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Creating Security in the New World of Work

Ottawa – The changing world of work in Canada is sending ominous messages to Canadian workers: Work longer hours, earn less money and, if times get even tougher, you're on your own. In the essay *The Future of Work in Canada* published today, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) affirms that governments and employers need to do more than “business as usual” to reduce Canadians’ anxiety and reshape the future of work.

Since the 1980s, Canadians have experienced enormous changes in workplaces and in the labour market, all in an economic climate of slow growth. The report points out that this has led to high unemployment, job insecurity, stagnant incomes and dire predictions of a “no-work” future.

Those predictions are based on dismal economic realities. While Canada’s average annual unemployment rate never rose above 7.5 percent before 1975, it has never dropped below that level since then. This decline in job security means more and more Canadians are experiencing unemployment 22 percent of workers in 1993, involving fully 35 percent of families.

“Unemployment isn’t *someone else’s* problem any more,” says Graham Lowe, a sociologist at the University of Alberta and coauthor of the report, with Gordon Betcherman of CPRN and Ekos Research Associates Inc. “It has become a deep-seated fear among working-class and middle-class Canadians. And the facts show that the fear is not misplaced.”

Betcherman and Lowe also report that Canadians are losing their sense of security as the social programs that have served as societal anchors are eroded. According to Betcherman, “The loss of Canada’s social anchors is increasing Canadians’ anxiety about the future. As individuals, Canadian workers have tried everything they can to make themselves employable, keep their jobs, and earn enough money to support their families. They are running out of options.”

“Canadians are anxious about the possibility of the end of work,” according to Judith Maxwell, CPRN President. “This prediction may come to pass if we do not take hold of the appropriate policy levers now.”

Those policy levers include measures that governments, business and labour can take to increase economic growth, ensure that jobs and income are distributed more evenly throughout society, and strengthen the anchors that give Canadians a sense of security in an uncertain work world.

According to the authors, Canadians need to engage in a wide-ranging discussion about how to, collectively, create the kind of working future and society they want in the 21st century. The authors identify a wide range of options worthy of serious debate if Canadians are to avoid the gloomy “no jobs” scenarios and lift the Canadian economy and society out of the “business as usual” doldrums.

First, monetary and fiscal policies need to be refocused to reduce unemployment, establish a growth agenda based on investments in people, and develop new tax approaches based on information the currency of the new economy.

Second, a range of strategies aimed at more evenly distributing working time needs to be considered. These include such approaches as work sharing, limitations on overtime and a shorter work week.

Third, education and training investment in human capital is the best strategy for individuals and nations as they navigate this period of change. Barriers such as inadequate labour market information need to be eliminated, while funding mechanisms must preserve quality and accessibility.

Fourth, the issue of worker representation also needs to be addressed. As new forms of work evolve, workers must continue to have access to the benefits of collective bargaining and support for their rights in the workplace. Employers and workers need to develop new forms of worker representation that are compatible with the new decentralized and fluid forms of work.

- 30 -

CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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