A photograph of a woman smiling, wearing a radio headset, in what appears to be a radio studio. The image is overlaid with a red tint.

Restarting the Economy: What media workers need to know

June 11, 2020

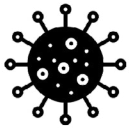
The media sector faced a number of significant challenges before the COVID-19 crisis struck, including the loss of advertising revenue to digital giants like Facebook and Google, cutbacks and closures of local and regional news outlets, the rise of “fake news” and resultant erosion of quality journalism, and massive loss of employment through layoffs, closures and restructuring. The global pandemic has shown us the critical role high-quality, locally-focused journalism plays in informing the public and holding those in power accountable. In fact, readership has skyrocketed since mid-March, and TV viewership has increased by nearly 50%.

After a great deal of public consultation and analysis, at the beginning of 2020, the federal government’s expert panel released its final findings regarding proposed revisions to legislation and regulations governing Canada’s media landscape. The Broadcasting and Telecommunications Legislative Review report (the BTLR report) contains dozens of recommendations regarding the funding, re-structuring, and governance of media in Canada. The COVID-19 crisis struck in the middle of this once-in-a-generation process, and it is critical that the federal government move forward in implementing the recommendations put forward in that report. At the same time, due to the effects of the pandemic and the further catastrophic decrease of advertising spending, it is vitally important for governments to step forward with urgent relief for the struggling media sector.

While we have seen some pandemic-related lay-offs in the broader media sector, within Unifor’s membership the lay-off rate has so far been relatively mild compared to other sectors. Many media sector workers have continued to work through the pandemic, although most have experienced changes in operations due to health and safety concerns.

What media workers should expect at work

For those who have continued to work through the crisis, there are critical health and safety challenges caused by the need for contact with the public while out in the field, and with co-workers in our workplaces. Special physical distancing measures are required, as well as screening and monitoring protocols to prevent transmissions at work. It will be more important than ever for employers, the union, rank-and-file members, and Joint Health & Safety Committees to work together to develop sound, risk-based health and safety programs for our members.



At the same time, it's clear that the one-two punch of the COVID-19 crisis on top of the pre-existing challenges in the sector have pushed some media companies to the brink. Unifor has been working with the federal government to make sure various emergency benefits and wage subsidy programs achieve the best possible results for workers in the media sector, given the particular challenges this sector faces.

What media workers should expect from their employers

Employers in the media sector have an obligation to ensure their workers are safe on the job. Unifor expects all employers to:

- Fully participate with their employees and unions, and their Joint Health & Safety Committees, to develop and implement Return to Work protocols and revised workplace health and safety plans,
- Provide adequate training, PPEs, and health and safety protocols to keep employees safe and protected, and maintain adequate staffing levels to ensure workers have the time to work safely,
- Provide extended benefits coverage (including health and pension benefits) for employees experiencing lay-offs,
- Participate in the federal government's Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) program, to bring workers back on the payroll, and help campaign for a CEWS program extension for employers that could face a longer ramp-up time for recovery,
- Help urge the federal government to enact the recommendations contained in the BTLR report, to provide the longer-term structural improvements that will help the media sector survive and thrive.

What media workers need from government

Governments at all levels can help the media sector by both addressing the short- and medium-term challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis, but also by addressing the deeper, more long-term issues the sector faced prior to the pandemic. That means things like:

- Providing additional and extended supports (like the CERB and CEWS programs) for workers in the media sector and others that face loss of employment,
- Move quickly to pass the recommendations in the BTLR report into legislation and regulation, which will ensure that the digital giants pay their fair share, establish a consistent and fair revenue stream for Canadian media outlets, and create revised media rules and regulations that more adequately reflect the modern media landscape.

Additional Resources

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.