

COVID-19: HEALTH EMERGENCY LABOUR PROTECTIONS

Urgent comprehensive action is needed to protect workers, communities

The systems in Canada that are supposed to protect workers during an economic crisis or pandemic are woefully inadequate. All workers urgently need income supports to follow the advice of health workers and to weather the consequences of job losses and interruptions in earnings as a direct or indirect result of coronavirus. The following measures must be implemented immediately:

All federal and provincial governments must:

- **Provide 21 paid emergency leave days NOW!**

All workers need a minimum of 7 paid emergency leave days as a basic, permanent labour right. But during pandemics like COVID-19, workers need *an additional* 14 days of paid leave.

To contain the spread of coronavirus – or any other communicable disease – *every* worker must be able to follow the advice of public health officials to stay home when they are sick. But patients in low-wage and precarious jobs face immense pressure to go to work even when sick because they simply cannot afford to lose pay or risk their jobs.

Workers with symptoms are being asked to self-isolate for a minimum of 14 days. This is impossible for workers in precarious employment who lack fully paid, job protected leave. Such workers are often on the frontlines of public and private service provision, such as cleaners, personal support workers, food service workers, gig workers, delivery workers, school bus drivers, farm workers, taxi drivers, migrant workers, live in care workers, and countless others.

A growing number of workers are now faced with loss of income due to short-term layoffs resulting from closures or staff reductions, or are forced to take time off to look after children as child care centres and schools close in response to COVID-19. The impact of lost wages will exacerbate the economic consequences of the pandemic.

- **Prevent employers from asking workers to provide doctors' notes to access paid sick day policies or Employment Insurance**

Our health care system does not need those suffering from colds and flu to be filling hospital emergency rooms, doctors' offices, or clinic waiting rooms, just to get a doctor's note telling them to stay home. This dangerous practice puts patients at risk of contagion and wastes precious medical resources.

- **Create an emergency fund to provide a non-repayable living allowance**

The consequences of COVID-19 are not merely related to sickness and self-isolation. Workers such as cleaners, school bus drivers, grocery store workers, food service workers, and more are already suffering the consequences of interruptions in earnings as a result of closures, and/or reduced demand for goods and services.

Workers who cannot access EI – including misclassified workers, and many dependant self-employed contractors – are in urgent need of income support. We need an emergency fund that provides a non-repayable living allowance for those suffering job loss or an interruption in earnings as a direct or indirect consequence of COVID-19. Such a fund could be administered federally through EI but funded through general revenues. *The weekly allowance should reflect at least the 2020 EI maximum benefit of \$573 for all emergency funds and EI benefits.*

- **Make it crystal clear that racism and xenophobia will not be tolerated**

As we learned during the SARS crisis, workers in the service, grocery, and hospitality sectors are particularly hard hit by misinformation, racism, and xenophobia. Such workers—especially Chinese, Iranian, and other groups of racialized workers—are more likely to experience loss of income during a pandemic, even if only through layoffs and reductions in hours of work as demand for services plummet.

Many workers without full citizenship status are excluded from accessing entitlements because of discriminatory rules. This must stop. All workers must be protected.

Public officials must do everything possible to combat racism and xenophobia within their institutions and to protect workers from the consequences of this prejudice.

URGENT ACTION REQUIRED ON EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

The federal government must improve access to Employment Insurance by:

- **Permanently reducing the number of hours required to qualify for EI benefits to a standard 360 hours for all workers**

EI is Canada's most important economic stabilizer, intended to ease the impact of economic downturns when workers experience job loss or interruptions in earnings.

Unfortunately, as it stands, only about 40% of unemployed workers receive EI when they need it, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

In today's economy where part-time, casual, contract, and temporary work are particularly predominant in sectors like food production and services, health care, education, transportation, retail, warehouse services, and more – it is almost impossible for such workers to accumulate enough hours to qualify for EI.

And because women, newcomers, workers of colour, and others facing discrimination in the labour market are over-represented in precarious employment, these communities are less likely to access EI and therefore experience financial hardship disproportionately.

- **Establishing a benefits floor for weekly EI income support**

Workers in minimum- and low-wage employment cannot survive on income support that provides only 55% of income.

Across Canada, the minimum wage is insufficient to bring full-time workers above the poverty line. Even if a minimum wage earner is fortunate enough to qualify for EI, the weekly income support provides only 55% of minimum wage. This is a disaster for workers.

The weekly allowance should reflect at least the 2020 EI maximum benefit of \$573 for all emergency funds and EI benefits.

- **Waiving the one-week waiting period for all EI benefits (regular and special)**

Workers living paycheque to paycheque can't afford to lose a day's pay, let alone a week's pay.

- **Eliminating the requirement for workers to be in Canada to be eligible for EI benefits**

Workers stranded outside Canada resulting from travel restrictions or decreased availability of transportation are being disqualified from EI income support. As a consequence, these workers are burdened with extreme financial hardship.

Workers should not have to be in Canada to access any emergency income supports or receive EI special and regular benefits.

- **Establishing a special multi-lingual hotline**

Workers need consistent and accurate information, especially in communities where English or French are second languages. The hotline must provide assistance and information in multiple languages including, but not limited to, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Farsi.

- **Increasing EI staffing**

The federal government must ensure there are adequate numbers of staff who can implement these permanent and emergency measures as quickly as possible. The number of staff must be increased to better provide online and telephone assistance in a variety of languages.

- **Expediting EI Work Sharing applications**

Work sharing agreements that prevent permanent job loss by allowing workers to share available hours must be facilitated. Service Canada should be actively promoting this measure as an alternative to layoffs.

There should also be flexibilities for workplaces considering reduced hours as well as innovative pilot projects in sectors with numerous small workplaces. Given the many smaller enterprises in the restaurant and retail sector, we propose Service Canada administer pilot projects that would group employers by sector so that individual employers in a community are not burdened with a complicated application process. This needs to happen quickly as some workers are already losing significant hours and income.