



Alberta is facing a double-barreled crisis, the likes of which we've never seen before. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global oil price crash have combined to create profound challenges for both our health care system and our economy.

The leaders of Alberta labour movement have discussed the situation and we have come to the conclusion that unprecedented times call for unprecedented measures.

In order to protect working Albertans and the province we all love, the Alberta Federation of Labour has developed the following list of eight suggestions for consideration by both our provincial and federal governments.

Taken together, we think our suggestions will help Alberta “flatten the curve” of infection (so health services don't get overwhelmed); fortify our health care system (in case we're not able to flatten the curve enough); and ward off the collapse of our economy (which is a real worry if mass lay-offs and income loss dramatically disrupt consumer demand).

#1: Scrap and replace the budget

A massive wave of bankruptcies and layoffs is about to hit our oil and gas sector. And some experts are predicting that the drop in consumer demand brought on by the pandemic response will lead to 20 percent unemployment. Yet, the UCP has seen fit to ram through an austerity budget that will heap public-sector job loss on top of private-sector job loss. This isn't just a recipe for recession; it's a recipe for a full-blown economic depression. The budget needs to be scrapped in favour of more aggressive policies being adopted by governments around the world.

At a minimum, the government of Alberta should boost spending by 5 percent with targeted increases to spending in health care, education and social services. The last thing Alberta needs right now is the current budget that constrains spending in the midst of a global recession.

#2: Mandate paid sick leave for all

Public health officials have made it clear that one of the best ways to flatten the curve of infection and avoid a spike in hospital admissions that could overwhelm our healthcare system is for people to stay home when they're sick and self-isolate if they contract the virus (or think they might have contracted it). This is good policy, but in practice, it's difficult for many people to follow. As it stands right now, more than half of working Albertans don't have paid sick leave from their employers. As a result, if it's a choice between following the advice of health officials or continuing to work in order to pay the rent and put food on the table, the reality is that many Albertans will continue to go to work, even if they're sick. That's why we're demanding 14 days of paid sick leave for ALL Albertans – including full-time employees, part-time employees, gig economy workers, contractors and the self-employed. The current system is broken. Most provinces don't mandate enough (or any) paid sick

leave. And the federal Employment Insurance (EI) system excludes far too many workers; and provides miserly benefits even for those who do qualify. This crisis should be seen as a wake-up call to fix our inadequate patchwork system of sick leave – for this health crisis, and for future health crises (which we know are inevitable).

#3: Keep health care workers healthy

In the battle to flatten the curve of infection and manage the rising tide of sick Albertans who will soon flood our province's hospitals, our doctors, nurses and other health care workers are on the front lines. In this fight, if we hope to reduce deaths and keep Albertans healthy, we have to put a priority on keeping our health care workers healthy. That means they need access to the best possible personal protective equipment (PPEs) to reduce the risk of becoming sick themselves. This is not a hypothetical problem. In jurisdictions that have already been hit by the spike in infection (like Italy), the ability of hospitals to cope has been hampered by the loss of health care workers who have had to remove themselves from the front lines and self-isolate after contracting the virus themselves. The risk of health care workers getting infected themselves can never be eliminated entirely, but it can be reduced. The provincial government and Alberta Health Services have not been paying nearly enough attention to the urgent pleas for better PPEs and safety protocols coming from the organizations that represent front-line health care workers: like the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) and the Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA). For the sake of both Alberta patients and Alberta health care workers, this has to change. We also think that, where possible, needed medical equipment should be purchased in Canada to help promote in-country job creation. Finally, we need to recognize that it's not only health care workers who are working in the public interest during this crisis. People who work in grocery and convenience stores; trucking and public transit; government services and rail service are also on the front lines. They all need to be acknowledged, protected and properly compensated.

#4: Provide income supports for workers, families and businesses

The government needs to immediately start sending cheques of \$1000 to all Albertans (adults and children) each month until the crisis passes in order to replace income for people who lose their jobs and to maintain household spending power. Don't worry about sending money to people who don't need it. Speed is the priority. We can tax it back from those who don't need it at tax time next year.

They also need to immediately reform the EI system to lower the hours for eligibility, remove the income caps, increase maximum weekly earnings and make the system available to all who lose their jobs (including gig workers, cultural workers, and the self-employed).

Finally, they also need to quickly begin providing support for businesses to weather the economic storm – but make the support contingent on them keeping their workers on payroll until the crisis passes. If we don't attach strings related to employment, many employers will simply use the government money to pay debt or buy back shares to boost their stock prices. Neither of these things will keep people working or support consumer spending, which need to be the real priorities.

#5: Keep paying public sector workers

The government needs to immediately commit to end all public-sector lay-offs and privatization initiatives, and the need to keep all public-sector workers on payroll, even if they're sent home because of the pandemic response. This will be one of the easiest and most effective ways to keep money flowing to Alberta households and keep money circulating in the economy through consumer spending.

#6: Engage in massive counter-cyclical spending

Supported by a new budget, the government needs to immediately start making massive public-sector investment in things Alberta needs – starting with the purchase of ventilators and the construction of hospital and ICU beds, so our health care system doesn't get overwhelmed by a surge in COVID-19 patients. This needs to be followed with a WWII-scale investment to support diversification, because investment and jobs in the oil and gas sector will never return to previous levels. The sooner we accept this reality the better. When making these investments, priority procurement preference should be given to local companies and local workers.

#7: Legislate a pause on rent, mortgage and credit card payments

The government needs to immediately introduce legislation to allow distressed individuals and families to stop making mortgage, rent and credit card and other payments without penalty – and without having to pay missed months – until the crisis passes. There should also be a ban on all evictions and utility shut-offs.

#8: Make a plan for construction

The government needs to immediately make a plan for construction projects and construction camps in Alberta. We are on the cusp of a very significant shut-down and turn-around season of maintenance work on Alberta's major oil and gas facilities. This means that more than 20,000 construction workers will soon be congregating in construction camps near Fort McMurray and other locations around the province. The province needs a plan for this situation, now. If workers are to be sent home to their families, in accordance with advice from public health officials, they need adequate compensation and support.

Many of these proposals may seem radical. But now is the time for radical action. They also may seem expensive. However, both Alberta and Canada have some of the best government balance sheets in the world. Besides, the cost of doing these things will certainly be lower than the cost of not doing them. And with interest rates at zero percent, the cost of doing the right thing has never been lower.