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FAST FACTS

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Less a Problem than an Opportunity

Fast food franchises in Brandon, the *Winnipeg Free Press* (Oct. 30, 2007) has reported, are offering prospective employees the chance to win \$1000 cash prizes, or even a new car, to work for them. Such gimmicks are not the way to solve a labour shortage. Better to view the problem as an opportunity---an opportunity to pull members of low-income communities now under-represented in the paid labour force into employment---and to pursue the opportunity systematically.

There are, for example, large numbers of Aboriginal people in and around Brandon. The communities of Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, Birdtail Sioux First Nation, and Canupawakpa First Nation are located in western Manitoba, and in the combined provincial constituencies of Brandon East and Brandon West there were 3,725 Aboriginal people (9.5 per cent of the total population) as of the 2001 Census.

The labour shortage at Tim Hortons and McDonalds, and at a great many other workplaces now and in the near future according to most demographic studies, can be seen as an opportunity to force us to think hard about how to overcome the many barriers impeding Aboriginal peoples' access to the paid labour force. Knock down the barriers that make it so difficult for Aboriginal people to find paid employment, and we take a big step toward solving two problems, namely, the immediate problem of growing labour shortages, and the persistent and pervasive problem of economic and social exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from mainstream life.

Innovative Strategies

There has in recent years been much innovation in developing strategies to move members of low-income communities into the paid labour force. Much of this has been described in a CCPA-Mb study (Loewen et al 2005). The strategies include simulated workplaces, cross-cultural and anti-racist training, and the establishment of labour market intermediaries, to name just three.

Simulated workplaces replicate the physical and cultural characteristics of the real workplace, and enable potential employees to learn about and adapt to workplace routines and cultural expectations in a hands-on manner.

Cross-cultural and anti-racist training, for both employees and employers, has been shown to make the transition to work more successful, especially when such training includes the development of an understanding of cultural differences and of various forms and expressions of racism.

'Labour market intermediaries' have proved to be especially successful. A labour market intermediary is a body comprised of employers, educational institutions, unions, governments and community-based employment development agencies, whose purpose is to find ways to move low-income people into good jobs. There is no rocket science in this. Rather, the intermediary is a means of focusing attention and effort on achieving this goal, rather than assuming that the goal can be reached by doing nothing. And it works.



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***FASTFACTS* continued ...**

These kinds of initiatives, and others, work well because they are focused on the task of finding effective ways of getting low-income people into good jobs. They conform with the principle that, if we set our minds to finding the way to do something, we can do it. The labour shortage in Brandon is best seen as a wake-up call to get us to deal seriously with the task of drawing those large numbers of people currently excluded from the labour force, into paid employment. Offering the chance to win a free car or cash is not a serious way of addressing this important issue, and suggests that no credible attempts are yet being made to solve these two inter-related problems---the co-existence of labour shortages, and large pools of people who are excluded from the labour force.

But Aren't These Lousy Jobs?

Some will say that workers cannot be attracted to Tim Hortons or McDonalds because these are not good jobs. This is a strong argument. Much evidence exists to support the view that moving low-income people into the paid labour force works best when people are moved into good jobs---jobs that pay a living wage, and include benefits and opportunities for advancement. We agree with this view, but would advance two arguments in support of our contention that serious, not gimmicky, efforts should be made to move low-income people into these jobs.

First, they are jobs, and constitute a first step toward entry into the paid labour force. In her powerful book, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (Vintage Books, 2000), Katherine S. Newman describes the many benefits that flow to low-income, inner-city youth from paid employment, even when that employment is in poorly-paid sectors like the fast food industry. She discusses the many problems in the industry, but her main message is the importance of work, and the dignity of work, and the need to find ways to get members of low-income communities into jobs.

Second, the inferior quality of these jobs represents an opportunity for unions to organize

in the service sector, and to prove yet again that the trade union movement is not only, as Ed Broadbent reported in the October 30, 2007, issue of the *Free Press*, a crucial promoter and protector of fundamental human rights, but also one of the major means of moving people out of poverty by fighting for decent wages and benefits and fairness in the workplace. If unions were to be successful in organizing the fast food and related service industries, wages would rise, benefits would improve, and, more importantly, workers would win the human rights protections that Broadbent describes. The recruitment difficulties of Tim Hortons and McDonalds would thereby be solved. And if strategies were consciously designed to get Aboriginal people into these jobs, a dent would begin to be made in the deeply-rooted and inter-related problems of poverty, racism and social exclusion experienced by the Aboriginal community.

The recruitment difficulties faced by Tim Horton's and McDonalds in Brandon---and by extension employers in other sectors and other cities ---will not be solved by gimmicks. They will be solved by a conscious determination to find ways to get people who are not now in the labour market, into those jobs. This will require effort and creativity. Our governments ---local, provincial and federal---must take the lead in making this happen, because leaving it to the market is not working. Further, the quality of these jobs must be improved if prospective workers are to be attracted to them. Trade unions must take the lead in making this happen, as they have done so often in other sectors. Once we abandon the gimmicks, and promote these more serious and proven approaches, we will all be the winners.

- Errol Black and Jim Silver

Errol Black and Jim Silver are members of the CCPA-MB's Board of Directors, and authors of Building a Better World: An Introduction to Trade Unionism in Canada, (Fernwood Press), a second, revised edition of which will be published in the spring of 2008.



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