

# Working poor hope for a boost

Star-sponsored forum held between budgets is aimed at low-wage earners

March 19, 2007

RITA DALY  
STAFF REPORTER

Advocates for the working poor hope the federal and provincial budgets will include measures to make low-wage employment less precarious.

A \$10 minimum wage? A working income supplement? An Ontario child benefit? Improvements to Canada employment insurance? Better employment standards? Dental coverage for the poor?

These are among the measures advocates hope to see when the federal budget is tabled today and the Ontario government presents its budget Thursday.

They are also among the issues that will be debated at a public forum on precarious employment at the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto tomorrow night.

Strategically held between the two budget announcements, the forum – the first in a series on poverty sponsored by the *Star* and **the Income Security Advocacy Centre** – will feature guest speakers including Ontario MPP Deb Matthews, parliamentary assistant to Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur; Deena Ladd, co-ordinator of the Workers' Action Centre; and workers' rights advocate Zainab Tayeb. But the forum is primarily meant to open the floor to low-wage workers struggling to stay afloat.

More than 200,000 Ontario workers scrape by on less than \$10 an hour and one in three is casual, part-time, contract or classified as self-employed, resulting in few benefits and no job protection.

The plight of low-income families has been neglected for more than a decade, said social policy expert John Stapleton.

Often welfare recipients and the working poor are one and the same, as families move from a precarious job to welfare and back to a precarious job. Employment standards such as minimum wage have eroded over the last decade, while at the same time social programs like welfare were slashed, he said.

"Now we're seeing a bottoming out," said Stapleton, a St. Christopher House Fellow. "So if we really do get a working income tax benefit

(tonight) and an Ontario child benefit on Thursday, we can actually cautiously say we're at a turning point."

A growing movement to push governments to act has developed in recent months. More than 60 community leaders, from bank chairs to union leaders to social policy advocates, last week sent an open letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Premier Dalton McGuinty urging them to make poverty a priority in their budgets.

The Toronto & York Region Labour Council has also launched a campaign pushing for a \$10 minimum wage after a study found more than one million workers in the Toronto area earn less than \$29,800 a year.