



Hon. Jason Copping
Minister of Labour and Immigration
107 Legislature Building
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Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

March 11, 2020

Gil McGowan, President
Alberta Federation of Labour
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Dear Minister Copping;

Your government says it plans to get serious about combatting the spread of COVID19 in Alberta. I'm writing today, on behalf of the 175,000 working Albertans represented by the Alberta Federation of Labour, to suggest that you can't really get serious about containing the virus without, at the same time, getting serious about the issue of paid sick days.

Whenever Albertans get sick, they're told not to go to work for fear of spreading their illness to co-workers and customers. This is sound advice, but disconnected from the reality faced by many working Albertans. This disconnect is particular pronounced for those Albertans working in lower-paid jobs and in the service sector. The vast majority of these people do not have job-protected paid sick days, provided by their employers.

Albertans without employer-provided paid sick leave make up a very significant portion of the provincial labour force – in fact, we think more than half of working Albertans would fall into this category. Many of these people are living paycheque-to-paycheque and simply cannot afford to go without pay for days, or perhaps even weeks, on end. And they certainly can't afford to "do the right thing," if that could possibly mean losing their jobs.

We feel very strongly that it is neither fair nor prudent to ask thousands – perhaps tens of thousands – of Albertans to go without pay for potentially prolonged periods of time without providing a robust system of protection for their jobs and their income. Without legislated requirements for paid sick days and job-protected leave, many Albertans will have no choice but to go to work sick – thereby undermining efforts by public health officials to contain outbreaks.

In the case of COVID-19, the government recommends 14 days “self-isolation” for people who are presumed or confirmed to be infected. The previous government changed the rules to allow for five unpaid days off without fear of workers losing their job, but this is less than the recommended “self-isolation” period. In essence, these workers are being asked to stay at home without pay for two weeks, but they could lose their jobs after five days. The rules are stacked against workers and many of them have no choice but to go to work sick.

While I recognize that Alberta’s *Employment Standards Code* allows for 16 weeks off unpaid due to quarantine, this does not provide adequate protection and reassurance to working Albertans for two reasons. First, quarantine and the kind of self-isolation being recommended by public health experts are not the same thing, under the law. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the *Code* doesn’t give workers peace of mind when it comes to pay. It is unfair to ask workers to bear the burden of public-health emergencies like one that will soon be upon us without providing them the support needed to slow the spread of the disease.

The changes announced by the federal government today are very helpful and welcome. However, the Employment Insurance coverage that they’re pointing to is only available to workers who have been quarantined. It is not at all clear that workers who follow the advice of public health officials and “self-isolate” would fit that definition. It’s also important to note that even if workers qualify for this program, workers would receive only 55 percent of their employment income up to a maximum of \$573/week. For many, that would not be enough to remove the disincentive to stay home.

Clearly, federal measures, while welcome, are not enough. Your government can help address this situation by changing the rules to allow all working Albertans to take 14 paid sick days every year. This protection needs to be available to all workers – not only those who have been with their employers for prolonged periods of time. It also needs to be made available to “gig” workers whose employers have been allowed to side-step their obligations under law by classifying them as “independent contractors,” as opposed to full-fledged employees.

You recently closed discussions on potential changes to the *Employment Standards Code*. I call on you, as Minister of Labour and Immigration, to lead Cabinet discussions to change the *Code* to include 14 paid sick days per worker per year.

Over and above paid sick days, I also ask that you work with your colleagues to ensure Alberta’s front-line public-sector workers have the resources they need to deal with COVID-19, such as ensuring all workers have the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the work they do and the risks they face. Many of these workers are exposed to disease simply because of the nature of their work, not only in health care, but also in education services, such as schools and daycares. The closure of such services due to disease will impact the health and economic lives of families which may require different government intervention.

In conclusion, I'd like to remind you that, in 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that, "paid sick leave plays a crucial role especially in times of crises where many workers fear dismissal and discrimination when reporting sick." They also found that, "gaps in paid sick leave result in severe impacts on public health." <https://www.who.int/healthsystems/topics/financing/healthreport/SickleaveNo9FINAL.pdf>

Similar sentiments have been expressed by most public health authorities around the world, including here in Canada. Over the past 20 years, Alberta has dealt with SARS, H1N1 and now we we're preparing for COVID-19. It's not a question if there will be more pandemic scares in the future, it's only a question of when. One-off paid leave provisions to deal with COVID19 would be much better than nothing. But the better approach would be to embed paid sick leave provisions in legislation for the long term – so that working Albertans can always afford to do the right thing and so that we're properly prepared for the next health emergency, whenever it comes

Sincerely,

Gil McGowan

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gil McGowan', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

President
Alberta Federation of Labour