

Ontario passes 15 minimum wage

By Josh O’Kane

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Ontario will implement \$15 minimum wage by 2019, and enact other new worker-focused rules even sooner, as lawmakers passed a series of revised employment laws at Queen’s Park Wednesday after years of research and debate.

The labour reforms put in place by the Liberals include requirements that employers pay part-time, casual and temporary employees the same rate as full-time employees for the same job; that employers must pay workers three hours’ wages for shifts cancelled with less than 48 hours notice; and extending personal emergency leave to 10 days, including two paid, to all workers.

The province’s business community has continually chimed in with consternation since the process reached the legislature last Spring, arguing that the measures will raise costs so much that they’ll have to hire less and raise prices for consumers to make up for the difference. Toronto-Dominion Bank researchers said in September that the minimum-wage increase alone could cost the province as many as 90,000 jobs through reduced hiring and greater automation.

Reforms amending Ontario’s Employment Standards Act, Labour Relations Act and Occupational Health and Safety Act will be rolled out on a gradual basis. Minimum wage, now set at \$11.60 per hour, will reach \$14 next Jan. 1, as will the new personal emergency leave allowances, and employees’ entitlement to three weeks of paid vacation after five years with the same employer.

Equal pay for non-full-time employees will come into effect next April 1. Scheduling rules, including payment for shift cancellation with less than 48 hours notice, will come into force Jan. 1 2019. Collective agreements do not have to come into compliance with the new labour

standards until either they expire or Jan. 1, 2020 – whichever comes first.

Labour Minister Kevin Flynn said in an interview that the gradual roll-out will let the government study how the reforms will affect different professions, giving it time to consider occupational exemptions for rules like scheduling. “We have a year to get them right,” he said. Broadly, he said it will improve life for countless workers: “Sometimes you forget how much of an impact this will have on ordinary peoples’ lives.”

Citing other jurisdictions hoping to implement \$15 minimum wage across the continent, including New Jersey and New Orleans, Minister Flynn said Ontario is “leading the way, but also just part of a movement across North America.”

Chris Buckley, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour, said the labour reforms were a win for far more than just unionized workers in the province. “We’re celebrating our victories, and we’re reminding the government that we expect them to go further to help create decent work for all workers in the province of Ontario,” Mr. Buckley said. The suggestion that thousands of jobs could be lost, he said, is “nothing but fearmongering.”

After lobbying Queen’s Park since the province launched the Changing Workplaces Review, which set the stage for this legislation, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce said it was disappointed that the labour changes passed. The Chamber, as well as the Ontario Restaurant Hotel & Motel Association – which represents many businesses employing shift workers who do on-call work throughout the province – both said they were disappointed the province did not include any measures to offset the costs they would incur from the labour changes.

This could include things like financial incentives for hiring youth and training, a reduction in liquor markup fees, or lowered tax rates, the groups said. Karl Baldauf, the Chamber's vice-president of policy and government relations, said the business group would focus its energy on convincing the province to introduce such offsetting measures in its 2018 Budget. Without such mitigation, Mr. Baldauf said in an interview, Ontario could wind up "hurting some of the vulnerable people in our province – the very people they're trying to safeguard."

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business called the province to spend at least six months pro-actively educating employers on the new measures so that they were aware of changes that could lead to costly infractions.

Wednesday's new reforms also include just-cause protections for unionized employees and enhanced abilities for employees to unionize in industries such as building services, home care and temporary help.

Ontario faces an election in 2018. The Opposition Progressive Conservatives have said that they support \$15 minimum wage but would delay its implementation.