

Lorry-Ann Austin  
Member, Local 407  
Region 3

**The coronavirus pandemic has deemed frontline workers – like grocery store cashiers, retail shop clerks, security guards, health and social care workers, food delivery and taxi drivers, early childhood educators - 'essential' yet these workers continue to be poorly paid and are often forced to put their health and safety at risk. Many low-wage and racialized workers have been disproportionately impacted during the pandemic highlighting the critical role of robust public services in tackling major health and social crises. How do we build a post-pandemic world that is caring, sustainable and equitable?**

#### Equity in a Post-pandemic Province

The coronavirus pandemic has illuminated long existing inequities in our society, particularly those related to social class, gender, and race. The pandemic has disproportionality impacted low-wage workers. Some workers have lost employment, while others have been required to place their health and their family's health at risk while they continue to work unprotected.

Women and racialized Canadians have been particularly disadvantaged by the pandemic as they are often the ones working in low-wage front-line positions in hospitality, retail, or social care. These jobs are vital to our communities and yet, these workers are undercompensated for the work that they do. Workers in front-line positions also have not had the privilege of choice in working from home. The essential nature of their work required them to continue to provide service even during community outbreaks of COVID-19. This work has largely gone unrecognized.

Many essential workers were forgotten by the B.C. government when it announced pandemic hazard pay for frontline workers in this province. The four dollar an hour wage bump for work completed between March and July 2020 was only available to workers in health, social services, and corrections (Smart, 2020). The BC Government Employees Union pushed for more inclusive guidelines and were able to see some extensions to the program, but store clerks and those working to maintain food supply chains were still left behind (BCGEU, 2020). The time limited pandemic pay also failed to recognize the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the ongoing risks assumed by essential front-line workers, many of whom today still await vaccine availability. We need to do more as a society to recognize the essential nature and vital contribution of all workers in this province.

As we move through this pandemic and beyond, we need to advocate for policy development that appreciates the inherent worth of all people while equitably compensating the labour contributions of workers. The current government is making good on its promise to increase the minimum wage, but this does not go far enough. While it is a step in the right direction, a minimum wage that is not tied to the cost of living does little to address income security and the accompanying threats of housing and food insecurity. There are also essential workers who do not benefit from the minimum wage, for example farm workers who are paid piece rates and often earn below the hourly minimum (MacLeod, 2021). We need a universal basic income if we are to build back a caring, sustainable, and equitable post-pandemic province. Ensuring every resident, regardless of circumstance or occupation, has access to income that lifts them out of poverty will improve health and social outcomes for all. It will also ensure people can refuse unsafe work, flee unsafe situations, and keep themselves from financial ruin during economic downturns. Though it was recently rejected by a panel appointed by the BC government, a universal basic income for all is the true path forward to equity and a compassionate society.

#### References

BCGEU. (2020, May 19). BCGEU calls for extension of B.C.'s pandemic pay program for essential workers. BCGEU. [https://www.bcgeu.ca/\\_bcgeu\\_calls\\_for\\_expansion\\_of\\_b\\_c\\_s\\_pandemic\\_pay\\_program\\_for\\_essential\\_workers](https://www.bcgeu.ca/_bcgeu_calls_for_expansion_of_b_c_s_pandemic_pay_program_for_essential_workers)

MacLeod, A. (2021, April 29). B.C.'s minimum wage is rising, but farm worker pay is still unresolved. The Tyee. <https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/04/29/BC-Minimum-Wage-Rising-Farm-Worker-Pay-Still-Unresolved/>

Smart, A. (2020, September 3). B.C. government says pandemic pay promised in mid-May coming in October. CTV News. <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/b-c-government-says-pandemic-pay-promised-in-mid-may-coming-in-october-1.5091704>