

## **Social Justice, Let's Celebrate!**

In 2007, the United Nations (UN) declared February 20 the "World Day of Social Justice" to encourage us to think about how poverty and unemployment deny social justice to people locally and around the world. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that all human beings have the right to adequate food, clothing, housing, education, health care, and other needs.

Using Universal Declaration of Human Rights standards, it is clear that there is a social justice crisis in New Brunswick. Tens of thousands of our fellow citizens are struggling to survive on incomes below the poverty line as defined by the 'low income cut-off.' The gap between rich and poor is increasing, and the poverty-level wages paid by some employers denies many working people the chance to live with dignity.

European countries, especially in Scandinavia, do better at building just societies. Compared to Denmark, which ranks '#1' in terms of having the lowest income inequality, Canada ranks #12. In New Brunswick, the political will to build a more just, equal society is lacking.

A 2011 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives study showed that the richest 10% of New Brunswickers had a "median income" of \$124,373, compared to only \$10,429 for the poorest 10%. That means half of the wealthiest citizens had annual incomes above \$124,373, while among the poorest 10%, half had yearly incomes even less than \$10,429! Further, from 2001-2011, the fortunes of the richest 10% grew 14%, compared to a 2% gain for the poorest 10%. This concentration of wealth makes our province unjust.

Since 2009, our Ministers of Finance have chosen to continue tax breaks for the wealthiest, rather than helping low-income citizens escape from poverty and live with dignity. Provincial tax policy worsens, rather than reduces, an unjust economic status quo. How serious is the situation? The 2013 Canadian Business Journal measured the Thompson family's wealth as \$20.1 billion and the Irving family's wealth as \$8.07 billion. Yet, in 2010, almost 100,000 New Brunswick citizens struggled to live on less than \$10,000 a year!

One of the best ways to build a just society is to create jobs that pay well. Increasing the number of good salaries is the key to reducing income inequalities. The August 2013 "Profile of the New Brunswick Labour Force" reported 350,200 New Brunswickers in the labour force, and 41,900 unemployed workers. The 10.7% unemployment rate means that more than one in 10 workers is unemployed, including 10,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 24. So many unemployed young people deepen our social justice crisis. Along with more than 41,000 unemployed, another 39,000 workers (11.1% of the workforce) only earned the minimum wage which is not enough to support a family. This shows the very wide gap between rich and poor.

As well, in spite of all the efforts made by the N.B. Coalition for Pay Equity, the wage gap between men and women working full-time persists. In August, 2013, the average annual income for women working full time was \$39,485, about \$8,000 (almost \$700 a month) less than the \$47,331 average earned by men. This means that for every dollar a man earns, a woman earns only 83.4 cents. For women, the problems of income inequality are made worse by an economic gender bias that devalues work done by women.

The words “social justice” apply to more than politics and economics. They evoke a deep desire to build a better world for all, and a willingness to live with just a little less so that others might simply live with dignity. The appeal for ‘justice for all’ reverberates in our hearts and is so compelling that no one can, in good conscience, ignore it. We cannot claim to have a clear conscience when we brush off or ignore our duty to fight for a fair distribution of economic resources to the poor; a smaller gap between the rich and the poor; a minimum wage that allows worker to feed their families; a labor force where women who do work of comparable value as men are paid the same as men; and for social welfare recipients to live with dignity, rather than merely trying to survive.

The demand for social justice is non-negotiable. We must commit ourselves to justice for all. We do not know what the future holds, but we do know that if we stand up shoulder-to-shoulder with the victims of injustice and listen to our conscience, we will help give birth to a truly just society.

Aur ea Cormier, n.d.s.c.