

Ontario 2024  
Budget Consultation-  
Unifor Submission

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## Introduction | Focus on affordability

Unifor is Canada's largest union in the private sector representing 315,000 members, 160,000 of whom live and work in Ontario. Unifor members work in health care, long-term care, the auto sector, retail, public transit vehicle manufacturing, transportation, energy, gaming, hospitality and more.

This year, the Ontario government must focus on making life more affordable for working people. Workers across the province are struggling to support themselves and their families as the Canadian affordability crisis forces many to make challenging decisions between rent, food, gas, and other essentials. Additionally, the cost of rent and buying a home in this province has become inaccessible for many Ontarians. Our solution to combat rising costs is to secure strong collective agreements that lift workers' wages and improve their working conditions so they can continue working and living here in our province. We also fiercely advocate for the continued improvement of legal protections for workers, provincially and federally, to keep them healthy and safe at work.

Workers need the Ontario government to reduce costs on specific things like health care, child care, housing, electric vehicles, and public transit. The chronic underfunding of public services in our province has profoundly impacted both workers and the people they provide vital services to. A vivid example of this lays in the current state of our public hospitals and the staffing crisis driving workers into the private sector. A quality system of accessible and effective health care starts with adequate staffing levels—and these jobs must be of good quality with decent working conditions. Additionally, we must care better to those who are injured because of their work. By increasing incomes of people receiving WSIB helps workers facing job loss access training and find new jobs.

Unifor is pleased to provide input into Ontario's 2023 provincial budget and recommends that government immediately implement the items below.

## Recommendation 1 | Keep profit out of health care

**Ontario's health care system is in crisis.** The Auditor General's December 6, 2023 report confirmed that a significant number of long-term care homes are failing to meet the provincial target of four hours of direct care—meaning that patients are not getting adequate care and staff are being asked to do the impossible, which has significant negative impacts on their own personal well-being. Staffing shortages remain a persistent issue in both the long-term care and hospital sectors. With expanded privatization, and the current state of understaffed public hospitals and care homes, many are now choosing to leave the sector entirely, further compromising our system of publicly delivered health care. High vacancies and turnover, particularly in nursing and personal support positions, have led to an unsustainable reliance on agency staff in both settings. There is a direct correlation between the quality of jobs in care settings and the quality of care that patients receive.

## Unifor recommends that government:

1. **Stop privatizing our health care system** and refocus investments in our public hospitals. Reverse the decision to expand surgeries and diagnostic procedures performed in private, for-profit clinics and repatriate services that have already been privatized.
2. **Improve staffing levels** in a concerted, conscientious effort that addresses the recruitment and retention issues in health care. We recommend that the provincial government:
  - a. **Withdraw the appeal of Justice Markus Koehnen’s decision that declared Bill 124 void and of no effect;**
  - b. Create a plan with an accountable timeline to **reach wage parity** across hospitals, long-term care and home care;
  - c. Require a ratio of **at least 70% full-time staff** in hospitals and long-term care; and
  - d. **Review the use of agency staff** in long-term care and implement strategies to reduce usage and prevent price gouging.
3. **Phase out for-profit care homes and home care** and transition toward community-based, non-profit, publicly owned homes and services
4. **Strictly enforce the 4-hour standard of care** at each long-term care facility and ensure that commensurate funding is provided to uphold this standard.

## Recommendation 2 | Improve quality of work and service in child care

Ontario families and child care workers deserve child care that delivers accessible, high quality, and affordable services. Jobs in child care must include decent work and pay to ensure that all families have access to quality care. Child care centres must focus on the quality of care instead of producing profit. The wage floor introduced this fall is a welcome improvement but leaves too many people behind and does not consider other important components of a total compensation package. Supporting families means making child care affordable and accessible and creating decent work and good jobs for child care workers.

To address Ontario’s ambitious commitment to rapidly expand child care spaces across the province, child care centres must offer working conditions that attract and retain workers.

**Unifor recommends that government:**

1. Ensure that the expansion of publicly funded, \$10-a-day **child care spaces in not-for-profit centers**; and
2. Establish an **effective workforce strategy** for the child care sector that includes:
  - a. Salary scale starting at \$25 per hour for all child care workers and \$30 per hour for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs);
  - b. Extended health benefits and defined benefit pension plans;
  - c. Paid sick days;
  - d. Professional development time; and
  - e. Paid programming time.

### Recommendation 3 | Expand public transit; prioritize made-in-Canada products

Local transit systems are vulnerable to service reductions, cuts, and privatization when operations are dependent upon fare box revenues, as witnessed during and in the aftermath of COVID-19. Affordable, high quality public transit is an important avenue to reducing expenses for the public. Robust investment in public transit infrastructure is an effective way to support the development of good, green jobs, stimulate economic development and reduce expenses for Ontarians.

**Unifor recommends that government:**

1. Ensure adequate and permanent **provincial funding to maintain and expand high quality, affordable public transit** service and infrastructure; prohibit the use of public funds to reduce and eliminate municipal transit routes while replacing them with private micro-transit (e.g. Uber, Lyft) services;
2. Follow-through on the commitment to **provide the Provincial share of the \$1.675 billion needed to procure subway car replacements on the TTC's Line 2 subway line**, ensure the federal government does the same and require the RFP issued by the TTC to maximize Ontarian Content.
3. Continue to require transit agencies in receipt of Ontario government funding to purchase transit vehicles including buses, subway cars and LRTs to **maximize Canadian content in their RFP processes related to transit vehicles**.
4. **Recognize that Made-in-Canada public transit requires public investment.** High interest rates and the sheer size of investments needed to make the transition to green and electric transit infrastructure means public money. All recent Public-Private Partnerships in the public transit sector have been such a disaster for Ontarians that they should be avoided entirely going forward. Public investment

in infrastructure and public ownership of operations of transit is necessary to contain costs and sustain and build capacity on these projects here in Ontario, just as we have done with our electricity systems.

5. **Prioritize and expand the procurement of union-made, Made-in-Canada transit products** and electric charging innovations across our public transit agencies. Procurement is an area the government can focus to bring down costs and expand the benefits of needed investments to Ontario's economy. These solutions along with public capacity generation around operations will keep wealth and benefits of the electrification of our infrastructure in Ontario.

## Recommendation 4 | Support workers and families during the EV Transition

Public funding and other support have helped secure investments in Ontario's burgeoning EV supply chain, including lucrative assembly and parts programs as well as battery-related production and material processing.

Building the auto industry of the future, that drives good, union job creation, requires continued attention on a range of policy matters, including those outlined in Unifor's comprehensive and targeted auto development program, "[Navigating the Road Ahead](#)".

### **Unifor recommends that government:**

1. **Establish a consumer purchasing incentive of \$5,000 for Zero Emission Vehicles.** The re-introduction of these purchasing incentives must synchronize with the timing of new, Ontario-assembled electric and hybrid passenger vehicles coming to market.
2. **Provide targeted support to identified at-risk auto parts suppliers, enabling them to retool operations, and retrain workers** to participate in the growing ZEV supply chain;
3. **Continue investing in ZEV infrastructure**, including charging stations (that support the benchmark target of 1 charger for every 10 on-road electric vehicles) as well as the expansion of clean and renewable sources of energy to bolster the provincial power system; and
4. **Provide workers affected by factory retooling periods and the transition away from ICE vehicles with tailored job transition supports.** These supports must include enhanced income maintenance, labour market readiness and skills upgrading, expanded worker coverage through AAP agreements, relocation assistance, early retirement bridging, and other supports necessary to successful labour market adjustment.

## Recommendation 5 | Maintain and expand labour adjustment programs

Unifor has had substantial success assisting members to transition into new jobs after experiencing job loss and plant closures through labour adjustment advisory programs, supported by employers and the government, and delivered by Unifor. As transitions continue to move their way through Ontario's economy, including in the auto and energy sectors, government must continue to invest and expand these initiatives.

### **Unifor recommends that government:**

1. Ensure adequate and permanent provincial funding to maintain and expand adjustment advisory program (AAP) agreements across the province when workers are faced with a workplace closure;
2. Continue to set-up action centers and labour adjustment committees through AAP partnerships with unions to ensure a holistic, peer-to-peer focused, collaborative approach to labour adjustment; and
3. Utilize AAP agreements and partnerships to create a dedicated auto industry labour market adjustment program for autoworkers affected by job displacement resulting from a shift to ZEV or other significant technological changes.

## Recommendation 6 | Make housing affordable for everyone

Canadians are amid a housing crisis, both for renters and homeowners. For renters, the crisis is in the form of spiralling rental rates and a lack of availability and no caps on rent increases in newer units. For homeowners and those seeking to become homeowners, rising interest rates have pushed many to the brink of their debt carrying capacity, while prices remain stubbornly high, especially in comparison to stagnant household income.

**The provincial government has an important role to play in alleviating the crisis and making housing more affordable for Ontarians**, and we applaud their recent move to remove the full provincial portion of HST on qualifying new purpose-built rental housing.

### **Unifor recommends that government:**

1. Commit to making **massive, long-term, sustainable investments** (through direct funding, tax exemptions, or other programs) for **new construction and the rehabilitation of housing stock**, with an emphasis on non-profit, co-op, affordable, and social housing;
2. **Establish new rules for short-term rentals**, in order to address their negative impacts on rental housing availability and affordability. B.C. has recently passed a suite of new rules and regulations, including platform accountability, a

provincial registry, and the establishment of a province-wide regulatory floor for areas experiencing housing distress (based on a principal residence requirement). Ontario could look to those new rules as a model for its own legislation; and

3. Continue to support those facing urgent and critical housing need, by **expanding rental assistance and enhancing other income support programs like OW and ODSP**, while working to increase housing supply in the long term.

## Recommendation 7 | Enhance WSIB supports

The Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) plays an important role in ensuring workers who are injured on the job are supported during recovery and throughout their lives. The last decades have shown a trend towards less support for injured workers and returning more money back to employers that has been set aside for injured workers. This trend must be reversed and more supports added for people who put their lives and well-being on the line at work.

### **Unifor recommends that government:**

1. **Repeal the change to WSIB that allows the Board to return premiums to employers.** Government must undertake meaningful consultation with all stakeholders on the entire workers compensation system, including benefit coverage levels and how claims are processed. Recommendations for improving the system include:
  - a. Increase the loss of earnings benefit to 90% and restore the 5% reduction;
  - b. Restore the loss of retirement income benefit ratio to 105% contribution; and
  - c. Provide greater coverage for mental stress injuries and occupational diseases.
2. **Provide additional payments to families of workers who have suffered a workplace fatality;**
3. **Provide funding to reopen access to the office of the worker advisor to unionized workers** so that all injured workers can access support without discrimination; and
4. **Make retirement homes a Schedule 1 employer** for the purpose of WSIB so retirement home workers are covered in the event of injury.

## Conclusion | Ontario Government can make life more affordable

Government has an important role to play in making life more affordable for Ontarians. Massive investments in housing stock, keeping profit out of health care, improving quality and service in child care and improving WSIB supports are all areas where government can make a significant difference in the ability of Ontarians to afford to live and thrive in this province. Building more transit while prioritizing made in Ontario products is policy that packs a one-two punch: it makes life more affordable by increasing quality of low cost transit and creates hundreds of good jobs in Ontario for folks who build transit vehicles. The EV transition requires a one-two punch as well with a focus on labour adjustment programs for workers who are displaced and increasing both supply of and demand for electric vehicles.

This government continues to tell Ontarians it cares about them and is making good choices to improve life in the province. The government's actions, however, are proving otherwise. In 2024, government must carve a new path and take actions to improve affordability and service quality for all Ontarians.

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