

## **Recap of key concerns from May 11th Drop-In Session: Health and Safety**

The “Principles” document is generating significant health and safety concerns. It does not follow the information provided by the provincial Science Table (COVID-19 Advisory for Ontario) which predicts a possible 4th COVID wave in the Fall. The document’s reference to 1m distancing as per the World Health Organization selectively omits the passage stating that “[t]he virus can also spread in poorly ventilated and/or crowded indoor settings, where people tend to spend longer periods of time. This is because aerosols remain suspended in the air or travel farther than 1 m (long-range).” The risk of exposure is increased in poorly ventilated classrooms and congregate areas. Many of our spaces are so poorly ventilated that they are simply unsafe to teach, learn or work in. Members asked us to ensure a full accounting as provided by the employer of how much and where changes in ventilation have been undertaken at York.

The cap of 50 students in classrooms was also criticized for not being based on current science. Faculty need to know the size of their classrooms in order to determine if it is safe or not to return to campus. Also, if there is a class of 50 and participants go into another class of 50, they are involved with contamination potentials involving 1000s of people. Colleagues pointed out that the senior administration is using cohorting language, but unless we block groups together as they are doing in the elementary schools, this is not cohorting.

Members pointed out that there is a lack of clarity in the “Principles” document regarding the timing and physical spacing of classrooms and the movement of people in congregate areas. Colleagues from the Libraries pointed out that if back-to-back classes or multiple classes are held the same day (either in-person or through a combination of in-person and remote/online) where will students congregate on campus between classes? Will they have to listen to zoom lectures or participate in zoom classes in the hallway and then jump into classroom for in class teaching? What about laptop access and internet/data access? Where do students go to plug in their devices after an in person class? Not all students have good internet plans. In normal times such students would go to the library - to study, to do course work, etc. -- so where are the common spaces they can use in the Fall? Given capacity caps and distancing requirements, students cannot wait outside a classroom or “mill about” while waiting for a class to start. Even outside the classroom, buildings will have a cap on capacity. And, even more challenging: what will happen in winter? Students cannot be expected to wait outside until it is time for their class to start. One faculty member noted, “It’s chaos waiting to happen.”

Similar questions were raised by faculty assigned back-to-back teaching in-person and remote course delivery. Will they be assured proper ventilation in their offices? If they have taken their computer home, will another computer be provided in their office?

Colleagues in libraries noted that they are already working double time to figure out curb side and special access to their holdings. They have concerns are about how the flow of students will be accommodated in the Fall. Even with the limited number of people currently allowed on campus, staff in the libraries have had to work very hard to ensure user quotas on each floor. The May 6th document is silent about the impact on colleagues working in libraries.

YUFA members also questioned what they should do if some students aren’t wearing masks or practicing distancing, especially if other students are concerned about this.

It was noted at YUFA’s Drop-In that it is highly unlikely that all faculty, staff, and students will have had their 2nd vaccination shot in time for the September start date. Younger faculty reported that they will not have their second vaccine dose by September. Given the poor roll-out

of vaccinations, neither high rates of vaccination nor two-doses of the vaccinations can be assured by September. Additionally, many of our students are international students living in countries that do not have equitable access to vaccines. Without requiring proof of vaccination, the University could become a driver in spreading COVID-19 across York and adjacent communities.

With the individual right to refuse work clause in our Collective Agreement, members have a right to refuse to come to campus in conditions that are documented as unsafe, ie. only if the province determines COVID a public health issue. As we saw this spring, Ford and his Medical Officer often ignore public health recommendations and the science table's advice. When a worker does refuse, the employer has the right to ask another worker to do that work. When an individual refuses to teach in person in order to meet the administrative quotas, the Chair or their designate can go to the next person. We need to be cognizant of the differential power status of colleagues, including CUPE faculty and teaching assistants who may be in less of a position to refuse work and end up being York's "essential front line" teaching staff.

Some faculty pointed out that the right to refuse "unsafe" working conditions is not always easy to invoke. While members have a right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions, our contract on its own does not offer sufficient guidance about the practicalities to members and stewards in the context of the current pandemic. On what basis is a safe workplace to be defined? As members argued, the right to refuse to work as embedded in labour law is exceptional and individual, and does not constitute a proactive, sustained and collective approach to the problem. We need to use our collective voice to identify the meaning of 'safe return' and the conditions under which this can happen.

All public health and infectious disease scientists stress that COVID will still be an issue next Fall, and the question is how much. Will there be a fourth wave? Will the virus morph and become vaccine-resistant? How long does this vaccine protection last? We don't know the answers to any of these questions. In essence, the whole world is currently engaged in one huge clinical trial about which the scientists still have many unanswered questions.

For more information on the right to refuse work click [here](#).