Brian Gallant

Premier of New Brunswick

Fredericton, NB

Mr. Gallant,

Your Finance Minister is getting ready to table his budget in a few weeks. It is a time of great importance for your government and for the population of the province since that budget will determine the economic and social direction for the next year and, probably, for many years to come. The Common Front for Social Justice would like to take this opportunity to heighten your awareness of the situation of thousands of citizens who are living in poverty in the province. We would also like to make a few suggestions that would greatly help improve their situation.

In our province, one person, out of seven, lives below the poverty line. We are talking, mostly, of low-income workers, income assistance recipients, handicapped persons, seniors, students, artists, etc. They live in poverty because of insufficient salary for those who work or inadequate income for those depending on assistance from the provincial or federal government. The lack of adequate public social programs, for example, daycare services or social housing only makes their situation worse.

In our province, the minimum wage is presently the lowest among all the Canadian provinces. To better understand the impact of such a reality on workers, the Common Front for Social Justice analysed the revenue of seven different categories of workers. We compared their annual net income and their annual budget. In each group, individuals and families showed a deficit ranging from \$1,000 to \$12,000, depending on the family situation.

As for welfare recipients, their total annual income keeps them below the poverty line. Moreover, they constantly experience food insecurity. Last year, in our province, three quarters of the people relying on food banks and soup kitchens were income assistance recipients. Since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008, the percentage of welfare recipients relying on food banks has increased constantly.

We believe your government must expedite the increases to the minimum wage so that it becomes, more rapidly, a decent income. Your government must also plan to increase the budget of the Department of Social Development in order to significantly increase the basic rate for recipients.

Mr. Gallant, you are probably aware that an important part of a family's budget goes to two major expenses, namely daycare and housing.

The present daycare services do not meet the demand. Only 25,491 children among 91,000 have access to regulated daycare services, and the number of spaces in rural areas is insufficient. Moreover, it costs too much; annual fees can reach \$7,800 for one child that is a third of the gross income of a minimum-wage worker. They are not adequately supported either: our province spends, on average, a little less than fifty per cent of the Canadian average for each daycare space. Indeed, low income families do get government assistance but, often, it is not enough.

We were happy to read, in your electoral platform, a commitment to increase the number of spaces in regulated daycare centres. To make that commitment a reality, you must include, in the budget and in the future budgets of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, targeted increases in order to add more spaces in daycare centres. Your government must also take steps to modify the way daycare services are provided. The present system, mainly dominated by the private sector, does not work. We definitely need to start the transition toward a public system, similar to the one in Quebec.

Housing is the second important expense in a personal budget. Right now, in New Brunswick, the annual cost for a two-bedroom apartment is near \$9,000. Workers and citizens with a fixed income find it difficult to pay for such an apartment and, consequently, must live in inadequate dwellings. For them, social housing, where the tenant pays 30% of his income, is the solution. We believe increasing the budget of the Department of Social Development is a must in order to increase the number of social housing units and, consequently, reduce poverty for those people and families.

Mr. Gallant, we are aware many people will be opposed to an increase of social expenses in times of economic difficulty. Our answer to them is that we will never turn our economy around by maintaining thousands of people in poverty and by refusing to provide them with the means to get out of poverty, namely adequate income, access to regulated daycare services and affordable housing.

Mr. Gallant, reducing poverty is not a question of charity it is a question of social justice.

Mr. Gallant, we are awaiting your response at the tabling of your next budget.

Sincerely yours,

Joanne Petitpas, Pauline Richard, co chairs.

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The Common Front for Social Justice is one of the largest democratic and popular organizations in New Brunswick, with close to 75,000 group and individual members. The Common Front brings together individuals as well as local, regional and provincial organizations to work towards the eradication of poverty.