

HANDOUT

We are all affected: The impact of the federal cuts on visibly racialized members, service users and communities

Since the Conservatives took power in 2006 under Stephen Harper's leadership, the federal government has been constantly attacking human rights and equity through a series of legislative changes and cuts to programs and services. Cuts contained in the 2012 and 2013 federal budgets, along with other recent legislation, have had a particularly harsh impact on equity-seeking groups, including racially visible people. Whether it's changes to employment equity or attacks on immigrant and refugee rights, there is something in this series of cuts that impacts everyone – from workers to families to service users to community members.

Employment Equity:

- We are seeing more and more concrete examples of employment equity being eroded.
- While hiring rates have increased over the years, racialized workers are still underrepresented in the public sector. This problem may worsen.
- Significant staff reductions are underway and equity groups, including racially visible members, are at risk of being laid off at higher rates.
- During the last round of severe cuts to the public service in the nineties, Aboriginal workers and workers with disabilities left the public service at significantly higher rates than other workers.
- Now in 2013, we face the very real threat of losing achievements we have made through employment equity.
- The Treasury Board has informed bargaining agents that a “workplace policy” and “workforce policy” will replace a number of stand-alone policies, including the duty to accommodate and employment equity.

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- This watering down of important policies combined with the dismantling of the Treasury Board's role to develop and monitor service-wide policies, have weakened central oversight of employment equity in the public service.
- Employment equity legislative requirements for the Federal Contractor's Program (FCP) were completely eliminated in the 2012 federal budget, along with nearly three quarters of the staff positions, including all the equity auditors. Prior to changes, federal contractors had to meet the same employment equity standards as required by other federal employers under the *Employment Equity Act*.

Restructuring of workplaces and services:

- Public sector workplaces and services are rapidly changing.
- Government spending cuts are undermining the ability of PSAC members to do their jobs.
- Cuts to front line services have meant increased stress for staff and service users alike. Layoffs, policy changes, and workplace restructuring have led to increased health problems, sick leave and mental health issues for members. This kind of toxic work environment is also known for contributing to increased rates of harassment, bullying and discrimination, including racism.
- Members at Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), for example, have noted that front line office closures, staff reductions, and constantly changing policies have put tremendous pressure on the remaining staff.
- For service users of CIC, this has meant increased wait times to process their claims, and longer distances to travel to get to appointments. If service users need help, they have to contact the call centre or use the website. This has created significant barriers for many newcomers, who don't yet know English or French and don't have a computer or internet access. Most newcomers to Canada are racially visible and face the added systemic barrier of racism.
- Federal government restructuring has also contributed to an increased reliance on contractors and temporary staffing agency contracts. These temporary, casual workers find very few opportunities for job security, advancement or equitable wages and benefits.¹ Racialized people are disproportionately represented among Canada's casual workforce.

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Cuts and changes to data collection:

- The cancellation of the long form census has a particularly harsh impact on racialized groups.
- While the government allowed certain questions based on gender to remain in the short form census, they refused to include questions regarding race or ethnic origin.ⁱⁱ
- Even though a longer voluntary survey is available, it won't be useful in identifying inequities. Newcomers and racialized communities are among those who are least likely to participate in a voluntary census, resulting in racialized communities being undercounted.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Low income newcomers and members of racialized communities rely on census data to help ensure existing government programs, designed to alleviate barriers, are effective and responsive to their needs.^{iv} The exclusion of census questions relating to race and ethnic origin, may lead to the cancellation of some of these social programs.^v
- The long form census and other statistical studies also provided the data, upon which employment equity initiatives are based.
- With the exception of Toronto, there is a serious dearth of research in local Canadian communities about racialized groups and their socioeconomic participation in society. This lack of data, means that the government doesn't have a clear picture of who the most marginalized citizens are and how they are affected by government policies and programs.^{vi}
- The federal government also ended funding for Canada's metropolis project, which is a major source of data and research for immigration policy in Canada. The government expects this initiative to sustain itself without funding.

Changes to employment insurance (EI):

- Racialized and immigrant communities will be hit the hardest by changes to EI.^{vii}
- A 2011 report by the Wellesley Institute and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, found that racialized workers – both immigrants and Canadian born – are falling behind in their earnings and over-represented in casual work that doesn't allow them to qualify for EI.^{viii}

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- In fact, immigrants and racialized workers are actually over-represented among those who have paid into the EI fund, but rarely qualify for benefits in the event of job loss.^{ix}
- Systemic racism in the job market, means that racially visible PSAC members who lose their jobs will face increased barriers to obtaining new employment.
- Cuts to Service Canada have caused delays in processing EI claims and created added stress for the remaining staff.
- Non-government initiatives designed to educate and encourage governments to hire immigrants and mentoring programs for internationally trained immigrants are receiving a limited amount of government support.^x
- There are tougher and more complex rules for obtaining employment insurance benefits, and a new requirement that recipients who have used EI frequently have to take any job available to them and accept as much as a 30-per-cent pay cut.
- In 2012, the government has eliminated 700 part-time referees and umpires who handled 26,000 EI appeals in 2011 alone. These referees and umpires were to be replaced with just over 70 people to handle not only EI appeals but also disability appeals under the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security. The previous process was free and very accessible with representatives for the worker, employer and government sitting on a tribunal. Now, it will be a single person to each case with no representative for the claimant.
- In May 2013, Statistics Canada reported that only 38% of unemployed Canadians received EI benefits. In some regions, were marginalized groups are clustered, like in Toronto, the number is even lower. The federal government has estimated that changes to EI will save the public treasury \$12.5 million this year and \$33 million next year. In 2007, Statistics Canada reported that 45% of applicants were eligible for EI.

Job Training Programs

- 194 million dollars have been shifted from existing training programs that target the most vulnerable such as people with disabilities into a non-existing “Canada Job Grant”.
- Under the Canada Job Grant, employers, provinces and territories now have to match the money given to programs from federal grants, Smaller employers who may not be able to afford the cost will be excluded resulting in fewer job opportunities.

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- Concerns are also being raised that under the new system, training will be focused on current employees, not the jobless.

Changes to immigration regulations:

- Between 2008 and 2012, the federal government made changes that affected Canada's approach to all three streams of immigration – economic, family and humanitarian.^{xi}
- The *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* has been amended in such a way that the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism has discretion to create new immigrant programs and classes without having to consult with parliament, provincial governments or the public.^{xii}
- Reduced quotas combined with a restrictive definition of “family class” will disproportionately impact racialized immigrants. Immigrants from Asia and other parts of the global south are the most likely to apply through this stream and are also more likely than European immigrants to have an extended family structure.^{xiii}
- On a per capita basis, there are far more visa offices in Europe than in Asia, Africa and other regions of the world. Fewer resources means slower processing times for those regions of the world. Moreover, visa requirements more often apply to applicants coming from the global south.^{xiv}
- The government is proposing dramatic restrictions on the sponsorship of parents and grandparents. Sponsorships will be increased from ten years to twenty years. Sponsors will also need to have a higher income over a longer period before they can sponsor. This will mean that only the wealthy can sponsor their parents.^{xv}
- These changes will disproportionately affect racialized communities and women, as they are more likely to be economically disadvantaged in Canada, and as such will have a harder time meeting higher income thresholds.^{xvi}
- The 2013 federal budget also proposes to hike fees for processing visa and citizenship applications.
- Skilled Worker visas have been decreased by 20% and 53 million has been cut from programs for new immigrants, including the cutting of public funding from Palestine House.^{xvii}
- The government also introduced a new proof of language proficiency on those applying for citizenship. Even those who have good English knowledge will be

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forced to pay to take the test and provide the required paper documentation.^{xviii}

Healthcare

Cuts have been made to the funding of the Health Council of Canada, the body responsible for ensuring national standards for quality care are met.

- Funding for health care for veterans and refugees has been cut and the Conservative government has refused to uphold the *Canada Health Act's* protections for patients against user fees and extra-billing.
- The Conservative government refuses to discuss with the provinces ways to control the cost of drugs and forge a national drug coverage program.
- The Conservative government is ignoring the calls of the provinces and territories to set to work on the 2014 Health Care Accord – which sets agreements for funding and service delivery between the federal, provincial and territorial governments.
- Government practices are increasingly headed away from a public health care system and towards privatization.
- 36 billion dollars in cuts over the next 10 years to health care have already been announced. The cuts start in 2014 with the elimination of Canada Health Transfer (CHT) equalization, then sharp cuts in CHT increases beginning in 2017. Over time, the federal government's share of health care spending will shrink to a small fraction of its original 50 per cent contribution -- down to 18.6 per cent by 2024.
- This leads to inequality of access to health care, including longer wait times for and reduced access to physicians, tests and treatments.

Any decrease in services impacts marginalized people who live in poverty, including racialized groups, more adversely than others because they are more likely to rely on clinics and hospital emergency facilities.

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Cuts to settlement services for new immigrants:

- Immigrant settlement services help newcomers to Canada deal with systemic barriers, including barriers to economic integration.
- In 2010, the federal government cut \$53 million from settlement agencies and programs across Canada, with the exception of Quebec.^{xix}
- Ontario received more than \$43 million of these cuts, forcing the closure of some agencies and resulting in job losses across the sector. Ethno-specific agencies that serve racialized communities were over-represented among those who lost 100% of their funding.^{xx}
- The closure of several Citizenship and Immigration Canada service offices across the country, has resulted in a greater service burden for settlement agencies.^{xxi}

Exclusion and punishment of refugees:

- Bill C-31, “Protecting Canada’s Immigration Act”, gives broad power to the immigration minister to detain asylum seekers for an extensive period of time. This also includes minors sixteen years old or above.^{xxii}
- The Act also cuts down on the amount of time to file refugee claims and treats claimants differently, based on their country of origin.^{xxiii}
- This Act gives the immigration minister the power to designate certain countries as ‘safe,’ thereby denying large numbers of refugees the right to a fair hearing based on their individual circumstances, as is required by international law.^{xxiv} “This will particularly impact women, queers, and racial minorities fleeing persecution based on gender, sexuality, and race.”^{xxv}
- Canada already accepts fewer than 20,000 refugees per year, which is less than 0.1 percent of the world’s displaced populations.^{xxvi}
- In 2012, the federal government also implemented cuts to its interim federal health program (IFHP), which covers basic healthcare for refugees and refugee claimants.
- These cuts have led to: confusion and anxiety for refugee claimants; confusion for healthcare service providers about patients’ entitlements; loss of psychological support services for refugees who survived torture, rape or other violence in their home country; the pitting of Canadian citizens against refugees from divisive rhetoric.^{xxvii}
- Refugee claimants pay the same taxes as other Canadians, and in fact, IFH costs were only about one-tenth as much per claimant as the average amount

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spent on health care per Canadian. Yet, Canadian doctors have witnessed first-hand, refugee claimants with cancer being denied treatments.^{xxviii}

- Immigration Minister, Jason Kenney, has refused to respond to requests for meetings, including requests from nine national health associations.^{xxix}

Exploitation of Temporary Foreign Workers:

- In 2007 and 2008, more temporary foreign workers entered Canada than immigrants.^{xxx}
- Temporary foreign workers or migrant workers are among the most exploited workers in Canada, with lower wages and fewer protections than other Canadian workers. Most belong to racialized communities.
- In 2011, changes to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, introduced the provision that there be a four-year limit on the stay of temporary foreign workers, followed by a four-year period, during which those workers cannot work in Canada.^{xxxi}
- This has resulted in a revolving door of migrant workers, who are treated like second class citizens and have little meaningful access to labour, employment, health and safety or human rights. Either there is no access to such rights or the enforcement processes are weak.
- The program has led to increased intergenerational conflict and upheaval of families. Caregivers are not permitted to migrate with their families, which in many cases, leads to a painful separation from their children and other family members.^{xxxii}
- The caregivers are required to live with their employers, and as such, many experience abuse and have nowhere to flee to.

ⁱ “Alternative Federal Budget 2013: Doing better together,” Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ “A Joint Report by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, The Metro Toronto Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic and Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change on The Status of Compliance by the Canadian Government with Respect to the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination: A Community Response to the Nineteenth and Twentieth Reports of Canada,” February, 2012.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

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- vii Asian Canadian Labour Alliance, "Labour Day Reminder: Harper's EI Changes hit Immigrants Hardest," Rabble.ca, September 3, 2012.
 - viii "Alternative Federal Budget 2013: Doing better together," Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013.
 - ix "OCASI Comments on Federal Budget 2012," Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, March 29, 2012
 - x "Alternative Federal Budget 2013: Doing better together," Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013.
 - xi Naomi Alboim and Karen Cohl, "Q and A: Shaping the future: Canada's rapidly changing immigration policies, Maytree, 2012
 - xii Ibid.
 - xiii A Joint Report by the Canadian Council Agencies Serving Immigrants, The Metro Toronto Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic and Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change on The Status of Compliance by the Canadian Government with Respect to the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination: A Community Response to the Nineteenth and Twentieth Reports of Canada," February, 2012.
 - xiv Ibid.
 - xv "Family Changes Backgrounder," Canadian Council for Refugees.
 - xvixvi Ibid
 - xvii "NOII Alert: Axe the Refugee Exclusion Act!" No one is illegal – Toronto.
 - xviii "Alternative Federal Budget 2013: Doing better together," Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013.
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 - xxvii "Interim Federal Health Program," Canadian Council for Refugees.
 - xxviii Ibid.
 - xxix John Bonnar, "Doctors and Lawyers Fight Cuts to Refugee Health-Care, Launch Charter Challenge," Rabble.ca, February 25, 2013.
 - xxx "Alternative Federal Budget 2013: Doing better together," Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013.
 - xxxi Ibid.
 - xxxii Ibid.