



For social and economic justice

Decent Work for All

A Backgrounder for Grant Seekers

What is decent work?

Decent work is the foundation of a good life and a healthy society. Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. Decent work is fair, dignified, secure, and respected. It is about equality of opportunity and treatment, work that is productive and delivers a fair income. It provides income security and social support when sick, unemployed, and/or raising children. It means safety in the workplace and freedom to organize and participate in the decisions that affect our lives.

Decent work includes:

- A **floor** that protects against exploitation and precarity (i.e. a minimum floor of wages, safety, benefits, and rights)
- A **foundation** for stability and full participation in society (i.e. infrastructure for people to thrive, like childcare, training, pensions, and Employment Insurance)
- A **path to** build wealth and power for workers who earn the least (i.e., helping to shape one's working life through organizing, collective bargaining, and democratic workplaces)

What is the source of this definition?

A global perspective

First articulated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1999, decent work refers to the quality of employment and whether it enables people to meet their needs and build a good life for their future.

The ILO defines decent work as: “Work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace, social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all.” (Source: [ILO Decent Work Agenda](#))

This definition is organized around **four strategic pillars**:

1. **Employment creation** – Access to jobs for all who are able to work.
2. **Social protection** – Safety nets like pensions, unemployment benefits, and health coverage.
3. **Rights at work** – Respect for labour standards, including freedom from harassment and discrimination.
4. **Social dialogue** – Workers’ ability to organize and have a voice in decisions that affect them.

Each pillar is mutually reinforcing, and gender equity and non-discrimination are cross-cutting imperatives. Without all four elements, work cannot be considered truly “decent.”

A Canadian perspective

In the Canadian context, the ONN-Mowat report (*Change Work*, 2015) offered an adaptation of this definition. Decent work includes:

- **Fair compensation** (including pay equity and a living wage)
- **Stable employment** (predictable hours and job security)
- **Opportunities for advancement and training**
- **Health and retirement benefits**
- **Workplace culture that supports inclusion and mental wellbeing**
- **The right to be heard and to influence decisions**
- **Safe and supportive working conditions**

To reflect the realities of the labour market and communities, decent work is:

- **Intentional**: It doesn’t just happen, and must be baked into organizational practices and public policy.
- **Context-specific**: It recognizes the unique constraints and opportunities in different sectors, including nonprofits that face chronic underfunding.
- **More than a checklist**: It considers holistically how work is experienced by individuals: physically, financially, emotionally, and socially.

In the landmark 2006 report [Fairness at Work: Federal Labour Standards for the 21st Century](#), Professor Harry Arthurs, one of Canada's leading labour law scholars, examined how labour standards could better protect workers in a changing economy. Professor Arthurs emphasized that labour standards must guarantee basic dignity. He described the fundamental principle of decency as follows:

Labour standards should ensure that no matter how limited his or her bargaining power, no worker in the federal jurisdiction is offered, accepts or works under conditions that Canadians would not regard as "decent." No worker should therefore receive a wage that is insufficient to live on; be deprived of the payment of wages or benefits to which they are entitled; be subject to coercion, discrimination, indignity or unwarranted danger in the workplace; or be required to work so many hours that he or she is effectively denied a personal or civic life.

To whom does this definition apply?

Everyone deserves decent work. But in today's economy, too many people are left out. Whether it's unpredictable hours, low pay, no benefits, or job insecurity, the reality is that precarious work now touches people in nearly every sector and community. While anyone can find themselves struggling with indecency at work, some groups—like women, racialized workers, newcomers, and young people—face deeper barriers to good jobs and fair treatment.

Even before COVID, research by the [Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario \(PEPSO\)](#) group found that at least 20% of workers in the region were in precarious forms of employment, with another 20% in jobs sharing many of the same characteristics, such as variable hours, lack of benefits, multiple employers, and limited job security. Today, that picture has not much improved. Studies over time have shown that between one third and forty percent of the workforce across Canada lacks decent work, a persistent gap that holds back people and our communities as a whole.

How can we create more decent work?

Making decent work real for everyone means raising the floor, strengthening the foundation, and opening a path forward for workplace voice and power, so all workers can thrive.

- **Raise the Floor:** Guarantee a real minimum standard of rights and protections for all workers by strengthening and enforcing employment standards and ensuring

every job provides fair wages, paid sick days, predictable schedules, and workplace safety.

- **Build the Foundation:** Make stability and participation possible for every worker by modernizing Employment Insurance, expanding access to strong community supports, and investing in skills training and career pathways so that workers can move out of dead-end jobs and into stable employment.
- **Open the Path:** Join with workers to remove barriers to organizing and collective bargaining, and tackling discrimination in hiring and promotion.

Decent work by the numbers

Too many jobs in Canada today fall short of being fair, dignified, secure, and respected. Here's what that means in numbers:

The Floor

Decent work is still out of reach for more than 1 in 3 workers.

That's over 2.7 million Ontarians whose jobs don't offer reliable hours, fair pay, benefits, or a voice at work. Studies have consistently shown that about between 30%–40% of Canadian workers don't have jobs that provide secure hours, fair wages, benefits, or the ability to exercise workplace rights. These workers are often concentrated in retail, hospitality, caregiving, and gig sectors. (Changing Workplaces Review, PEPSO, CCPA BC)

People without decent work are nearly twice as likely to be injured or become ill at work.

In Ontario, people in jobs without decent work protections like paid sick leave or job security are at 181% higher risk of injury or illness, compared to those in stable, rights-based employment. This became especially acute during the pandemic, when workers in highly precarious jobs had nearly 5 times higher risk of COVID-19 infection. ([Institute for Work & Health, 2024](#))

In 2024, racialized women earned just 74.1 cents for every dollar earned by white men.

In 2024, racialized women earned, on average, 74.1 cents for every dollar a white male worker earned, a difference of roughly 10 dollars (\$27.88 vs \$37.63). Racialized women are also 7.6 percentage points less likely to be employed than non-racialized women, reflecting systemic inequities in job access and security. ([CCPA, 2025](#))

The Foundation

30% of Ontario workers lack employer-provided health or dental benefits.

Without workplace benefits, workers and their families face higher out-of-pocket costs for care, reinforcing cycles of financial stress. ([C.D. Howe Institute](#), 2023)

There is nowhere in Ontario where you can work full-time on a minimum wage and cover all your expenses.

The living wage in the Greater Toronto Area is \$26/hour, which is over \$8 higher than the minimum wage. Ontario's minimum wage is currently \$17.20/hour (2024), but it falls far short of what's needed to meet basic living costs in the GTA. ([Ontario Living Wage Network, 2024](#))

Only one third of people who are unemployed are covered by Employment Insurance.

There are now 1.4 million unemployed workers across Canada with only 463,890 receiving regular EI benefits. That means just a third of the unemployed are covered by benefits. ([Armire Yalnizyan](#), Toronto Star 2024)

A Path of Agency and Power

Unionized workers earn more and have better benefits.

A recent University of Regina study found that unionized workers in Canada earn \$3.55 (11%) more per hour than non-union workers, with unionized women earning 20% more. Union members are also far more likely to have pensions (82% vs. 37%) and supplementary benefits like paid vacation. ([Poirier and Stevens, 2024](#))

Only 30.4% of Canadian workers are covered by collective agreements

That equates to around 5.3 million workers in 2023, with public-sector coverage at 76.7% versus just 15.5% in the private sector. This persistent gap reveals how the vast majority of private-sector employees lack institutional voice at work. ([Statistics Canada, 2024](#))

70% of Canadians believe workers should have an easier path unionization

A 2024 poll by the Canadian Labour Congress found that a majority of Canadians, 62%, believe belonging to a union is a good thing, and 70% of Canadians want governments to remove barriers to forming or joining a union, while only 9% are opposed. Support is

highest among women and workers in key regions like Ontario and the Maritimes, highlighting widespread public desire for greater workplace voice and representation. ([Canadian Labour Congress, 2024](#))