

ONE YEAR OF COVID

March 4, 2021



March 2021 marks the one-year anniversary of COVID19 lockdowns in Canada, when governments declared a sudden shutdown of schools, businesses and workplaces, and we all suddenly faced this reality of essential work, social distancing and virtual meetings. It is important to acknowledge and learn from the ways in which the labour movement has fought to keep workers and the general public safe during these last 12 months.

We need to recognize the great contributions made by all labour unions in taking stands against mass layoffs, and in asking employers for measures to keep workers and communities safe. Because without doing so, we would risk crediting all of this important work to the benevolence of governments – federally, provincially and municipally – without crediting all of the efforts and negotiations that unions are doing every day on behalf of their members and the communities in which they live.

By law, employers must take every reasonable precaution to protect workers from COVID-19. Worker representatives of joint health and safety committees have a legal right to participate in the development of COVID-19 precautions and their evaluation through workplace inspections.

The Workers Health & Safety Centre has been updating and expanding resources to ensure all workers have access to the information and training they need to exercise their rights and responsibilities.

For the past year, union members, leaders and staff in essential sectors have tirelessly challenged their employers and supervisors to provide personal protective equipment, demand improved ventilation systems at workplaces, and advocated for safety measures at every workplace – from healthcare facilities to warehouses and factories, from schools to public services to construction sites. This helped keep countless workers and members of the public safe. And when workers deemed work to be unsafe, their union representatives have protected their right to refuse work, making complaints with the Ministry of Labour on their behalf, and pushing for management training to adhere to new health and safety standards.

Beyond workplace inspections and evaluation of “safe” work, many unions are fighting with their employers to prevent layoffs and instead negotiated redeployment, recall and protection of seniority rights. And where there have been layoffs, these have been greatly minimized because the union is negotiating behind the scenes with the employer to save as many jobs as possible. In some cases, unions have been proposing creative ways of offering services to the public that strengthen the social safety net for everyone.

In addition to assisting thousands of members with medical or family status accommodation requests, many local unions are demanding their employers provide for paid quarantine days that are not from their sick bank, and paid sick leave for those experiencing COVID symptoms when sick bank days are exhausted or nonexistent. And labour continues that fight for those workers without a union – in demanding for paid sick days for all workers, regardless of their representation. Labour also continues to fight for income supports for all workers whose jobs were disrupted by COVID.

As we continue to face this new reality of living under this global pandemic, it is essential that unions are recognized for their daily negotiations in ensuring that workers are fairly treated, and that workplaces are safeguarded from the spread of COVID19. A recent look at history reveals that most Canadians today attribute paid maternity leave to the good-will of the federal government, instead of thanking the Canadian Union of Postal Workers for their long strike in 1981. The slogan that “Unions gave you the weekend” may seem dated, but it symbolizes labour’s impact on not just wages but also benefits that are crucial to working people from all walks of life.

And with this pandemic that has disrupted every aspect of our lives, it is essential that we have the collective strength to demand immediate solutions combined with the measure that will ensure a Just Recovery for All.

The Executive Board recommends that Labour Council:

- Extend thanks to all workers and their unions for their hard work and dedication during the pandemic and ask all levels of government to do the same;
- Consult with affiliates and delegates regarding interest and capacity to establish a permanent monument to essential workers;
- In collaboration with affiliates and allies, continue the fight for social solidarity in filling COVID gaps and a Just Recovery for All – creating a society that is more equal, not less, coming out of this crisis.