RESOLUTION ON THE NEED FOR URGENT ACTION TO ADDRESS THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ALBERTA

WHEREAS COVID-19 cases in Alberta are increasing exponentially, which means that daily new cases in the province could hit 2,200 by December 8; 4,400 by December 28, and 8,800 by January 17, if new, more aggressive public health measures are not implemented

WHEREAS current measures are clearly not working to get the pandemic under control in our province, nor can they reasonably be expected to work

WHEREAS our contact tracing system has been overwhelmed and our hospitals are on the path to being overwhelmed, as well

WHEREAS our health care workers are exhausted and our health care system is already plagued by staff shortages as workers get sick themselves or have to isolate in large numbers

WHEREAS opening new beds is meaningless if we don’t have skilled health care workers to staff them

WHEREAS the “single-site” policy for long-term care facilities has effectively been abandoned by the provincial government, putting thousands of vulnerable seniors at elevated risk

WHEREAS the lack of leadership, direction and support from the provincial government is also causing a crisis in our schools, with more than a quarter of Alberta schools reporting COVID-19 cases and outbreaks

WHEREAS many schools are being forced to close because of the lack of staff to replace other staff who are sick or isolating

WHEREAS the collapse of our province’s contact tracing system means that thousands of children may be going to classes with COVID-19 positive classmates or classmates who have been exposed to the virus

WHEREAS the Chief Medical Officer of Health has acknowledged that many employers and businesses are not following public health directives on COVID-19, yet have faced no consequences

WHEREAS the Alberta government, unlike other governments around the world, has chosen to ignore previously identified thresholds that were supposed to trigger more aggressive public health measures
WHEREAS public health authorities are now unable to identify the origin of more than 80 percent of new COVID-19 cases

WHEREAS outbreaks are being reported in every region of the province and every sector of the economy, including significant and increasing outbreaks in the health care, long-term care, education, construction, retail, logistics and manufacturing sectors

WHEREAS there is a growing mountain of evidence showing that, in addition to killing far more people than the flu, COVID-19 can cause serious damage to the lungs, kidneys, brains and other organs of afflicted patients, causing life-long health problems for people who “recover,” and imposing significant long-term costs on our health care system

WHEREAS the lack of mandatory paid sick leave has meant that many workers, especially women, youth, racialized workers and those with low incomes and precarious employment, often have no choice but to go to work even when they’re sick

WHEREAS current provincial laws and the new federal Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB) are clearly not enough to ensure that all workers are staying home and isolating when they should

WHEREAS many employers, in both the private and public sectors, are pressuring, threatening and intimidating workers into coming to work even when those workers should be staying home and isolating

WHEREAS austerity policies from the provincial government are leading Alberta Health Services to rely more on casual workers (who don’t have paid sick leave) and leading AHS to demand that full-time staff use their vacation time when they need to isolate (as opposed to paying them while they isolate)

WHEREAS these questionable staffing policies are leading workers in the health care system to go to work when they’re sick (risking increased spread of COVID-19) or to decline shifts out of fear of getting infected (exacerbating staff shortages at the worst possible time)

WHEREAS it is becoming increasingly clear that it is a false dichotomy and an irresponsible policy position to suggest, as our provincial government has done, that we have to choose between the health of our economy and the health of our citizens

WHEREAS economists and policy experts have said unequivocally that not locking down the economy to stop the spread of the virus will cause more harm to jobs, businesses and the economy than a lockdown would

WHEREAS many businesses and individual workers who are currently losing their businesses or jobs will only qualify for federal assistance and benefits if a lock down is ordered by provincial authorities

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WHEREAS health experts and public health agencies around the world have agreed that masks are a necessary part of any effective COVID-19 response strategy and every province except Alberta has responded to this expert consensus by enacting province-wide mask mandates

WHEREAS most health experts and global public health agencies now agree that COVID-19 can be spread by tiny aerosols in the air, in addition to being spread by larger droplets

WHEREAS most health experts and global public health agencies now agree that policies focused exclusively on “protecting the vulnerable” don’t work and should be abandoned in favour of policies that focus on stopping community spread

WHEREAS research has clearly shown that the zero-COVID, “crush and contain” strategies adopted by countries like New Zealand, Australia and Taiwan (as well as the provinces of the “Atlantic Bubble” here in Canada) have been much more effective in both stopping the spread of the virus AND protecting jobs and the economy

WHEREAS relief in the form of vaccines will not be available until the spring of 2021, at the earliest, and that the job of government should be to keep infections and deaths as low as possible until that time.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Alberta Federation of Labour and its affiliate unions call on the Alberta government to implement the following measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 and support Albertans through the second wave of the pandemic:

• Enact a “circuit-breaker” lockdown to break the chains of transmission and slow the spread of the virus, as recommended by hundreds of doctors, health care policy experts and Alberta’s largest health care unions.

• Enact a province-wide mask mandate for all indoor public spaces, including all workplaces.

• Re-institute a single-site policy in long-term care facilities (the policy was never really made functional in the first wave).

• Introduce mandatory paid sick leave so people can actually afford to stay home when they’re sick or when they need to isolate.

• Provide provincial income and financial support for Albertans who lose their jobs as a result of a lockdown – including a provincially-mandated moratorium on evictions and foreclosures

• Adopt the federal exposure notification app.

• Dramatically increase funding for schools – so we can hire more staff to cover when other staff are isolating and to shrink class sizes to promote physical distancing.

• Formally recognize the new science on aerosol transmission of COVID-19.
• Invest significant and adequate amounts of provincial money in proper ventilation in schools, health care facilities and workplaces, so we can heed the new scientific evidence on aerosol transmission of COVID-19.

• Update PPE guidance for all workers, especially those in the health care sector, to accord with the new scientific consensus on the aerosol transmission of COVID-19.

• Formally embrace the precautionary principle and acknowledge that it should guide all COVID-19-related health and safety decisions in Alberta workplaces.

• Release full information about outbreaks in private-sector workplaces (this was promised in April but has never been acted upon fully)

• Proactively inspect Alberta workplaces and levy fines on employers who are putting their workers at risk by not following public health guidelines.

• Adopt a zero-COVID, “crush and contain” strategy, similar to the ones adopted by the jurisdictions around the world that have been most successful at dealing with COVID-19 – like New Zealand, Australia and Taiwan (and also the provinces of the “Atlantic Bubble” here in Canada).

• Develop a provincial vaccination plan so that we can move quick to distribute vaccines when they become available and overcome dangerous misinformation campaigns.

AND THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the AFL also calls on the Alberta government to STOP doing a number of things that are undermining our province’s ability to deal with the pandemic. Specifically, the AFL urges the government to:

• Stop driving doctors out of the province during a pandemic

• Stop plans to layoff 11,000 health care workers during a pandemic

• Stop underfunding our health care and education systems

• Stop plans to privatize Alberta’s public testing and lab facilities, which continue to be such an important part of our pandemic response

• Stop legislation (Bill 47) aimed at stripping Albertans of their right to refuse dangerous work. This right is always important, but it’s shocking that the government is trying to eliminate it during a pandemic and when it is abundantly clear that not all employers are following public health directives.

This resolution was adopted unanimously by the Executive Council of the Alberta Federation of Labour on the afternoon of November 19, 2020. The unions attending the Executive Council collectively represent 175,000 working Albertans and include the following:

United Nurses of Alberta (UNA)
Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)
United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)
United Steelworkers (USW)
Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC)
Canadian Union Postal Workers (CUPW)
Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)
Non-academic Staff Association of Alberta (NASA)
Alberta Fire Fighters Association (AFFA)
International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE)
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)
International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB)
Ironworkers (IW)
International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM)
United Utility Workers of Alberta (UUWA)
International Association of Theatre and Stage Employees (IASTE)
Labourers’ International Union (LIUNA)