August 19, 2020

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON  K1A 0A6

RE: Drug Coverage Crisis

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

While we are pleased to see slow but steady signs of economic recovery occurring all across the country, unfortunately some sectors are still reeling from the COVID-19 crisis and various pandemic-related closures. Unifor has worked closely with elected officials and the civil service to provide feedback and policy guidance as the federal and provincial governments have taken on the historic challenge of guiding Canada through the crisis.

Working people across the country have benefitted from the numerous support programs developed and implemented by federal and provincial governments, and the income supports and wage subsidy programs have prevented many Canadians from slipping over the edge into poverty. However, as the COVID-19 crisis extends into its sixth month, we are seeing another potential disaster loom on the horizon.

As the days and weeks tick by, thousands of laid-off workers run the risk of losing eligibility for their prescription drug coverage. Unfortunately, many workers have already lost their coverage, placing them and their families in an extraordinarily precarious position in terms of both their finances and – more importantly – their health. This is an urgent issue, but one we saw coming even at the early stages of the pandemic, which is why we wrote to provincial Premiers on March 18th, and to you on April 29th, raising our concerns about the impending drug coverage crisis.

While Canadians pride ourselves on our collective commitment to each other through our universal public healthcare system, the fact is, too many Canadians already go without adequate medical coverage. Even before the pandemic, many Canadians lacked access to affordable prescription drugs, and since the economic collapse, thousands more laid-off workers – both union and non-union – will soon face the same gut-wrenching choice between life-saving drugs and rent or groceries.

This drug coverage crisis affects workers from coast to coast to coast, but, as some sectors continue to flounder, it is becoming clear that some Canadians need support more urgently than others. Those in especially hard-hit sectors like travel and tourism, including hospitality, gaming, and airline workers, are...
closest to the brink, and we all have an obligation to come together quickly to make sure no one in these sectors goes without critical, life-saving drugs.

Unfortunately, as is too often the case, crises like the pandemic disproportionately affect marginalized Canadians. For example, workers in the hospitality and gaming sector are more likely to be women, people of colour, immigrants, young people, and low-income earners. This means that measures designed to protect access to life-saving drugs for hospitality and gaming sector workers will provide support for those Canadians who need it most.

Unifor alone represents thousands of workers who have already lost, or are soon to lose, their drug coverage. We have managed to negotiate union contracts and other agreements with some of our employers that have temporarily extended drug coverage for our members, but time is running out even for these provisional measures. We believe it is time for governments to step in and provide a more comprehensive solution to the drug coverage crisis.

We believe there are a number of ways to provide urgent drug coverage for those who need it. For example, provinces like Ontario and Quebec already have their own limited prescription drug plans, and these programs could be revised and scaled up to include workers who risk losing their work-provided drug plans. Governments could also provide subsidies directly to employers or benefit trusts (including employer, union, and jointly controlled trusts), specifically earmarked to cover the costs of COVID-related extended health coverage.

We have a duty to stand up for our own members, the rest of the labour movement, and the two-thirds of Canadian workers who don’t yet belong to a union. But we also believe that the federal government must get ahead of this crisis, and work with provincial partners to develop and implement a solution to the drug coverage crisis that will act as a bridge for workers in especially hard-hit sectors like travel and tourism. Canadians should not be punished or disadvantaged for working in sectors that will, through no fault of their own, take longer to recover from the pandemic and related closures.

As always, we at Unifor are pleased to offer our knowledge and expertise, and we are happy to come together with government officials, corporate leadership, and health experts, to assist in the development and implementation of a solution to the looming drug coverage crisis.

Sincerely,

JERRY DIAS
NATIONAL PRESIDENT

cc: The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Finance
    The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health
    Provincial Premiers