

WORKERS' ACTION CENTRE



ANNUAL
REPORT

2007

Workers' Action Centre
720 Spadina Avenue, Suite 223, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2T9
416-531-0778 (phone) 416-533-0107 (fax)
info@workersactioncentre.org www.workersactioncentre.org

Protecting Workers' Rights

The Workers' Action Centre is led by workers directly affected by low wages, poor conditions and unstable jobs. This year we have a committed membership of 266 active workers and are in touch with hundreds more. Every day workers who face violations of their rights on the job call the Centre. We give them the information they need. Our members, volunteers and staff provide support and suggest strategies to help workers deal with their employers and with government agencies.

We're proud of our accomplishments this past year:

- We helped more than 1100 workers directly through our phone lines
- More than 2000 workers attended our "Know Your Rights at Work" workshops, either through our community agency workshop program or our in-house sessions
- We provided Employment Standards training to more than 200 front-line staff of community agencies
- We continued to produce and distribute our Fact Sheets on workplace issues: *Workplace Bullying; Job Scams; Employment Insurance-It's your Right; Independent Contractor-Are you self-employed or an employee?; and Enforcing Your Rights as a Young Worker.*
- We distributed more than 2000 copies of our booklet, *Your Rights At Work – An Action Guide for Fair Employment*, 500 copies of our *Tamil Workers' Rights Handbook*, and more than 500 copies of *Working Through a Temporary Agency – What you should know.*

We published our eight-page newsletter *Workers' Voices* in English and Tamil in February, June and November. The newsletter features stories about workers, their inspiring battles for justice in the workplace, and our campaigns. This year's *Voices* included stories from Sybil, Alfred, Douglas, Saturnino, Curtis, Pearl, Errol, Meera, Sharif, Andrew, Jack, Sangita, Siva, Raj, Kevin, and Carlos.

All of these resources are on our website to help us reach a larger audience.

Working On The Edge – Working for Change

On May 30th WAC was proud to launch a new research report *Working On The Edge*. The report documents 18 of our members' experiences of precarious work and violations of employment standards. It was prepared by a team of academics, researchers, staff from Parkdale Community Legal Services, members and staff of the Workers' Action Centre.

The launch took place at the University of Toronto, where a panel discussion of the report attracted 150 people including community agency staff, union leaders, social justice activists, public policy organizations, government representatives and community organizers. The panel included academics, researchers, community leaders and WAC members David Reyes and Lucya Pirapakaran, who made the links between their own experiences and the public policy changes needed to make real change for workers in low wage and precarious employment.

Some facts from the report:

- Workers face a labour market where 37 percent of work is outside of the standard full-time permanent employment contract.
- Temp agency workers earn 40 percent less than their permanent counter-parts.
- One in four Ontario workers earns less than \$10 an hour.
- Over the past five years, more than \$100 million in workers' wages has gone uncollected by the Ministry of Labour.
- The Ministry of Labour found employers violated workers' rights in 11,358 claims and owed workers \$37 million in unpaid wages in 2005-06, yet it prosecuted only four companies and two directors resulting in fines of \$55,900.
- The Employment Practices Branch has only 20 staff to do 2,500 proactive inspections of 350,000 workplaces covering almost 6 million workers in Ontario.

We need to push for better enforcement... if our rights are not enforced, we really have no rights at all.

Curtis

photo: Getting the word out on the street about our campaign



It is only if we speak out about problems that employers will not keep repeating them in the future.

Saturnino

photo: Networking with our allies at the Report Launch, May 2007



We would call the temp agency and they would blame the client company and the client company would blame the temp agency, so we're basically a pawn in their game.

Andrew

photo: Discussing strategy at our Scarborough Forum, June 2007

WAC members attended neighbourhood meetings, conferences, meetings at community agencies, and community events. We distributed information and talked about our campaign, making presentations to more than 4000 individuals. Members gave our booklet to people in shopping malls and on busy street corners, visited their 16 Toronto MPP's, and attended eight All Candidates' Meetings to raise workers' rights' issues.



I strongly recommend that employees who are facing injustices, harassment and violation of labour laws should take action.

Meera

photo: Working together and making new friends

The 80-page report concludes with detailed policy recommendations. It calls for reform to employer-practices, equality for all workers, and amendments to the *Employment Standards Act* to cover temp agency workers. It also recommends changes to minimum wage policy and more effective enforcement of the *Employment Standards Act*.

We distributed the report to Ontario MPP's, policy developers and to community organizations across the province. We're continuing to push the Ministry of Labour, using our report as a basis for making changes and improvements for all workers in Ontario.

Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal!

WAC launched its campaign, *Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal*, in 2006 and the pressure continued in full force through the 2007 election year in Ontario.

We focussed the campaign on three key issues:

- Raise the Minimum Wage to \$10 Now and Index to the Rate of Inflation
- Expand Labour Laws to Protect Temporary and Contract Workers
- Make all Employers Follow the Law.

To support these demands WAC distributed 5000 copies of our booklet *Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal*, produced in English, Tamil, Spanish and Chinese. We handed out backgrounder fact sheets on each of our three key issues – for example, one called "Poverty is on the rise in Ontario and low wages are a big reason why." These materials can be found on our website.



Many of us, especially new immigrant youth, have to work in order to be able to afford to study. The public needs to have an awareness about the impact that minimum wage employment has on young people.

Sangita

photo: Visiting bad bosses in Scarborough

To assist workers to get involved, we developed a "How to Participate at an All Candidates Meeting" and "How to Visit your Local MPP" kits. We distributed these kits across the province via our website, encouraging workers in other parts of the province to bring these issues to their elected representatives.

After the election WAC members who were involved in the campaign met to plan the next steps. Now we're organizing to make the Ontario government's promise to review the ESA, and other campaign promises, a reality. We're building on our work so far by getting more information out to the neighbourhoods and to our government and community representatives, by speaking to the media, and by taking on bad employers. We're making a real difference in people's lives.

Building a Movement

During 2007 WAC increased the number of active members by 50%, and we developed a strong and dedicated Board with seven Directors.

Two Organizing Committees – Downtown and Scarborough – meet regularly to plan outreach in their communities to ensure workers are aware of their rights under employment laws. Committee members accompany other workers when they talk with a bad boss. Others may hand out information and meet with local community agencies to let them know about our work. This summer, to gain support for our “Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal” campaign, Scarborough members organized a Forum attended by more than 150 members and local community representatives.

Our Leadership Development workshops include training sessions on talking to media, how to make public presentations, how to speak with elected representatives and how to raise issues at All Candidates Meetings.

This has been a year of reaching out. We’re building provincial partnerships in the movement for workers’ rights. We’ve linked up with organizations in Hamilton, Windsor, Whitby, Brantford, Kitchener, and Mississauga. We network with unions and faith groups, and continue to be involved in Campaign 2000 and the Employment Standards Work Group. We’ve joined policy discussions with the Provincial Advisory Committee on Harassment at Work, and a new anti-poverty network – “25 in 5”.

We’ve held Community Meals in Scarborough and Downtown, linking experienced members with new members. Our Scarborough Theatre group is working on new ways to bring our message to more workers.

In 2007 WAC members told their stories in the mainstream and local media. The Scarborough Mirror covered our campaign to raise the minimum wage. City-TV covered our minimum wage rally. Curtis, a WAC member, was featured as part of a CTV “Whistleblower” series on unpaid wages. WAC members were featured in several stories in the Toronto Star, including three in their *War on Poverty* series. Some themes were: trying to survive on a minimum wage that is far below the poverty line; fighting to get unpaid wages from employers; and the need for protection from job scams.

The Workers’ Action Centre offers a way for people to join together to fight for fair employment. We’re addressing the roots of the problems we face, the weak laws that allow racism and poverty to affect our lives and our workplaces. Together we’re building our movement for change!



Supporting each other, we can help to improve work conditions.
Tom

photo: Learning new skills at a Leadership Development workshop

Our Mission

The Workers’ Action Centre is a worker-based organization committed to improving the lives and working conditions of people in low-wage and unstable employment. The Centre provides information and education to enable workers to organize for change.

Our work is guided by these principles: maximum involvement of the people affected, developing leadership among workers, shared learning, and ACTION FOR CHANGE.

About Us

The Workers’ Action Centre is an incorporated non-profit organization, established in 2005 from a merger of Toronto Organizing for Fair Employment (TOFFE) and the Workers’ Information Centre.

Our Board of Directors for 2007:

Zainab Taiyeb (Chair), Clint Palmer (Vice-Chair), Lynn Spink (Secretary), Patricia Ramirez (Treasurer),
Lucya Pirapakaran, Ron Franklin, Navtej Duggal

A special thank-you to our Members, allies, volunteers and students who have given their time, energy, commitment and spirit to improving the lives of all workers. Together we are strong!

The Workers’ Action Centre is proud to have worked with Parkdale Community Legal Service and the following organizations: CAW Social Justice Fund, City of Toronto, Heritage Canada, The Law Foundation of Ontario, The Public Service Alliance of Canada, Status of Women Canada, Toronto Community Foundation, United Way of Greater Toronto

Our 2006/07 audited financial statements are available upon request.

Workers’ Action Centre

720 Spadina Avenue, Suite 223, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2T9
416-531-0778 (phone) 416-533-0107 (fax)
info@workersactioncentre.org www.workersactioncentre.org