



Just the Facts: Making Ends Meet

At SEIU-West, we believe in having an engaged membership. In anticipation of the Saskatchewan election on April 4, 2016 we have identified several key issues that matter to you, your families and communities. “Just the Facts” sheets on those issues are part of the information, education and tools we offer to help you make informed choices about voting and getting involved in the election.

Did the government miss an opportunity to save for our future during the recent boom?

Poverty, inequality, and insecurity: not everyone benefitted from the boom.

- In recent years, we have repeatedly been told that we were living in good times. That the Sask. economy was booming, and that inflation was low. Yet this didn't fit with the actual experiences of many Sask. people. Not everyone has benefitted from the boom.
- The provincial government has been quick to take the credit for the good times, but has not done enough to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are shared fairly. It has not taken enough responsibility for, nor done enough planning for, the boom's negative effects, including the end of the boom.
- Long before the recent fall in oil and potash prices, many Sask. residents were having trouble making ends meet.
- According to a poll of 1200 Sask. residents in mid-November 2015, just 29% said they had been positively affected by growth.
- Unless you worked in the oil/gas or mining sectors, or in real estate and property development, the chances are good that your income did not rise significantly during the boom, especially when the rising cost of living is taken in to account.
- Since the last provincial election (November 2011), the overall cost of living in Sask. has risen faster than in the rest of the country, especially when it comes to necessities like healthy food and shelter.
 - The price of beef has risen 47%, pork 34%.
 - Fresh fruits and vegetables rose 33% (versus just 20% in the rest of the country).
 - The overall cost of shelter rose more than 10%, and the costs of utilities (water, heat, & electricity) rose by almost 20%.
 - Child care & housekeeping costs rose 15%.
- There is evidence that young workers have been especially hard-hit by these price increases: taking inflation into account, the average weekly wages for workers under 25 actually declined by nearly 3%. This is one of the reasons why SEIU-West has strongly supported campaigns to increase the minimum wage.
- Another reason: over the past four years, full-time tuition for most university and college programs in Sask. has risen 16-20%, making it harder to pay for an education without going deep into debt (see also our “Just the Facts; Educational Opportunities” fact sheet).
- In the November 2015 poll mentioned above, 44% of Sask. respondents said that the rising cost of living was “the issue most affecting you right now”—higher than for any other issue. 80% of respondents agreed that the rising cost of living is increasing inequality in the province.



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Food bank use is growing.

- Food banks are a sign that not everyone is benefitting from our economic boom.
- Food bank use is not just a big-city issue. Sask. has 29 food banks, in communities ranging in size from Saskatoon and Regina to Unity and La Loche.
- Use of these food banks is high, and growing: more than 26,000 people sought food bank assistance in Sask. in March 2015, an increase of 51% since 2008. This growth seems to be increasing as the economy starts to fall.
- Food bank clients are not just unemployed adults:
 - 45% of Sask. clients are under 18--the highest percentage in Canada.
 - 18% of clients have wages as their main source of income – a glimpse into the challenges facing the working poor.

Aboriginal people have not fairly benefitted from the boom.

- It has not increased Aboriginal employment rates. Among Aboriginals not living on reserves, 26% (about 26,000) live in poverty. The percentage is even higher for Aboriginals living on-reserve, and is 60% for Aboriginal children.

Poverty, insecurity, and inequality have a big impact on health.

- According to Saskatoon's Chief Medical Health Officer:
 - "The conditions in which we live, work, learn and play have a huge impact on our health. The stark reality is that many people who live in Saskatoon Health Region do not have the same opportunities to be as healthy as others and as a result, live shorter lives. This is not fair and does not need to be this way."
- Sask. people increasingly share these concerns, and support policies to do something about them. In 2013, a Saskatoon Health Region/University of Saskatchewan study found that:
 - 80% of Saskatoon residents think income is the most important factor affecting health.
 - 87% supported more disease prevention and health promotion programs.
 - 82% supported universally affordable child care.
 - 73% supported raising the minimum wage.
 - 73% supported lowering post-secondary tuition
- The study found that people were willing to increase taxes to pay for these policy changes:
 - 82% supported increased taxes on alcohol & cigarettes.
 - 78% supported increased taxes on the wealthiest people.
 - 72% supported increased corporate taxes.
- Unfortunately, our provincial government has not shown the same level of concern about or commitment to these issues.

It's not just the very poor who are insecure.

- According to a 2015 survey of Sask. employees:
 - 43% said they were living paycheque-to-paycheque (defined as "would be difficult to meet my financial obligations if my cheque was one week late").
 - 53% said they were saving 5% or less of their cheque (the highest in Canada – retirement experts suggest a minimum of 10%).
 - 38% said they felt "overwhelmed" by their level of debt.



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Signs the boom is ending.

- According to Statistics Canada data, average earnings in Sask. are starting to fall, especially in oil patch jobs, but also in the retail and health care sectors. The main reasons seem to be reduced hours of work, employer's increasing use of part-time workers.

Saskatchewan Futures Fund: a missed opportunity to prepare for life after the boom.

- In many places with a large natural resources sector, such as Alberta, Alaska, and Norway, the government sets aside a large portion of the revenue it gets from natural resources and invests it in a "sovereign wealth fund" (SWF).
- A well-run SWF can help the province, state, or country diversify its economy and prepare for a future when the natural resources run out.
- The Wall government has dithered and stalled when asked about creating a Sask. SWF.
- In 2013, the government finally asked former U of S President Peter MacKinnon to research other SWFs and make recommendations. MacKinnon recommended that the Province set up a Saskatchewan Futures Fund as soon as possible.
- The government has not acted on his recommendations, and with resource prices now falling it may be too late.

What Can I Do??

Get involved!

- Share this information with family, friends and coworkers, and use it to start conversations about the issues.
- Ask questions of the candidates and other political party representatives who contact you about the issues raised in this "Just the Facts" sheet.
- Become involved with the party or candidate whose positions on these issues best serve the needs of you and your community.
- Write a letter to the editor to your local paper to share information on issues affecting your community.
- Use social media to share facts about issues that matter during the election.
- For more information about becoming more actively involved, visit www.purplevotes.ca.

Selected Sources

- Food Banks Canada. Hunger Count 2015. <https://www.foodbankscanada.ca/hungercount2015>
- MacKinnon P. A Futures Fund for Saskatchewan: A Report to Premier Brad Wall on the Saskatchewan Heritage Initiative. 2013. <http://www.gov.sk.ca/adx/aspx/adxGetMedia.aspx?mediaId=2db41e74-30f1-4397-bf4f-fa051bc6182e&PN=Shared>
- Upstream website. <http://www.thinkupstream.net/>



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For further information about this topic, including details about the sources of the information on this fact sheet, please contact Karman Kawchuk, Research Officer, SEIU-West, at karman.kawchuk@seiuwest.ca