

Dueling for Dollars

Feminist Activism and Minimum Wage Coalition Politics

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Cet article analyse le développement des coalitions et les facteurs du contexte politique qui ont mené à l'émergence de la « Coalition pour un revenu équitable ». L'auteure explique ce qui a poussé trois groupes de femmes à adhérer à la coalition et les avantages qu'elles vont en retirer à l'intérieur de leur militantisme féministe.

Feminist activism in Canada has a long and stellar history. Initially focused on voting and workplace rights at the turn of the nineteenth century, women's collective action during the second wave women's movement during the 1970s and 1980s was responsible for "ground breaking" changes such as the establishment of women's shelters, rape crisis centers, and family law reform, to name a few (Rebick). Remarkable achievements accomplished by the purposeful political activism of feminist women.

Feminist activism and organizing has taken many shapes. To compel social, economic, and political transformation, women created or joined community-based or formally organized groups. Some were ad hoc collectives; others became established mainstays of the feminist movement, such as The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) or the Federation des Femmes du Quebec.

Linda Briskin reminds us that

coalitions have also been an important feminist strategy of the women's movement in Canada (32-33; see also Adamson, Briskin and McPhail). In fact, during the last few decades coalitions have often been employed as a feminist advocacy strategy at local, provincial, national, and international levels, in a range of political and policy issues. In years past, coalitions have formed in Canada around the struggle to stave off free trade; for the insertion of an equality clause in the Canadian Constitution; to protect family allowance (the Family Allowance Coalition); to ensure women's reproductive rights, to end poverty and violence against women (the World March of Women for Global Solidarity); and most recently to protect child care gains under the federal Martin government when the Code Blue for Child Care coalition was organized.

The benefits to feminist activism of joining a coalition, however, has been under-studied. It is a also a good time to grapple with coalition politics to uncover the current contours of the women's movement, especially important after years of welfare state retrenchment which has restricted space for critical, feminist politics making it all the more crucial for women to work together.

We intend to investigate this issue

by analyzing the Just Income Coalition (JIC), a collection of diverse groups founded in 2002 in Winnipeg to advocate for an increase to the minimum wage. The Just Income Coalition is of importance to mapping out the current policy effectiveness of "feminism in action" since three of Just Income Coalition's 25 members¹ are well-known progressive women's groups in Winnipeg: The Provincial Council of Women, the UN Platform for Action Committee and The Women's Health Clinic. And a decent or "living" minimum wage is a significant feminist demand in relation to women's ability to be economically independent. As Shelagh Day and Gwen Brodsky remind, although the percentage of women in the paid labour force increased dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s, women "...do not enjoy equality in earnings, or access to non-traditional jobs and managerial positions" partly because of the wage gap between men and women and because of women's occupation segregation in low-waged, traditional female jobs (6). Moreover, women often work part-time in precarious employment (lack of job ladders with few or no benefits) and they comprise a significant percentage of the minimum wage work force. Further, this issue is important to feminist politics and women's

equality given that minimum wage is a policy area that can go part of the way to address the feminization of poverty. As Jennifer deGroot has argued, minimum wage helps to keep women poor (deGroot 2005a). Finally, minimum wage, a provincial responsibility, is a public policy that appeals to a broad cross-section of activists and social policy groups, providing us with a good case study to analyze coalitions as a site of feminist activism.

And, coalitions may well prove to be a quite effective way for women's groups to force policy responses from government because of the way they can build and sustain allies within civil society. Coalitions can also present to government a united voice with public support beyond each distinct group's direct constituency. This thinking comes from the perspective that coalitions can offer an effective force for progressive women's groups who are in a constant struggle with the state—in a perpetual dueling for dollars—in two predominant ways. First, for the increase or restoration of operational funding so that women's groups can engage in advocacy, lobbying, and policy education, and second, for the funding of programs of import to women. A "dueling for dollars" is the result of neo-liberal political agendas advanced and implemented by various federal and provincial governments during the 1980s and 1990s which have left many women poorer and many women's groups unable to effectively function as policy advocates (Bashevkin; Cossman and Fudge). Moreover, the implementation of a neo-liberal drive toward privatization and welfare state downsizing has also left many women's groups in a weakened situation due to a concomitant anti-feminist backlash.

The first part of this discussion provides a brief overview of some of the published literature on coalition politics from which we can glean theoretical and empirical insights.

We then analyze coalition development and the broad policy context that led to the emergence of the Just Income Coalition. This section also discusses why the three women's groups joined the coalition and what they brought to it. We discuss as well some of the advantages of being part of the Just Income Coalition to the work of these groups and to feminist activism.

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**Coalition Politics:
Theoretical Considerations,
Empirical Evidence**

Why do feminists organize into coalitions? What are the benefits and challenges? Looking to the experience of the Action Canada Network which was formed in 1987 to oppose the pending Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, of which NAC was a participant, Peter Bleyer put it quite starkly when he wrote that coalitions typically form as "the ultimate stage in a defensive political project" which in the free trade case was "the growing collective organization of capital..." (140). That is, when faced with a non-responsive government along with formidable policy foes, activists and social movement groups come to realize that working alone is just not enough to get their message across to the public or to compel policy

change when up against a sustained and seemingly intractable structure of power—a situation often experienced by feminist groups.

Once organized, there are particular advantages to feminist movements aligning with like-minded individuals or groups in coalitions. Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail have told us the story that, during the late 1970s and 1980s, feminists gradually engaged in coalitions in an attempt to establish a "...broader and more public character for the grass-roots women's movement" (71) so as to include the participation of a variety of people and to move "beyond a white middle-class viewpoint" (79). Linda Briskin later stated that coalitions are of benefit since they cast a wide "advocacy net." The way coalitions are structured, for example, can attend to the diversities of women, either based on race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation or Aboriginal identity, because they offer an alternative to homogeneous organizations which tend to silence marginal voices (Briskin 32-33). This may be because coalitions need not be hierarchical institutions, but may be loose collectives of various groups. Coalitions then, are more likely to be attractive to groups beyond the women's movement (e.g., labour or peace activists) because they are often linked to broader struggles for social justice (Briskin). And there are other advocacy benefits to joining coalitions. In their study of NAC and the specific case of when NAC joined the Family Allowance Coalition in 1985 (which included the National Anti-Poverty Organization, the Canadian Labour Congress and the Conference of Catholic Bishops), Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin and Christine Appelle relate that the organization came to realize that the organization came to realize that an array of advocacy strategies were necessary and beneficial to the women's equality agenda. These strategies came to include engaging in both long-term strategic advocacy tactics such as sustained

lobbying and giving presentations to parliamentary committees, but also activism that was organized around episodic short-term goals like the potential de-indexing of family allowance (220-221). And although NAC felt that the organization was able to maintain itself as an equal partner in the coalition along-side the Canadian Labour Congress and the Conference of Catholic Bishops, it was nonetheless further reported that there were some in NAC who would have preferred to act alone fearing NAC's goals could be "contaminated" by non-feminist coalition partners (Vickers, Rankin and Appelle).

Coalition Development and Feminist Activism

In the case of the Just Income Coalition, neo-liberal agendas which drove welfare state retrenchment at both the federal and provincial levels in Canada created a political and policy context which captured the attention of social justice advocates in Manitoba. Their concerns were underpinned by their knowledge of the high rate of poverty in Manitoba, and the poverty experienced by the low-waged. In 2001 for example, just prior to the creation of the JIC, the child poverty rate in Manitoba was 22.5 per cent, the highest in Canada (Campaign 2000 1). Poor children, of course, live most often with poor women, a situation not improved since 2001. As the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) has reported, women are the majority of the poor in Canada, with one in seven (or 2.4 million) women living in poverty (1). The depth and consequences of poverty is graver for immigrant women, senior women, and Aboriginal women (CRIAOW).

And, even with over 60 per cent of women in the paid labour force in Manitoba, women are the so-called working poor (Statistics Canada 2003: 6). In fact, it has been re-

ported that two-thirds of women in poverty are employed (Just Income Coalition 2004a). In Canada, 1 in 25 people worked at or below the minimum wage in their province in 2003 (Statistics Canada 2004). Nationally, 4 per cent of people were minimum wage workers, while in Manitoba, 5.2 per cent of the labour force earn minimum wages (Statistics Canada 2004). And as the Just

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Income Coalition often highlighted to government and Manitobans, the stereotype of the minimum wage worker as a young student living at home with no family responsibilities is remarkably inaccurate. In fact, in Manitoba, 46.2 per cent of minimum wage earners are adults over the age of 20, the majority of whom are women. As well, 20 per cent of minimum wage earners are family heads; some are single parents with children under the age of 18 (JIC 2004a, 2004b). To the minds of some of the coalition participants, it seemed as though a "defensive political project" was required to bring attention to the social and economic marginalization of Manitoba's working poor and the labour market vulnerability of women.

The Just Income Coalition was formed in 2002 "...out of a shared concern over the inadequate minimum wage and its impact on low

income Manitobans" (JIC 2004b). The JIC called for an increase to the minimum wage to a "living wage" of \$10 per hour, which emanates from the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that "everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration" (2004a: 2). In other words, the concept of a living wage recognizes the value of a person's labour that facilitates a worker's economic independence to fully participate in society.

To our mind, the participation of the three women's groups in the JIC: The Provincial Council of Women of Manitoba (PCW), the UN Platform for Action Committee (UNPAC) and the Women's Health Clinic (WHC)—were important to the organization and development of the JIC. Indeed, the PCW and the WHC were founding members. All of these groups felt that it was a "natural fit" between the goals of the coalition and the objectives of their organizations (deGroot 2005b; Draffin-Jones; Scott).

In fact, councils of women across Canada had been advocating for an increase in the minimum wage since 1988 (PCWM 1) as a way to reduce women's poverty well before the JIC was formed. In their brief to the Minimum Wage Board in 2001 (they had also presented a brief to the Minimum Wage Board in 1998) the PCW argued that:

The rate can and should be used to fight poverty. To leave it at its present level enables businesses and organization to underpay their workers as they seek to stay in operation or, indeed, make profits (1).

UNPAC also related that their involvement in the JIC was an extension of work they had already been engaged in, having previously completed an extensive study of the experience of Manitoba women in the economy. One of the significant findings of their *Women and Econ-*

omy Project was that poverty was a “key economic concern for women” (1). They explicitly argue for a fair minimum wage level, not just as a tool to fight poverty, but clearly as a way to advance women’s equality. Indeed, UNPAC contends that, under international commitments outlined in the Beijing *Platform for Action* and other UN agreements such as the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Manitoba government has an “...obligation as well as a moral commitment to use policies such as minimum wage to reduce women’s poverty” (3).

The WHC is also one of the founding members of the JIC. The WHC promotes a broad, feminist approach to women’s health. In their view, health is not just about traditional “medical” diagnosis and treatment—there is a clear relationship between income and health, well-documented in their own reports such as *Women, Income and Health in Manitoba* released in July 2000. As the WHC sees it, low wages and income inequalities are grave barriers to women’s equality. Moreover, low incomes lead to decreased health, not only for women, but for their children, families and society as a whole (1).

A careful reading of JIC documents, reports, and briefs presented to the province’s minimum wage authorities, often detail the connection between women’s low-waged employment, and the JIC did call on the government to undertake a full gender-analysis of minimum wage policy. Although the gender aspects of the minimum wage policy put forward by the JIC cannot solely be attributed to the three women’s groups, it is clear that the existing research and policy expertise previously developed by the PCW, UNPAC and WHC contributed greatly to reinforcing the connection between minimum wage and women’s poverty and low-wage work. Gail Watson stated that the WHC’s report *Women, Income and*

Health in Manitoba was distributed to all members of the JIC at one of their first meetings. As well, UNPAC’s *Women and Economy Project* also produced a substantial amount of data on women’s experiences in the paid labour market and women’s personal stories of living in poverty. However, perhaps an indication of how well the coalition worked together, Watson also indicated that

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the agenda of the women’s groups was the agenda of all of the coalition partners. The three women’s groups always felt they were full partners in the coalition. This was likely because the coalition participants were well aware of the enduring issue of deep poverty in Winnipeg and that it is largely women who are the poor. It can arguably also be attributed to the fact that all of the coalition partners are local organizations, and therefore, have worked together to advance other social justice issues.

The PCW, UNPAC and WHC also brought to the JIC their own specific networks and contacts both within government and within the women’s movement community (e.g., women’s policy agencies in the provincial government and other women’s groups). Discussions did take place with the WHC and the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, who was also the Min-

ister of Labour, a potential ally of the women’s groups on the issue of minimum wage and its connection to women’s poverty.

The Benefits of Coalition Politics to Feminist Activism

As the Just Income Coalition developed, the PCW, UNPAC and the WHC had the opportunity to build their public profile by being part of the coalition, reach a wide audience beyond their typical advocacy sphere, build a solidarity network with other progressive groups while, along the way, continuing to hone their own organizational advocacy skills.

The evidence of this was the advocacy repertoire of the JIC. There was a feeling that a window of opportunity had opened for the coalition to potentially make some in-roads on the issue of increasing the minimum wage. An NDP government was in power and open to discussing social policy and labour market issues with civil society groups, albeit being noncommittal on substantially increasing the minimum wage. The federal (Martin) government had recently put more monies into transfer payments to fund health care, which would have freed up monies for spending in other areas. Their lobbying and action strategies, therefore, were well thought-out to make the best use of the relatively open policy context, the best use of their time, energy, and limited resources and to make themselves widely known to government and to the public. The JIC’s advocacy repertoire was also devised to reach into the very community it was advocating on behalf of—the inner city of Winnipeg—while also appealing to the broader public to build support. It was decided not to engage in disruptive advocacy (e.g., sit-ins or demonstrations to pressure government directly) but rather to focus on actions that would put the issue of low wages and the minimum wage on the political agenda.

How did they do this? The JIC engaged in typical lobbying methods by meeting with politicians and submitting briefs or letters to the Minimum Wage Coordinator or Board. But other, more attention-getting, unique methods were used too. The JIC made good use of the Internet as a organizing and education tool, and they set up an online petition on their web page. In October 2004, the JIC held what they called a "Just Income Week." This was a seven-day event that included sending out media releases, inviting guest speakers to talk about minimum wage policy at public forums, holding poverty workshops, street theatre, and showcasing art and concerts. This week of events culminated in the presentation of a petition, with over 8,000 signatures, at the Manitoba legislature to then Acting Minister of Labour and Immigration, Steve Ashton.

During the month of May 2005, the JIC held a "Low Wage Community Inquiry" which had a few overall purposes: to involve grassroots individuals (low-waged women, business, social services, academics, government) to critically examine minimum wage policy and living wage policy proposals; to increase public awareness about the low wage employment and the concept of a living wage; and to convince the government to increase the minimum wage to a living wage (JIC 2005a). This Community Inquiry was held across the province in Winnipeg, Brandon, and Thompson. The staging of the Community Inquiry was also undertaken as way to pressure the government to strike a formal inquiry into low wage employment and minimum wage. The JIC presented their report of the Low Wage Inquiry, called *Paid to Be Poor*, to the provincial government in October 2005.

At a time when the women's movement had been making marginal equality gains, another benefit to the women's equality agenda and to feminist activism in the province,

was that the JIC was somewhat successful given the provincial government eventually did increase the minimum wage, albeit not to the living wage they had hoped. Indeed, just after the JIC began lobbying government, the minimum wage rate was increased by 25 cents from \$6.25 to \$6.50 in April 2002. Arguably because of pressure from the JIC, the province has since been steadily increasing the minimum wage by 25-cent increments since the first increase in 2002. It was most recently increased to \$7.60/hour. However, as Gail Watson, spokesperson for the JIC, put it: "quarters just don't cut it," referring to the government's tentative, cautious response leaving Manitoba behind other jurisdictions such as British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. The JIC took heart, however, when the province announced in March 2005 that the Minimum Wage Board was directed to undertake the development of a four-year strategy on future increases. The following May, the province ran an ad in the local newspaper inviting submissions from the public to the Minimum Wage Board (Manitoba Labour and Immigration).

With regard to feminist activism, the coalition was a way to share the costs and time needed to engage in effective advocacy. This was much needed assistance given the minimal resources of these women's groups functioning largely, although not altogether, as volunteer organizations. The JIC also provided a great opportunity to be part of a diverse group of experts in various policy fields and in navigating government. This provided a way for each of these groups to increase their knowledge and expertise in the minimum wage and labour market policy that only can serve to better facilitate their later advocacy work.

The JIC was an effective way to build alliances and to ensure that women's needs, equality issues, and feminist perspectives were articulated in the JIC information and

lobbying materials. Indeed, because each of the JIC representatives brought with them a group or organization of many more individuals, it was a good way to disseminate the goals and activities of the PCWM, UNPAC and WHC to groups and an audience they would not normally reach.

Conclusion

By all accounts, the JIC was a successful coalition, not only because they pushed the government to increase the minimum wage, but also because the issue was often framed in gender terms. The PCW, UNPAC, and WHC worked well together as a coalition, united in their resolve to address the issue of women's poverty and low-wage working realities.

Although increases to the minimum wage will have some impact, this policy alone cannot address socio-cultural or structural factors that contribute to low wages and women's economic oppression. There is still a need to critique the existence of low wage jobs and examine why women occupy low wage jobs in the first place as well as to continue analyzing women's experiences in the low-wage labour force. In some ways, incremental increases to the minimum wage merely perpetuates women's "dueling for dollars." To go beyond this situation, efforts to alleviate women's poverty must also be focused toward reforming programs that will have a more substantive impact on women's lives, such as the funding of a comprehensive, publicly-funded child care system. For this reason, even given the many advantages of coalitions for feminist activism, there is still a need for progressive women to build and sustain a nationally viable women's movement. In Canada, the structural realities of federalism, make it imperative that women organize on both fronts.

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¹Coalition partners are: Provincial Council of Women of Manitoba, Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, Winnipeg Harvest, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Women's Health Clinic, Welcome Place, Community Education Development Association, St. Matthews Maryland Community Ministry, Communication, Education and Justice Unit and the Political Action Committee of the Manitoba and Northwest Ontario Conference of the United Church of Canada, Centre for Aboriginal Human Resource Development, Oblate Justice and Peace Committee, Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario of the United Church of Canada, West Broadway Community Ministry, UN Platform for Action Committee Manitoba, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Winnipeg, Manitoba Federation of Labour, Northend Stella Community Ministry, Wolseley Family Place, Anglican Diocese of Rupert's Land, Mennonite Central Committee, Local Investment Towards Employment, Structured Movement Against Capitalism, Winnipeg Labour Council, Winnipeg Presbytery of United Church of Canada.

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