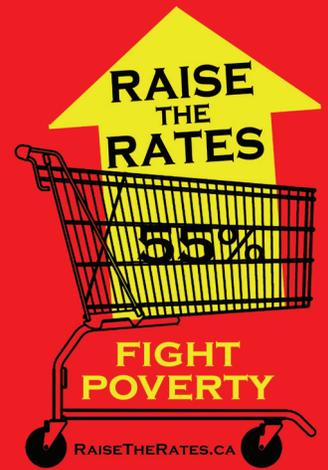


# CUPE ONTARIO AND THE RAISE THE RATES CAMPAIGN



## WHY IS SOCIAL ASSISTANCE A CUPE ISSUE?

**A**t the 2010 CUPE Ontario Convention, we took an important step in continuing to build solidarity with our community allies and fighting poverty. We voted on a resolution to endorse and actively support the Raise the Rates campaign to raise social assistance rates in Ontario and to stop the Ontario Government's attacks on unemployed and low wage workers across the Province.

CUPE Ontario has been a vital partner in building the campaign across Ontario – involving CUPE locals and members to organize along-side grassroots anti-poverty groups within our communities. Together we have fought back against cuts to essential programs like the Special Diet, and now the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit. We have spoken out against proposals to merge social assistance that would lead to a loss in income to those with disabilities. We have joined with the campaign to raise the minimum wage to demand a \$14/hour wage – understanding that many who are poor and unemployed fluctuate between low wage work and social assistance programs. We have put the issues of poverty and public services at front and centre. And we have done this from a principle of building solidarity with those living in poverty.

The following information helps to explain why raising social assistance rates is a worker's issue, how it relates to wages and what can be done to take these issues on in our workplace, our locals and our communities.

Many CUPE members already know the impact the cuts have had upon people in our communities because we work with those living in poverty, have families or friends who rely on social assistance, or ourselves have experienced poverty and precarious conditions. Many of us have, at times in our lives, have been only a pay-cheque away from poverty. This campaign allows us to work together to make the change necessary.



As a CUPE member working with clients under the existing Ontario Works legislation my day involves constant troubleshooting with clients' to obtain and maintain the basic necessities of life: food and shelter. The level of stress clients' experience is oppressive and as a case manager it becomes very difficult to develop a future case plan and follow through with a cloud of hopelessness hanging over both our heads.

## SOME DEFINITIONS

**AUSTERITY:** An ideology that promotes cutting public services, wages and benefits as a response to the economic crisis. A form of hyper neo-liberalism that became popular after the 2008 economic collapse.

**OW:** Ontario Works, otherwise known as 'welfare', is provincial social assistance for single unemployed people as well as families. There used to be a separate program for families called 'Family Benefits' (or 'Mother's Allowance') but that was cut in 1995.

**ODSP:** Ontario Disability Support Program or 'disability' is provincial social assistance for people with 'recognized' disabilities. In order to get ODSP one has to go through a lengthy and often complicated application process.

**SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES:** The rates of income for social assistance benefits (OW and ODSP)

**SPECIAL DIET ALLOWANCE:** A food benefit of up to \$250 extra per month for people on OW/ODSP to buy healthy/medically necessary food. Years ago, this benefit was available to anyone on OW/ODSP whose doctor, nurse practitioner, dietician or midwife



filled out an application saying that this benefit was required for medical reasons. As more people began accessing the benefit, the Ministry of Community and Social Services accused poor people of fraud and abusing the benefit. Over time, they changed the rules to limit access to the Special Diet – most people have seen the benefit cut completely. This is having serious health consequences for people living on OW/ODSP.

**COMMUNITY START-UP AND MAINTENANCE BENEFIT:** a benefit to get people housing, to provide first and last month's rent, to re-locate, or to buy furniture and the basics to starting up a home. It was an essential benefit for people who are homeless, for women re-locating from domestic violence, and from people leaving institutions trying to get started up on the outside. In 2013, the Liberals eliminated this benefit, putting many more at risk of homelessness.

## A HISTORY OF CUTS

**1995:** Mike Harris Conservative government cut Ontario Works (welfare) by 21.6% as part of the 'Common Sense Revolution' and ODSP (disability) rates were frozen. Since that time, social assistance rates have continued to decline as cost of living skyrockets and government has failed to raise the rates even with the rates of inflation



**2003:** Liberals are elected promising to reverse Harris era cuts and bring change. In their first budget they fail to do any of what they promised

**2005:** Liberals begin their attack on the Special Diet. Accuse applicants of fraud and change the rules of eligibility. Many people cut off the program and/or limiting the amount given

**2010:** Liberals attack the Special Diet again, forcing even more people off the program

**2012:** Liberals launch 'Social Assistance Review Commission' – report includes many broad reform recommendations as well as some scary proposals such as the merging of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program

**2013:** Liberals announce they will cut the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit

## THEY SAY CUT-BACK, WE SAY FIGHT-BACK: A HISTORY OF FIGHTING BACK

**1995 – 2000:** In response to the Harris cuts and attacks on both workers and the poor, there were massive demonstrations, organizing efforts, and days-of-action across the province

**2004:** Ontario Coalition Against Poverty officially launched demands on the newly elected Liberals to actually reverse the Harris cuts and raise the rates of social assistance

**2005:** Special Diet Campaign sees health clinics across Ontario getting people access to the Special Diet – health providers and grassroots activists put on these clinics from an understanding that 'poverty is the biggest determinant of poor health'. Originally the Special Diet was \$250/person. The work of activists got thousands this benefit. The program went from giving out \$6million to \$200million at the height of this campaign.

**2010:** CUPE Ontario joins the Raise the Rates Campaign and the campaign grows across the province

**2011:** Release of Health and Poverty video with Ontario Council of Hospital Unions, provincial speaking tour and press conferences follow

More and more allies join the Campaign including Ontario Federation of Labour, CUPW, OPSEU, and a wide range of social agencies, health providers, and community organizations

**2012:** Provincial Week of action to Stop the Cut to Community Start-Up sees communities win \$42million in funding

**2013:** Second Provincial Week of action sees actions in cities and towns across Ontario and a culmination of a provincial assembly in Sudbury. Major demand in this week of action includes 'No merger of OW and ODSP'

**2014:** Liberals announce they will back off from a merger of ODSP and OW as a result of significant community pressure

## ORGANIZING TO WIN:

### WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Demonstrations, Marches and Rallies

Occupations of government and politicians offices

Press conferences

Community BBQ's

Town halls and public events

Connecting grassroots activists with CUPE members

Reports, articles and public information

Direct support for people navigating the system

## WHO PAYS FOR THE CRISIS?

### LIBERAL GOVERNMENT TARGETS POOR & WORKING PEOPLE



photo courtesy of John Bonner

In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, all three levels of government have gutted public services, wages, and social programs in the name of austerity.

Tax breaks for corporations: Ontario has lowest corporate tax rates and the lowest spending on services per capita in Canada. Corporate tax breaks have taken over \$4billion/year out of public services to line the pockets of CEOs and big business.

In Ontario, this has meant a major attack on social assistance benefits, on wages and on our rights as public sector workers to fair bargaining. In 2010 for example, at the same time that government further cut the Special Diet Allowance and enforced a wage freeze on the public sector, they gave corporations a \$4.6 billion tax break (for 3 years)!



## RESISTING CUTBACKS & CONCESSIONS : AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL

Cuts to Social Assistance benefits are only one small part of a huge wave of cutbacks that have been coming down on poor and working people across the world. We have seen how this era of austerity influences the employer in our bargaining – demanding concessions from our hard fought benefits and rights.

Those of us who face these attacks need to work together.

## SOLIDARITY NOT CHARITY

Poor people and public sector workers have every reason to work together as allies in the same struggle. Right now, one in six Ontario workers is working at or close to the minimum wage. The low-wage economy is the fastest growing sector – a direction that both governments and corporations are pushing for.

To ensure that the supply of low paid workers is preserved and expanded, governments cut social assistance benefits and increase vulnerability and desperation. Solidarity with poor people on assistance is not just a matter of being compassionate – our issues are intrinsically linked. Low welfare rates ultimately undermine the bargaining power of those with jobs and is an attack on the social safety net that workers fought for and won generations ago.

The statement 'an injury to one is an injury to all' really does stand true.

We are not saying that building unity is without challenges or denying that it involves work. Poor and unemployed people must reject the propaganda that scapegoats public sector workers; understanding that the attack on these workers is part of the attack on the services they deliver. At the same time, unionized workers need to be in solidarity with those on social assistance and low wage workers by challenging stereotypes and oppression and fighting for a decent and livable income for all.

## CUPE AND THE RAISE THE RATES CAMPAIGN

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

A committee is working to put this campaign on the ground with CUPE members and anti-poverty activists together.

Get involved, join us in this campaign! Ways to get involved:

Contact: [ocap@tao.ca](mailto:ocap@tao.ca) /416-925-6939 to join the CUPE Raise the Rates Committee

**INVITE** the Committee to speak to your local, caucus or sectoral meeting

**MOBILIZE** your membership for upcoming demonstrations and events

**BECOME** a financial sustainer of the Raise the Rates Campaign:

**DONATE** to the Campaign: 'Ontario Coalition Against Poverty' 157 Carlton St, Unit #206, Toronto, ON, M5A 2K3

**VISIT:** [RaisetheRates.ca](http://RaisetheRates.ca) for more information

RaiseTheRates #RaisetheRates



**Current Monthly Basic Needs and Maximum Shelter Rates and Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) amounts for select OW family types**

	BASIC NEEDS	MAX SHELTER	OCB	TOTAL
Single	\$250	\$376	\$0	\$626
Single Parent – 1 child under 13	\$344	\$596	\$101	\$1,041
Single Parent – 1 child 13-17	\$344	\$596	\$101	\$1,041
Single Parent – 2 children under 13	\$344	\$648	\$202	\$1,194
Single Parent – 2 children (one under 13 and one over 13)	\$344	\$648	\$202	\$1,194
Single Parent – 2 children 13-17	\$344	\$648	\$202	\$1,194
Couple	\$458	\$596	\$0	\$1,054
Couple – 1 child under 13	\$458	\$648	\$101	\$1,207
Couple – 1 child (13-17)	\$458	\$648	\$101	\$1,207
Couple – 2 children under 13	\$458	\$702	\$202	\$1,362
Couple – 2 children (under/over)	\$458	\$702	\$202	\$1,362
Couple – 2 children 13-17	\$458	\$702	\$202	\$1,362



**Current Monthly Basic Needs and Maximum Shelter Rates and Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) amounts for select ODSP family types**

	BASIC NEEDS	MAX SHELTER	OCB	TOTAL
Single	\$607	\$479	\$0	\$1,086
Single Parent - 1 child under 13	\$750	\$753	\$101	\$1,604
Single Parent -1 child 13-17	\$759	\$753	\$101	\$1,613
Single Parent - 2 children under 13	\$750	\$816	\$202	\$1,768
Single Parent -2 children (under/over)	\$759	\$816	\$202	\$1,777
Single Parent - 2 children both 13-17	\$768	\$816	\$202	\$1,786
Couple - 1 with a disability	\$893	\$753	\$0	\$1,646
Couple - 1 with a disability - 1 child under 13	\$893	\$816	\$101	\$1,810
Couple - 1 with a disability - 1 child 13-17	\$902	\$816	\$101	\$1,819
Couple - 1 with a disability - 2 children under 13	\$893	\$886	\$202	\$1,981
Couple - 1 with a disability - 2 children (under/over)	\$902	\$886	\$202	1,990
Couple - 1 with a disability - 2 children 13-17	\$911	\$886	\$202	\$1,999
Couple - both have a disability	\$1,211	\$753	\$0	\$1,964
Couple - both have a disability - 1 child under 13	\$1,211	\$816	\$101	\$2,128
Couple - both have a disability - 1 child 13-17	\$1,220	\$816	\$101	\$2,137
Couple - both have a disability - 2 children under 13	\$1,211	\$886	\$202	\$2,299
Couple - both have a disability - 2 children (under/over)	\$1,220	\$886	\$202	\$2,808
Couple - both have a disability - 2 children 13-17	\$1,229	\$886	\$202	\$2,317

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