

What the Coronavirus (COVID-19) means for the transit and passenger rail workers?

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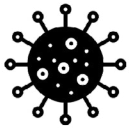
About the transit and passenger rail sector

Unifor represents nearly 9,700 road passenger transport workers in Canada, including urban transit workers, taxi drivers, shuttle bus and intercity bus workers. An additional 2,300 of our members work in passenger rail including workers from our national rail service VIA Rail and the Ontario Northland Railway. Carrying approximately 6 million passengers yearly, our transit systems and national passenger rail service plays a critical role in supporting our economy, connecting our communities and ensuring the public has a safe, affordable and accessible means of transportation.

How the transit and passenger rail sector is vulnerable to COVID-19

Our transit and passenger rail members work in close contact with the public and are on the frontlines of this pandemic, ensuring people get safely to where they need to be. However, due to this constant public exposure, road and rail passenger workers are at greater risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Workers and drivers are also at risk due to people who are knowingly or unknowingly sick, since transit passengers are not screened compared to those at some airport and rail terminals. Further, the lack of provincially-mandated paid sick days in many jurisdictions often leave workers with little choice but to take transit when sick, while those without personal vehicles have little to no alternative means of getting around.

In terms of economic impacts, we are already seeing the reduction and elimination of service routes at VIA due to growing calls to stay home and limit travel. The closure of borders and international travel bans will also significantly affect taxi and limo drivers who rely on a steady stream of riders from airport and rail terminals. We are also seeing more people avoid transit altogether as a greater number of workplaces and businesses temporarily shut down, leading to service reductions on urban transit lines and interprovincial travel. All this is resulting in job and wage reductions for workers that will only exacerbate as the crisis prolongs.



What Local Unions in the transit and passenger rail sector should consider

As a union, we must ensure that all precautions are being taken by employers and governments to maximize health and safety for our members while also protecting any lost wages for workers due to job disruptions.

- Workers and operators must have access to appropriate protective gear such as gloves and masks and increased access to hand sanitizing equipment and cleaning stations. Employers must ensure that all vehicles, buses and cars be rigorously cleaned and sanitized after each shift with special attention given to areas and surfaces more prone to worker and rider contact.
- We must ensure full wage protections for all transit workers in times of shut downs or industry-wide slowdowns.
- Ensure workers who call in sick, quarantined or in self-isolation, must receive full income assistance and eliminate the requirement to provide a doctor's note. Job-protected paid leave should also be provided if a worker is required to care for an ill or quarantined family member.
- All workers must have access to paid sick days and EI sickness benefits to eliminate the need for travelling to their workplaces.
- Taxicab and airport limousine drivers often pay substantial monthly operating costs such as insurance and stand rent. We are requesting that these additional costs be suspended to alleviate the financial burden on drivers.
- We must implement clear personal hygiene protocols including regular cleaning of uniforms, encouraging physical distancing of passengers and co-workers where possible and safety measures to deal with physically abusive and violent passengers.

What the union expects from our employers and government

- Access to appropriate protective gear and hand washing stations
- Rigorous cleaning and sanitizing of vehicles
- Strict personal hygiene and passenger distancing protocols
- No doctor's notes to claim sick leave benefits and access to paid sick days for all workers
- Full wage protections and relief from operating costs for drivers

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.

For more information, visit: www.unifor.org/covid19