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Unions critical to well-being of all Albertans: new study

Strong correlation with better wages, improved workplace safety, and greater equality

EDMONTON – A new study released this morning by the Parkland Institute recommends that the Alberta government should step back from its current moves to reduce unionization and restrict collective bargaining, as labour unions play an important role in improving wages, improving workplace safety, and reducing inequality across the province.

The report, authored by Parkland researcher David Campanella, Athabasca University associate professor of labour relations Bob Barnetson, and Canadian Labour Congress senior economist Angella MacEwen, is titled ***On the Job: Why Unions Matter in Alberta***.

Despite significant declines in unionization rates over the last few decades, and a provincial policy climate in Alberta that is discouraging, to say the least, of unions and unionization, the report's authors found that unions provide substantial economic and social benefits to all workers in the province.

"Alberta has the lowest unionization rate and some of the most union-hostile labour laws in the country," says Campanella, the lead author on the report. "Our research shows that this does a great disservice to workers in the province and Albertans in general."

The report focuses on the impact of unions in the areas of wages, worker safety, and income inequality. In all three areas the evidence shows far better results with increased unionization. Some of the key findings include:

- measured in terms of economic performance, wage growth in Alberta has been far lower than in other provinces with higher unionization rates;
- women and young workers fare much better in unionized environments;
- high unionization rates also put upward pressure on wages for non-union workers;
- unions play a key role in improving worker safety through education, worker empowerment, and government lobbying;
- there is a strong correlation between falling unionization rates and growing income inequality in Alberta.

"It's important to highlight that unions serve to raise the bar not only for their own members, but also for the ununionized," says Barnetson. "All Alberta workers benefit from these positive impacts of unions."

The authors point out that despite a strong anti-union bias in the Alberta government, in terms of unionization rates, Alberta is still doing better than many jurisdictions in the United States. Within this context, Alberta unions are well-positioned to mobilize workers in the province to push for changes that would vastly improve the well-being of all Albertans.

"Any future attempts to further restrict collective bargaining in Alberta need to be assessed against the very real economic and social benefits of unions," concludes Campanella. "All Albertans interested in higher wages, safer workplaces, and a more equitable distribution of income should consider their goals as closely aligned with the goals and accomplishments of the labour movement."

The Parkland Institute is a non-partisan public policy research institute in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. The publication ***On the Job*** is available for download on the institute's website at <http://parklandinstitute.ca>.

For more info, or to arrange interviews:

David Campanella, Public Policy Research Manager, Parkland Institute (w) 403-270-9669, (c) 587-718-2267, david.campanella@ualberta.ca

Bob Barnetson, co-author, (w) 866-418-7198, barnetso@athabascau.ca