

why i'm in the fight for decent work

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Chuka Ejeckam is the Director of Research and Policy at the BC Federation of Labour.

The fight for decent work is the fight for human dignity. In my view, it is motivated by the non-negotiable assertion that all people, by the fact of their existence, are entitled to all the resources necessary for material, social, and psychological well-being. This assertion recognizes and includes an innate human desire for meaningful work – and that work need not be wage labour. Whatever that work is, however, it must be decent work. This means that it must occur in environments that are safe and protected from physical and social harms, must not conflict with the workers' need of and entitlement to well-being, must not demand that workers compromise their morals, and must not be exploitative.

This fight is a universal calling for each of us. While recognizing our differential capacities to engage in it – based on our relative circumstances – the struggle to protect, provide for, and empower every being on this planet is a defining struggle of our lives, our communities, and our politics. For centuries, exploitative and extractive political-economic structures have served the wealthy and well-connected at the expense of everyone else. It is our duty to topple them.

I'm the Director of Research and Policy at the BC Federation of Labour (BCFED). The BCFED works alongside its affiliate unions throughout British Columbia to benefit all workers in the province. Through our connection to the Canadian Labour Congress, we work in service to all workers in Canada. And, through the principle of international solidarity – and with recognition of the interconnectedness of our world – we seek to support all workers, everywhere, who are denied the resources and circumstances required for well-being and human flourishing. This includes workers who provide unrecognized and uncompensated labour; the kind of labour that goes into raising

children, caring for elders, building and preserving communities, and protecting all there is to treasure about human social interaction and organization.

Among the files on which I lead are the future of work, rising precarious employment, and the rapidly accelerating climate crisis. Our engagement with these issues recognizes the capacity for advancing automation and artificial intelligence to displace workers, disrupt worker organizing, and deteriorate worker-built political power. However, we also recognize that these technologies, if worker-controlled, can improve the safety and working conditions of human labour, as well as positively separate the attainment of material, social, and psychological security from provision of wage labour. The struggle for decent work includes the struggle for work dedicated to community enrichment and self-actualization, not just the struggle for decent wage labour.

In recognition of the changing labour environment and the ongoing rise of economic inequality, we call for increasing workers' power and control over their own circumstances. This requires (1) increasing the rigour and enforcement of employment standards and labour regulations, in part by increasing the funding of relevant regulatory agencies; (2) building a fair, equitable, and sustainable economy supported by boldly progressive taxation, secure and sustainable jobs, and well-funded, quality public services; and (3) actively pursuing meaningful reconciliation for and with Indigenous peoples, including implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We also campaign to increase union density, with unions being one of the most broadly beneficial social institutions in our society. Further, we act as advocates, pressuring governments to address policies that have deepened inequality over recent decades, and supporting structural change, such as placing workers in control of the process of automation. In each case, our position seeks to protect and bolster access to security and well-being for workers and increase their power and control over their own lives.

In the same vein, our engagement with the climate crisis recognizes that the massive structural transformations necessitated by the fact of climate change can create empowering employment for millions of people throughout the world, as well as foster global solidarity and cooperation that seeks to protect every person on the planet. However, this can only happen if those transformations are controlled by workers and worker-aligned institutions, and are animated by an unyielding pursuit of social, racial, gender, economic, and environmental justice. Climate change is an existential threat to organized human society. But, if we choose it, it can also be the catalyst for building a world that has never yet existed – a world explicitly and adamantly founded in cooperation and collective well-being.

The rapidly changing labour environment in which we live cannot be reversed. De-industrialization, automation, increasing precarity, and existential ecological threat

are our shared predicament, and while they raise great and numerous concerns for workers, unions, and those earnestly invested in pursuing justice, they need not be a terminal condition. By increasing the power of workers, of unions, and of people, and by increasing the control we hold over the structures of production, distribution, and access to well-being that govern our lives and societies, we can create a world of decent work for all – and perhaps, for the first time in history, a decent world.



Armine Yalnizyan is an economist, the Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers and Senior Economic Policy Advisor Deputy Minister's Office, Employment and Social Development Canada.

I'm Armenian, so it's not easy for me to be optimistic. But, as a Canadian, these days I can't help but feel a little surge of optimism about the future that lies ahead for workers. Yes, the robots are coming, and they may eat many jobs. But before this wave of automation ushers massive labour displacement, the long-awaited Exit of The Boomers from the labour market will trigger the biggest wave of job vacancies we've ever seen. This will create a historically unprecedented opportunity to improve outcomes for millions of workers and young people preparing to enter the Canadian labour market.

I am confident population aging will make possible a type of labour market that wasn't possible before, because widespread labour shortages mean we will truly need all hands on deck. There simply won't be enough robots to do all the work that needs doing, high and low skilled. The choice is to ignore the untapped potential and let economic growth in the world's 10th largest economy continue to decline; or take this economic urgency and turn it into a social force for greater equality and decent work. That means investing in the human potential of everyone, but especially groups of people historically excluded from learning and job opportunities, and in pay rates. If public dollars are invested in educational attainment and employment rates, we will see more Canadians working with better pay and benefits. That would increase household incomes and public revenues and decrease demand for jobless benefits, social assistance and remedial health services.

There's another reason I'm optimistic that most political leaders will find this an irresistible policy path. Canada is not alone in shifting focus from externally-driven to internally-driven growth. Population aging throughout the global north, the rise of nationalist and increasingly

protectionist policies, and more frequent extreme climate events are slowing global economic growth, especially in the richest nations. For the foreseeable future, attempts to boost growth in this era of slowing growth are less likely to reliably come from export-led trade than domestic policies. And within domestic policies, the most room for improvement is through policies that boost the economy from the bottom up, not trickle down policies. Canada could lead in demonstrating the kind of public investment that literally pays for itself.

There is so much potential for things to go right. And yet, things can go very wrong, very quickly. Instead of seizing this chance to improve opportunities and outcomes for millions of Canadians, widespread labour shortages could also be addressed by importing the solution. That describes Canada's history, and is a fundamental element of its future success. By 2025, the only growth in the labour force will be through immigration, due to falling fertility rates and population aging.

Mention the "future of work", and technology's impact often takes centre stage. Digital technologies both contribute to and erode opportunities for decent work, and I fear for what balance we will strike over time. Every day, new labour-displacing and labour-enhancing technologies meet our needs and desires for faster, better, cheaper. Consumers and businesses alike are rapidly normalizing the request for on-demand labour. Employment relations, employment standards and labour law read differently if your employer is actually a consumer. And in the search for cheaper, faster, fewer-strings attached, we may be pitting ourselves, as consumers, against ourselves as workers.

We're only beginning to understand the significance of this evolving context, and explore legal frameworks to govern our digital rights as both consumers and workers. We're only beginning to investigate ways to rebalance the distribution of power between corporations and citizens, between capital and labour.

Wherever these conversations lead, we need to be part of them. For me, the journey ahead is immensely exciting. Based on 30 years as a progressive economist, I know the transformative energy will come from "the ground up", from equality-seeking groups. I'm talking about unions. People who value community and personal wellbeing, in addition to paid work. Ironically, the often discounted groups in society are the ones who now know what's needed most to disrupt the status quo. Together, we will move the trajectory of the journey beyond the simple pursuit of economic growth, towards the intersection of social and economic goals. The demographic imperative means that the road ahead could lead to less inequality in the labour market. If we focus our efforts, we could see the end of two-tier contracts and the systemic "othering" of groups of workers within and between workplaces, including temporary foreign workers of all skill and pay levels. That would lead to less precarity and churn in labour markets, but enhance fluidity between paid and unpaid work, and workers' control over their time.

The technological imperative could forge a path towards regulatory reforms for laws and rules that protect people as much as businesses and platforms, benefit workers as much as consumers, and better distinguish the public interest from the private interest. This journey brings us back to first principles, time and again. As behaviours change, so will definitions and pushback to control the agenda. The stakes are high. But let's not forget: we've been here before.

Workers around the world have come a long way since the creation of the International Labour Organization 100 years ago. Hard-fought improvements came from collective action in the workplace and through national employment standards; new institutions of support and recourse; coordinated international movement in norms and codes of practice; and vigorous local, national and international efforts to eliminate exploitation.

A century of lessons learned, echoed in the span of my professional life, underscores a central fact: we'll never do it alone. Good news, because here we are, seeking continued progress, together. May the inevitable spells of individual pessimism spur us towards more coordinated collective action, and propel us towards good reasons for being optimistic about the future for workers – our future.



Ted Howard is the President and Co-Founder of The Democracy Collaborative.

Ten years ago, at the height of the financial crisis, as unemployment in the U.S. hit 11%, I visited the high plains Texas town of Amarillo. Leaders of the city were justifiably proud that while unemployment raged across the country, in Amarillo it never got above 4% – what most economists would consider “full employment.” But on this trip, I met with the Superintendent of the Amarillo Independent School District and asked what was happening in his schools. The first thing he told me was: “Sixty-six percent of the children in all of our schools are on free or government subsidized lunch programs.”

In other words: virtually everyone in Amarillo had a job – indeed many people had two or three – and yet two-thirds of families couldn't afford to send their kids to school with a sandwich and an apple for lunch. This story is playing out in communities across America.

It is for reasons like this that I – and my organization, The Democracy Collaboration – are in the fight for decent work. We believe that work must be family-supporting, financially rewarding, and that those who contribute their labor to the economy should share in the profits that their hard labor makes possible. As defined in our new book, “The Making of a Democratic Economy,” Marjorie Kelly and I call this the “principle of good work.” As we write: “In a democratic economy, good work at a living wage is a central aim. Workers are to be accorded dignity and work itself is honorable – a vital part of developing what philosopher Martha Nussbaum called full human ‘capabilities.’” Or as American President Abraham Lincoln observed, labor is “the superior of capital,” deserving “much the higher consideration.”

We are in this fight with many allies – businesses and enterprises that are not rooted in maximizing shareholder value for absentee investors, but fairly rewarding the work of employees and the residents of communities in which they are based. These take many forms: employee-owned companies, B-corps, worker cooperatives, community-owned enterprises, community financial institutions ... and many other forms of broad-based ownership in which labor and community come before capital.

One such model I’ve been closely associated with for the past decade is the Evergreen Cooperatives of Cleveland, Ohio, where I now live. Evergreen is a network of for-profit, green, worker cooperatives that provide vital services to our city’s anchor institutions, most notably area hospitals and universities – a massive hydroponic greenhouse growing 3 million heads of lettuce and 300,000 pounds of basil in the middle of the city; a green energy and construction company; two industrial-scale laundries now cleaning nearly 30 million pounds of healthcare bed linen, towels, gowns and uniforms for local hospitals.

These are not normally high-wage industries, but because Evergreen’s several hundred workers are the owners of these companies, everyone makes an above-industry standard family-supporting living wage, health benefits, and profit sharing. Workers elect members to their company’s board of directors and are trained in financial management so that they can read their monthly Profit and Loss (P&L) Statements and make key decisions over the future of the company.

This, I would submit, is what decent work looks like, all the more so given that virtually our entire workforce was formerly unemployed and from asset-poor households. Nearly 50% of Evergreen’s owners were formerly incarcerated. But now they are owners of successful businesses working to revitalize the economy of our older industrial city.

We are also in this fight with forward-thinking public officials: ranging from Mayors to State Legislators, Senators and even most recently to progressive Democratic presidential candidates. Currently we are working with multi-stakeholder collaboratives working to

build wealth in their communities – from Albuquerque, NM and Tacoma, WA to Rochester, NY and Richmond, VA. In the past few years, and for the first time in modern American history, cities are putting line items into their budgets to promote and seed worker cooperatives; states are building employee-ownership centers to help retiring owners transition their companies to worker control as part of their succession plan; cities and states are exploring the establishment of public banks so that capital can be more readily directed to those who most need it and who are most likely to build decent work; universities and hospitals are transforming their purchasing, hiring and investment policies to provide more local residents with the opportunity to enter into decent work.

As I look to the future, my own focus is on lifting up these models of a new, democratic economy so that other communities in the United States, and now also in the United Kingdom, can expand their vision of what is possible. It's no longer enough for elected officials to pat themselves on the back when the number of new jobs increases. They need to refocus on the quality of those jobs, the career opportunities they afford, and ensure that labor is not simply an expense on a company's P&L that should be limited and squeezed – but the essential factor of business success that must be rewarded, celebrated and compensated at a fair and just level.



**CHUKA, ARMINE AND TED ARE MY LABOUR OUR FUTURE PARTICIPANTS AND POLICY INNOVATORS
WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED THESE REFLECTIONS AS CONVERSATION STARTERS.**

ATKINSON
For social and economic justice