

## Protesters fight for minimum wage increase at MPP lunch



By Brock Weir

Community activists said they were reaching dead ends getting a response from Deputy Premier Christine Elliott on their fight to maintain what was a planned increase to Ontario's Minimum Wage in January. So, on Friday morning, they took their message direct to Ms. Elliott.

Representatives from The Fight for \$15 & Fairness, a grassroots organization advocating for a living wage, the York Region Food Network and more, brought out their banners and unfurled their placards outside the Royal Venetian on Industrial Parkway South where Ms. Elliott was due to talk business issues at a luncheon hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

The group was responding to a move by the Ontario Government earlier in the week to cancel the increase in minimum wage to \$15 that was expected to come this January while reviewing and scrapping components on Bill 148.

Bill 148 was brought in by the previous Provincial Government and legislated not only an increase to minimum wage, but new provisions regarding paid sick days, personal emergency leave, and more.

"This is the perfect opportunity because Christine Elliott is inside, who has been avoiding all our attempts to make a meeting in the office," said Jessa McLean of 15 & Fairness prior to Ms. Elliott's arrival at the banquet hall. "Not only is she inside, she's meeting with business and these are also the people we're trying to speak to because these are the people in the ears of our politicians trying to scrap the \$15 minimum wage. We know it is not workers calling into their representatives asking them to lower the minimum wage; these are people that we need to get out of our politicians' ears and we want to make it clear to the public too that we're here on their side, we're willing to speak to both of these parties here and now, if they are willing."

When Ms. Elliott arrived for the luncheon, she spoke briefly to the assembled demonstrators and accepted petitions they hoped to present.

Inside, the Newmarket-Aurora MPP said she told them she would "meet with them to hear their specific concerns" and see if they can "find some common ground."

"I always try to do that," said Ms. Elliott of finding that common ground, "but I would say that we have to balance the needs of people currently at a minimum wage to continue to get increases. But, I think from a business' perspective, that has to be on a basis that is consistent and evenly spaced so that businesses can absorb the increase [so] businesses can stay in business and continue to provide those jobs."

"There are two sides to this and I think we need to find balance to ensure that people get a decent living wage, but also that businesses will know what they are going to be facing and be able to plan their business activities according to the increases." The increases brought in by the previous Liberal government, she added were "significant" and brought in quickly, "making it really hard for business."

Lunch moderator Brendan Black and Ms. Elliott delved further into the ramifications of reviewing Bill 148, with Mr. Black asking Ms. Elliott what Ontarians can expect as far as potential changes to the legislation.

"I can't deal with any specifics, but I can tell you that Bill 148 is under discussion right now because all of us as MPPs heard these

concerns with respect to this Bill," said Ms. Elliott. "It is not just about the increases in minimum wage that was anticipated coming up in January 2019? We heard about some of the issues with respect to vacation pay, days away with numerous other provisions that were causing a lot of stress and a lot of extra expense for businesses.

"We are listening to the concerns of people who have shared with us. I think that is our responsibility to do so because we want businesses to stay in business. We also want you to continue to be able to hire people. We know that many people are actually losing their jobs right now because of the increase in minimum wage because employers either have to cut back on their hours or they have to cut back on staff. Nobody wants to see that happen. We want to see people being employed and we want to see employers doing well so they can continue to employ people."

The 15 & Fairness campaigners might have achieved the day's objective of getting their message to the Deputy Premier, but they say they are not going away without a fight. Ms. McLean said there are "tons of misconceptions" out there about the minimum wage, perpetuated she said by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

A minimum wage, she said, boosts purchasing power across the Regions and small businesses will see the benefits "despite the increase in labour costs."

"They can't come out and tell us who deserves the poverty wage and why that is okay," said Ms. McLean. "Until they can answer that question, we can't accept less than a \$15 minimum wage, which hardly puts you above the StatsCanada poverty line to begin with. The fight isn't over."

