



For Immediate Release

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Making health care workers scapegoats no way to manage COVID-19 pandemic

Three unions representing health care providers in Saskatchewan – SGEU, CUPE and SEIU-West – are angry and disappointed by the Sask Party government's decision to impose an emergency order that will allow it to redeploy thousands of health care workers from their normal jobs.

The government threatened publicly on September 10 that it would issue an emergency order on September 13 if talks with the unions, which commenced on September 9, didn't result in an agreement to allow for employee redeployment. Instead, government advised it would impose a previously negotiated Letter of Understanding (LOU), which expired in July, between the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) and a number of unions representing health care workers. SHA representatives and health care provider unions had just concluded a negotiation session Monday afternoon when the government issued the emergency order.

"For months, health providers and their unions have been calling on the government to take action to stop the rapidly rising cases of COVID-19 that are overwhelming the health care system," said Sandra Seitz, CUPE 5430 President. "Instead, the government 'ignored the science' and passively watched this latest COVID crisis unfold. Now, after progress was made in negotiations with the SHA, we are disappointed and discouraged to see the government take such a heavy-handed approach with health care workers."

The previous LOU enabled the SHA to move thousands of workers between different jobs to meet the needs of Saskatchewan's pandemic response. That LOU expired earlier this year when the province lifted the public health order and removed all pandemic restrictions and measures. Since that time, vaccination rates have stalled, COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations have increased to record levels, and health care workers of all types have faced unprecedented workloads with many staff suffering burnout and chronic fatigue. Negotiations for a new LOU would have provided labour mobility while proactively addressing the issues health care workers endure in their provision of care.

"It's unacceptable for the premier to refuse to enact even the most basic, common-sense measures like indoor masking for the general public," said Tracey Sauer, SGEU President. "Yet he's more than willing to demand additional sacrifices from health care workers who have already gone above and beyond during extreme conditions over the past 18 months."

Last week, the government announced a reduction in non-critical or elective services in order to expand surge capacity in the health system. It also announced plans to further privatize a number of health services by outsourcing contact tracing and testing as well as thousands of MRIs to private, for-profit companies to help alleviate strains on the system.

At a time when the premier claims the health care system is in such deep crisis that he must circumvent health care workers' basic rights and the foundations of our public health system, Mr. Moe has refused to consider re-introducing a low-cost, easily implemented mask mandate.

This despite the fact that the media has reported that the government's own research shows a mask mandate could reduce cases by as much as 50 per cent.

"Instead of providing effective leadership to get us through the fourth wave of the pandemic, it's clear the premier is blaming and threatening health care providers for the pressures in the health care system caused by his government's inaction," said Neil Colmin, SEIU-West Vice-President. "The premier and his health minister have expressed gratitude to health care workers in the past and have referred to them as heroes, but these recent actions to force health care workers back into unhealthy and unsafe workplace conditions speak louder than words. This is not how a government should treat its heroes."

SGEU, CUPE and SEIU-West represent over 30,000 health care providers working in acute care, home care, public health and long-term care across the province.

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