

March 5, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL

The Honourable Filomena Tassi
Minister of Labour
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The Honourable Carla Qualtrough
Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion
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House of Commons
Ottawa, ON
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Dear Ministers,

Re: Emergency supports for workers in workplaces affected by COVID-19

As you are well aware, concerns over the COVID-19 virus are mounting within Canada and around the world. The number of reported cases of infection are on the rise in many countries, including more than 30 confirmed here in Canada. Alongside the spread of infection, and the obvious public health issues that arise, there is a demonstrable effect on the economy, creating uncertainty and hardship on Canadian workers. Just this week, the Bank of Canada justified lowering its key interest rate due in part to the “material negative economic shock” of COVID-19.

Unifor represents 315,000 workers, in every major industrial sector of the economy and in the public sector. Our local union leadership and staff are fielding questions from members regularly on the potential health risks of a COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the impact an economic slowdown will have, and what supports are available. In certain situations, job and income security provisions exist within collective agreements – providing a clear (if sometimes temporary) path to managing shift reductions, and sickness benefits. However, fewer protections exist in other sectors, especially where non-standard and precarious work (i.e. temporary, part-time, contract, independent contractors) predominate. This is especially true for non-unionized workers, with no recourse to collective agreement protections.

As the COVID-19 virus spreads, economic conditions will worsen. Similar to emergencies that Canada has witnessed in the past (including the SARS outbreak, 9/11, the global financial crisis), we must prepare for sector-wide disruptions. This includes protective health and awareness strategies for workers most vulnerable (health care workers, teachers and education support workers, transportation workers, hospitality and retail workers, etc.). It also includes mitigation efforts for workers faced with shift reductions as well as temporary and permanent layoffs. Global supply chains operate today in a hyper-efficient manner, with very little slack. Small supply disruptions can shut down assembly lines and idle factories more quickly than at any point in the past. All workers are susceptible to this potential slowdown.

It is heartening to see Prime Minister Trudeau has struck a special Federal Cabinet committee, chaired by Minister Freeland, to coordinate Canada's response to this pending crisis. This is an important step.

As the Ministers responsible for emergency worker support, job stabilization and income assistance measures, it is important that you bring forward a range of ideas to ensure Canadian workers (and employers) have the tools at their disposal to weather this storm, and mitigate as much economic harm as possible.

To that effect, we encourage your respective Ministries to act quickly, decisively and collaboratively with provinces on various supports for workers, including actions to:

- Waive the standard one-week waiting period for Employment Insurance sickness, compassionate care and family caregiver benefit claims, ensuring workers have immediate access to payments, and reduce the number of qualifying hours to 360 (from 600);
- Increase the duration of EI sick leave from 15 to 26 weeks;
- Waive the EI sickness benefit requirement for a medical certificate;
- Implement emergency special coverage unemployment insurance payments for vulnerable workers (including precarious workers, and independent contractors), who otherwise would not receive EI benefits;
- Introduce special "income relief" measures for full-time and part-time workers in the health care sector (as was done during the SARS outbreak), who are more susceptible to contracting COVID-19;
- Reduce the number of qualifying hours for regular Employment Insurance benefits to 360 (from what now falls between 420 and 700 hours), to ensure more workers – especially vulnerable workers in the hospitality, tourism and retail sectors – can access benefits in the event of job displacement (an assessment of this measure should follow, with consideration of making this change permanent);
- Ease federal Work-Sharing rules, to maximize eligibility, and enhance benefits to mitigate job losses especially within vulnerable sectors (like tourism);

We strongly encourage your Ministries to collaborate with provincial counterparts, and urge them to consider additional support measures – including legislated paid sick days and waiving requirements for employees to produce doctor’s notes (at the very least, considering other less onerous ways to substantiate absences due to illness).

These are practical and prudent measures that will help alleviate the burden on workers, as our country navigates this pending crisis.

We appreciate the work undertaken by the federal government so far, and would be glad to provide further information and support for these measures, as required.

Sincerely,



Jerry Dias
National President

cc. The Right Honourable Prime Minister Trudeau, P.C., M.P., The Honourable Minister Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P., The Honourable John Horgan, M.L.A., The Honourable Jason Kenney, M.L.A., The Honourable Scott Moe, M.L.A., The Honourable Brian Pallister, M.L.A., The Honourable Doug Ford, M.P.P., The Honourable Francois Legault, M.N.A., The Honourable Blaine Higgs, M.L.A., The Honourable Dennis King, M.L.A., The Honourable Stephen McNeil, M.L.A., The Honourable Dwight Ball, M.H.A., The Honourable Sandy Silver, M.L.A., The Honourable Caroline Cochrane, M.L.A., The Honourable Joe Savikataaq, M.L.A., Lana Payne, Angelo DiCaro, Scott Doherty.

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