

CEIU Scholarship Program 2021 - Essay

Since March 2020, the reality of COVID-19 and the resulting work-from-home situation that it has demanded of public service union members has challenged the relevancy of unions themselves. As of April 2020, 5 million Canadians were now working from home due to the pandemic.¹ Prior to COVID-19, public service unions were instrumental in ensuring that workers in the office were safe, comfortable, and their well-being and mental health was not at any risk due to the office itself. How has the reality of COVID-19 changed the impact of unions, and how should they remain relevant in building solidarity and ensuring workplace justice in the years to come?

Working remotely and being away from social interaction for long periods of time can foster isolation, creating mental health risks for those affected.² Although it is possible to socially interact online, such as through video conference calls or instant messaging services, it is not ideal. In terms of union impact, it is more difficult to communicate and build solidarity with one another when communication is restricted to virtual venues. It may be best for the union itself to reach out to workers to ask how they would prefer to communicate. However, even if communication were to be restricted to online, it is still possible for the union to hold events, activities, and build solidarity through these means. Although one can fondly remember union activities prior to the pandemic such as barbecues, fundraising events, and potlucks, it is still possible to hold these activities virtually. When there is no other option, it may be the only way to continue building solidarity with workers and remaining relevant in their lives.

This shows that the most important task for the union in building solidarity should be to maintain spaces for its members to assemble in. At the end of 2020, almost 1 in 3 Canadians reported having lost their job due to the impact of COVID-19.³ In the federal public service, 17% of workers do not have an indeterminate position as of 2020.⁴ Although those that are indeterminate may not feel the impact of 1 in 3 Canadians losing their job, the role of unions in the reality of so few federal public servants losing their job during the pandemic cannot be understated. Furthermore, the 1 in 3 Canadians that lost their job due to the pandemic were not all casual or term workers; however, they did not have the job stability that unions have fought for for decades. The importance, then, of unions was brought to the forefront as a result of the consequences of the pandemic.

¹ Statistics Canada, COVID-19 and the Labour Market in April 2020, May 8, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2020034-eng.htm>. See also: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, April 2020, The Daily, May 8, 2020.

² Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Quarantine and Isolation, June 15, 2020, <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19/quarantine-and-isolation>.

³ Global News Wire, NEW POLL: COVID-19 Pandemic Having Severe Impacts on Unemployed Canadians, December 9, 2020, <https://www.globenewswire.com/en/news-release/2020/12/09/2142314/0/en/NEW-POLL-COVID-19-Pandemic-Having-Severe-Impacts-on-Unemployed-Canadians.html>.

⁴ Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Population of the Federal Public Service by Tenure, December 23, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/innovation/human-resources-statistics/population-federal-public-service-tenure.html>.

As the office adapts, it is important that the unions adapt along with it. Instead of organizing a union barbecue or outdoor social event, possibly the union could consider virtual events, such as lunch break coffee chats or after-hours meet-ups. Although virtual events are not ideal, it may be more important now than ever to hold these events for workers that are feeling isolated or alone. Another possibility would be for union stewards to communicate with members through newsletters or emails. Essentially, communication with members should be stepped up during this kind of work-from-home situation.

Furthermore, if any workers are feeling that their employers are overworking them, or are experiencing other job-related issues due to the fact that they are working from home, it is important for them to connect with other workers to discuss these issues. If an individual experiences one issue, yet never talks about it with anyone, they may very well think that they are the only person experiencing this issue. Communicating with one another through virtual events, meet-ups and chats is important in building worker solidarity. Unity has never been more important than during circumstances that force workers to be alone.

Although many indeterminate federal workers may take their job stability for granted, it is important not to remain complacent. Rights can be taken away from workers when they least expect it. This is where the relevancy of unions comes in in the middle of a pandemic, where it is hard to remain in contact with colleagues and build solidarity. It is important to not forget how the unions have fought for many of the privileges we take for granted, and will continue to do so. Maintaining solidarity through virtual means, polling workers to ask how best they would prefer to communicate and keep in touch with their colleagues, is something that unions can do going forward to ensure workplace justice in the years ahead. Although hopefully this pandemic and the work-from-home situation does not continue forever, the rights of workers and the relevancy of unions in protecting these rights absolutely should.