

Restarting the Economy: What road passenger transport and urban transit workers need to know

June 5, 2020

Across the country, road passenger transport and urban transit services have taken a significant hit during the COVID-19 pandemic.

School closures have all but suspended school transportation services; domestic and international travel restrictions have decreased airport limousine services and intercity and provincial bus service; and wide-scale business closures and calls to stay home have resulted in significant drops in taxi and public transit ridership.

This has taken a toll on our over 12,500 members in the sector on two fronts – layoffs for those who have seen service cuts or elimination of routes and, for those still working, concerns regarding personal health and safety due to frequent exposure to the public.

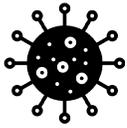
As provinces begin lifting restrictions and reopening businesses, we need to ensure transportation workers feel prepared and protected as ridership increases. For those workers still waiting on their return to work (e.g. school bus drivers), access to income supports is needed so they can continue to make ends meet.

What road passenger transport and urban transit workers can expect when returning to work

Any government economic recovery plan or strategy must include access to passenger transportation services.

Workers and community members need access to safe and reliable public transit in order to get to and from work and in order to access goods and services to help stimulate the economy. As many transit systems have remained operational during this pandemic (despite significant service reductions and layoffs), returning to full service should not be a lengthy process. The most pressing consideration will be how to keep workers and passengers safe from COVID19.

The union has already been working closely with employers on ensuring proper protocols to keep workers safe, such as access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPEs), instituting passenger limits on vehicles, rear boarding to maintain physical distancing and frequent cleaning and sanitation of vehicles,



especially high touch surface points. Similar steps have been taken in taxis, for example, through the installation of plastic shields to protect drivers, customers, and frequent cleaning of cars and payment machines.

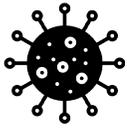
For other transportation workers, for example, school bus drivers or airport limousine workers, their return to work or seeing a return to full operations is contingent upon the opening of sectors they service – schools and air travel. In the meantime, governments and employers will need identify strategies on how to reduce virus transmission with groups where masks and physical distancing is more difficult, such as young children in school buses and people with disabilities using specialized transit vehicles.

What road passenger transport and urban transit workers should expect from their employers

The focus of all employers in this sector must be to communicate openly, share information freely, listen and act on received worker input. Workers should receive training and instruction concerning virus transmission mitigation from their employer prior to heading back to work. Instructions should cover everything from processes entering the workplace, procedures to detect the virus and expectations when driving.

Transportation workers face a greater risk of infection due to frequent exposure to riders, while riders are also at risk of spreading the virus among themselves. Unlike other forms of transportation, like air travel, it is not feasible to test each transit passenger for symptoms of illness before boarding. As such, it is imperative that employers take all necessary steps to protect workers and riders. Unifor expects that employers:

- Develop, communicate, train, monitor and evaluate return to work and health and safety procedures in collaboration with unions and workers.
- Facilitate physical distancing on board vehicles by placing passenger limits on transit vehicles and maintaining rear boarding.
- Provide transit workers with the appropriate personal protective equipment, increased access to hand sanitizing equipment, cleaning stations, and installing plastic shields and enclosure systems where possible.
- Ensuring all transportation vehicles are thoroughly and frequently cleaned and sanitized and ensure cleaning products used are not harmful for workers and passengers.
- Encourage riders to begin wearing facemasks while onboard to protect workers and other passengers.
- Develop protocols and safety measures to deal with abusive riders in order to limit any physical interactions.



What road passenger transport and urban transit workers need from Government

All levels of government have a role to play in ensuring Canadians have access to strong and accessible transportation networks while ensuring workers are not left behind during an economic crisis. Unifor recommends:

- Ensuring transportation workers have access to income supports through the Employment Insurance (EI) program. Many school bus drivers work part-time and do not accumulate enough hours to meet current EI eligibility criteria. All part-time and precarious transportation workers need full access to EI benefits.
- Ensure that transit agencies and operators are not excluded from special government programs (e.g. Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy program) that are meant to financially assist and support businesses and organizations during difficult times.
- Provide financial support to ensure greater inter-urban and inter-provincial bus service so that remote communities are not completely cut off.
- Providing permanent and sustainable federal and provincial funding to support operational costs for local public transit systems.

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.