

What the Coronavirus (COVID-19) means for retail workers

ABOUT CANADA'S RETAIL SECTOR

Canada's retail sector is a major contributor to the overall economy. With more than 2.8 million workers, and nearly 150,000 stores, retail and wholesale trade is the single largest employment sector in Canada and a vital artery for the economy. Retail is the final link in the supply chain that connects individuals to the goods and services they need. Retailing also serves an important social function, with outlets (from supermarkets to shopping malls) serving as gathering places in communities.

HOW RETAIL WORKERS ARE VULNERABLE TO COVID-19

Large groups gathering in one space, often in close proximity, with few screening requirements, heightens the risk of transmission of COVID-19. This is why public health authorities are restricting public gatherings, be it at restaurants, bars or stores. So far, in Canada, many large retailers have announced shorter shopping hours, while others have announced total closures to help limit public interactions. As COVID-19 spreads, we can expect more store closure announcements. The trouble is that many retail workers are part-time, with insufficient hours to qualify them for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. Ensuring full income and benefit replacement during this crisis is a critical challenge.

WHAT THE UNION EXPECTS FROM RETAIL EMPLOYERS

Appropriate protective gear

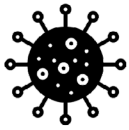
Proper safety training

Strict personal hygiene protocol

Social distancing measures

No doctor's notes to claim sick leave benefits

Full income assistance



For pharmacies, supermarkets and those workplaces (like distribution centres) along the food supply chain, the situation is different. In times of crisis, groceries and medicines are public goods (not just consumer goods). In areas where the coronavirus has hit hardest, such as Italy, supermarkets and drug stores have remained open, despite regional quarantine orders. We can expect the same in Canada. This requires extra precaution and care to protect front-line workers, to ensure their safety and well-being.

HOW LOCAL UNIONS IN THE RETAIL SECTOR CAN SUPPORT MEMBERS

Local unions must ensure that members have access to proper protective gear (e.g. safety gloves, masks) through their employer, especially for those in closest contact with customers. This includes proper training, on a regular basis, so that staff have the best available knowledge for personal safety in what is a rapidly changing and fluid situation.

Supermarket and pharmacy workers must understand they are at the frontlines in this health crisis and are playing a major public service role in this outbreak. Therefore, employers must communicate strict protocols to workers for personal hygiene and store hygiene as well as social distancing and safety measures with co-workers and customers.

Local unions must ensure employers and governments do not require retail workers who fall ill or experience flu-like symptoms to provide doctor's notes in order to claim sick leave benefits. Any employee who is responsible enough to call in sick, self-isolate or undergo quarantine should face no financial penalty.

Lastly, local unions can urge government officials to expand eligibility for Employment Insurance benefits (including sick benefits) as many retail workers will fail to secure enough work hours to qualify. Retail workers should receive full income assistance, including financial support from employers, during this time of crisis.

Unifor has launched a hub for member information about the pandemic at unifor.org/COVID19 and encourages members to check the site regularly for updates.

Subscribe to Unilink, the union's weekly national newsletter at unifor.org/subscribe and download the Unifor mobile app on your smartphone.