

RESPONSES TO COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Uncertain times are never easy. Our history as a labour movement and as Canadians shows time and again how together we can meet adversity. We have shared with neighbours and with complete strangers, protected the vulnerable, and sheltered those without a home. During the present COVID19 health crisis, every one of us will be challenged to be the best that we can – generous, thoughtful and selfless.

Our movement believes in solidarity and the power of collective action, that we are stronger together. It is hard to reconcile this deep commitment to the collective with the idea of social distancing, and the knowledge that being physically apart is what is needed while we battle a global pandemic. These recommendations are a current list and represent the urgently needed supports for all workers in the GTA, especially those most vulnerable among us.

PRIORITIES

The labour movement is an important partner in helping make decisions and communications during this health and economic crisis. We call on all levels of government to ensure that workers have incomes they can count on during and after this crisis, child care if they are able to work, work that is healthy and safe, and stable housing. We emphasize the need for continued social solidarity with the goal that no one is left behind during the crisis or afterwards. It is important to recognize that Canadians don't all start from the same place – we have a high level of inequality including the racialization of poverty and exploitation of some due to their immigration status.

We outline eight priorities for governments:

- Ensure health and safety of workers
- Ensure paid, protected sick leave
- Fill gaps in proposed EI benefits
- Ensure public services are available for all workers and particularly those on the front lines – child care for essential workers is key
- Propose initiatives that meet community needs and create/retain jobs
- Protect workers from bankruptcy, homelessness, and impoverishment
- Ensure the differential impact on Ontario's diverse communities is addressed
- Reject a return to an austerity agenda or worse

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Ensure the health and safety of all workers – particularly frontline workers who cannot work remotely. Those in authority should:

- Ensure that social distancing, hygiene and sanitation protocols – and time to practice them – are adapted to all workplaces to allow safe working conditions

- Work closely with health and safety committees and unions to conduct hazard assessment and areas of potential exposure for workers, and adopt strict workplace protocols
- Provide the necessary equipment, supplies, and correct information to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and an adequate supply of N95 respirators where appropriate
- Ensure the right to refuse unsafe work is protected and increase workplace inspections in all sectors
- Work closely with unions to provide accurate and timely information to employees about accessing benefits and support
- Provide compassionate care and bereavement leave support to employees, as well as mental health counselling and support
- Ensure full workers' compensation to any worker who interacts with the public and contracts COVID-19
- Provide financial support for non-profit organizations that are on the frontlines, especially those that cannot enforce social distancing for operational reasons

PAID SICK LEAVE FOR ALL

Workers need access to paid sick leave through enhanced employment standards legislation at provincial and federal levels. At a time when Ontario should have been moving forward, Doug Ford's government chose to cut the meagre provision of two paid sick leave days for employees. The following initiatives would recognize the need for special measures at the current time plus ongoing protection to address the normal illnesses employees may experience. The Province must:

- Provide at least 21 paid emergency leave days now - all workers need a minimum of 7 paid emergency leave days as a basic and permanent labour right, but during emergencies such as the current global pandemic COVID-19, workers need an additional 14 days of paid leave
- Permanently eliminate the sick note requirement for all workers [including migrant and undocumented workers) since it puts unnecessary strain on our health care system

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Significant changes have been proposed by the federal government to the EI system and supplementary supports for those who do not qualify. However, governments must undertake the following steps in order to maximize the impact of the changes:

- Waive the one-week waiting period for regular EI benefits
- Increase benefit levels from 55% to 60% of income
- Ensure migrant workers have access to all forms of benefits
- Make all benefits (EI Regular, EI Sick, Canada Emergency Response Benefit) retroactive to the beginning of the crisis in Canada
- Delivery must be nimble and accessible

- Open direct communications with employer groups and unions so they can operate with full and accurate information and facilitate information sharing with employees

PUBLIC SERVICES INCLUDING CHILD CARE FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

- Ensure that public services (including health care and child care) are properly funded, accessible, and affordable for all workers – particularly for frontline workers who cannot work remotely
- For parents who are reluctant to take their children to a childcare provider offering multifamily services (and childcare workers who are reluctant to risk multiple exposures), consider having customized child care
- Boost health care capacity – well-paid, trained staff must be increased in hospitals, long term care, and home care

ECONOMIC STABILIZERS

Consider the following types of initiatives to keep people working, stimulate the economy, and be prepared to serve the needs of a growing economy when the crisis subsides.

- Speed up public sector infrastructure to act as a fiscal stimulus, create jobs, fill backlogs, and improve public services using low-interest loans or government bonds:
 - TCHC building energy retrofitting and repairs
 - School buildings energy retrofits and repairs
 - Public transit systems capital expenditures and state of good repair
- Prioritize “green manufacturing” with the dual purpose of stimulating the economy and helping meet Transform TO goals and Canada’s Paris Agreement commitments
- Clearly communicate flexibility measures to assist non-profits that receive funding directly from government as they manage their transfer payment agreements and provincially funded program requirements
 - Social services that are required to temporarily discontinue services should continue to receive transfer payments and funding so they survive through the crisis
 - Local cultural organizations (which serve as pipelines to the larger entertainment industry) should continue to receive grants so they survive through the crisis
- Support development of local supply chains so that we are not as reliant on materials and parts from other countries

PROTECTING WORKERS FROM FINANCIAL RUIN

Government must take steps to protect people from precipitous changes such as bankruptcy or homelessness:

- Impose a moratorium on all credit card interest or a cap of 2% on interest rates

- The federal government should instruct utilities, banks, landlords, credit card companies and financial institutions to extend and relax mortgage, rent and bill payment requirements, loan servicing obligations, and other responsibilities facing consumers and households
- The provincial government should instruct all provincially-regulated institutions to extend and relax payment requirements on financial responsibilities facing consumers and households, including rent and mortgage payments
- The provincial government should provide a top-up to 80% of income for those receiving EI and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit
- Rents should be frozen

IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

Recognize that health and economic crises affect communities in different ways. Push governments to:

- Ensure all communities have access to current and appropriate information, establish dedicated COVID hotlines in different languages for all workers and employers
- Fund the Anti-Racism Directorate to challenge xenophobia and racism
- Implement an immediate moratorium on all immigration enforcement (detentions and deportations)
- Relax or remove work permit and permanent resident status rules and swiftly grant open permits to workers in transition

AVOID AUSTERITY AND SHOCK DOCTRINE POLITICS

The labour movement and our allies must be prepared for the politics of the [Shock Doctrine](#) and the fight against austerity measures. To a certain extent, growing inequality is fueling the health crisis: our lean healthcare system is the result of declining revenues brought about through massive tax cuts for corporations and wealthy individuals. At last year's Stewards Assembly, Linda McQuaig reminded us that tax levels of 20 years ago would provide \$56 billion more in annual revenue. Our society should be more equal – not less – coming out of this crisis. We will:

- Fight against tax cuts for the wealthy and demand tax fairness
- Demand fair taxation on digital commerce. Giant technology corporations – Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google – pay no or little tax in Canada. Fair taxes would bring in revenue, retain Canadian jobs, support quality journalism, and safeguard our culture
- Demand public equity stakes in corporations as a condition of government financial support, tie funding that supports industry and business to jobs and income, and ensure transparency
- Resist opening up of collective agreements when emergency is declared
- Be on guard for promotion of a permanent 'culture shift' towards online transactions – from grocery shopping to education

- Demand the federal government require banks to ease credit card interest rates. At the same time that banks are accessing billions in public funds, they are still charging interest rates of 21% and more to individuals
- Prepare for attacks on pensions if business and pension fund managers call for reductions in benefits or seek to switch to defined contribution or target pensions
- Press for further enhancements to the Canada Pension Plan.
- Make sure the full capacity of government and the central bank is used ambitiously and fairly
- Commit to investments and policies which would lead to a stable, sustainable economy based on climate justice and a Green New Deal for Canada