

Ontario Chamber of Commerce VP, local business owners blast Bill 148



By Mike Pickford

The proposed increase to minimum wage included in the provincial government's Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act will serve to hinder Ontario's most vulnerable, not help them, says a vice-president of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

Karl Baldauf, the OCC's Vice-President of Policy and Government Relations, was in Orangeville on Tuesday (Aug. 8) to discuss the government's Bill 148 with several members of the local business community, some of whom spoke of their disdain for what they feel is unnecessary interference on the part of the Province into how they run their businesses.

Mr. Baldauf, the main speaker at a luncheon hosted by the Dufferin Board of Trade, was joined by Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones in dissecting the legislation which, along with an increase to a \$15 minimum wage by January 2019, includes a proposal that would see part-time, casual, temporary and seasonal employees performing the same job as full-time employees entitled to the same wage, permit employees to refuse shifts if asked to work with fewer than four days' notice, entitle employees who are on-call to be paid for three hours if they're not called in for a shift, while also guaranteeing employees three hours of pay at their regular rate if a shift is cancelled within 48 hours of its start.

The bill would also give employees the power to take up to 10 personal emergency days per year, two of which would be paid, without having to provide a doctor's note. It would also become mandatory for employees with more than five years' experience to be given three weeks of holidays, up from two.

In what was his 18th such session out of a planned 40 across Ontario, Mr. Baldauf shared why the Ontario Chamber feels it's so important to engage with the provincial business community.

"The Chamber network in Ontario is trying to help educate employers around what the impacts will be from Bill 148, and I think it's clear they're going to be quite significant," Mr. Baldauf said. "As I go from community to community the big thing I'm hearing over and over again from folks is that this is all too much too soon."

He added, "I don't think anyone will disagree that the idea behind these changes, the idea behind an increased minimum wage, is good. However, the reality is, as an unintended consequence, these changes are going to have a negative impact on the very people the government is trying to help."

In his presentation Mr. Baldauf estimated that youth employment will drop approximately 20 percent should Bill 148 be adopted as is. He added that he expects most businesses will have to slash jobs, leaving newer employees and personnel at the bottom of the totem pole in danger.

"Having a \$15 an hour minimum wage is no good if you don't have a job," Mr. Baldauf added.

And while not too many of those in attendance wished to comment about the possibility of job losses, Tisha Saunders, owner of Marlin Travel, admitted it was a harsh reality of the situation many small business owners are now facing.

"First and foremost, if Bill 148 goes ahead, unfortunately I'm going to have to take a look at my staffing and at my scheduling. We're open seven days a week, 12 hours per day," Ms. Saunders said. "My people are earning more than minimum wage right now and we do okay, but this bill is going to change things."

Marlin Travel has been in Orangeville for two decades. With nine local employees — seven in store and two on the road — the company was doing quite well as it approaches its 20th anniversary. Now, Ms. Saunders says what should have been a bright future now appears to be unclear.

'We're hearing from some of the businesses here today that these changes are going to have a knock-on effect with regards to prices, essentially saying the price of their product will go up. I can't control that in my line of work,' Ms. Saunders said. 'I can't raise prices to try and offset losses or make up profits - it's the airlines, the cruise lines and the hotels that get to decide that.'

She added, 'For me, I'm going to have to take a hard look at whether or not I stay in business if this thing goes through.'

The topic of rising costs and inflation was a central point for Mr. Baldauf who noted that life was about to get more expensive for everyone residing in Ontario. A representative from Canada Bread confirmed, albeit in a roundabout way, one of the first things the company would do to offset increased costs would be to jack up the cost of its products.

'We're definitely going to see more significant inflation, pretty much across the board,' Mr. Baldauf said. 'Bill 148 will have a number of negative impacts right here in Ontario. Life is about to get expensive. Jobs are going to be cut. The potential impacts are concerning.'

Ms. Jones went so far as to suggest the measures were simply a political ploy by a Liberal government hoping to gain favour among voters ahead of next year's provincial election. Now, more than two months after the initial announcement, she says the response she's had from the local business community has been overwhelming.

'I've met with a lot of manufacturers and a lot of smaller businesses over the past few weeks and, frankly, they're all telling me the same thing,' Ms. Jones said. 'For the most part, people are accepting a \$15 minimum wage, if the provincial government wants to get that in place then fine, so be it. But don't implement it within 18 months, don't implement it without a plan.'

She added, 'Businesses plan in three- and five-year cycles, they don't plan in 18-month cycles. That's what I've been hearing'

Stories like 'this is how much I'm paying currently, this is how much payroll is, this is the cost it's going to have on my company', it's staggering. That's what makes this real. I think the government needs to start hearing these real stories.'

Mr. Baldauf said the Ontario Chamber is in 'constant communication' with the government regarding changes the organization has suggested. He remains 'quietly optimistic' the Province will understand the potential impacts Bill 148 would have on the economy.

Ms. Saunders said she doesn't believe the government cares about that long list of impacts.

'This government is not a good government. I always like to give everybody a chance because we needed a change, but (Premier Kathleen Wynne) is just driving us into the ground,' she said. 'To me, every single part of Bill 148 is concerning, but the thing that really bothers me is the dictating. It's becoming a dictatorship.'