

Restarting the Economy: What retail workers need to know

June 5, 2020

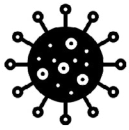
In certain subsectors, such as food stores and pharmacies deemed essential, work never stopped. That is thanks to workers, many earning substandard wages, who bravely put personal health at risk to ensure uninterrupted access to essential goods. As a result, Canadian supermarket sales surged in March by more than 40% over the previous year. Retail pharmacies experienced notable revenue bumps too.

However, these figures mask the carnage experienced by non-essential retailers, including those located in dense shopping plazas, required to close their doors and temporarily lay off staff. This did not bode well for a retail sector bracing for a significant business slowdown already. Forecasters, pre-crisis, predicted decade-low sales for Canadian retailers in 2020. Once COVID-19 hit, and public safety measures forced store closures, revenues fell quickly and precipitously. Between February and March, Canadian furniture stores saw revenue losses of 25%. Gas stations, a 20% drop. Clothing stores saw sales cut in half. Despite some reprieve through online ordering and curbside pickup options, April sales figures project to be far worse. As the COVID-19 crisis prompts shoppers to test drive e-commerce options for the first time (Shopify cites a 78% increase in first time e-shoppers in April), bricks-and-mortar retailers will face even greater financial pressure to restructure their businesses in the months ahead.

What Retail workers can expect when returning to work

For non-essential retailers outside of British Columbia and Nova Scotia (in these provinces retail was never ordered to close) workplace restarts are happening gradually. Most provinces allow curbside pickup of online orders, while others allow only external-facing store access with limits on the number of shoppers inside. In Ontario, for instance, large shopping plazas remain closed with no timeline to reopen. Many stores that are operating have modified (i.e. shortened) business hours.

However retailers choose to restart their operations during this pandemic, all must consider personal protection and safety for workers as a top priority. As workers return to work, they can expect to undertake non-invasive temperature checks as well as screening tests, to determine risk of infection. Workplace guidelines and protocols must be in place and thoroughly communicated to staff. Modified workstations, particularly at checkouts and customer service desks, likely include Plexiglas barriers to limit contact and



mitigate virus transmission. Sales floors will contain markers and directional guides to help customers navigate the store safely and maintain appropriate physical distancing.

Most store operations and work tasks will remain the same for workers (e.g. sales, shelf stocking, and inventory management) although employers may ask staff to take on additional roles, including managing customer traffic flows, sanitizing shopping carts, baskets, tabletops and other high-touch areas. Unifor is in regular dialogue with employers to ensure workers feel safe in performing their assigned work tasks, and have the proper training and equipment to fulfil those duties. The union is also paying close attention to the interaction between customers and staff, ensuring store managers or owners (not staff) are responsible for enforcing safety rules with the public.

What Retail workers should expect from their Employers

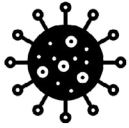
Retail workers are on the frontlines of this crisis. Supermarkets, pharmacies, home hardware stores and various distribution centres have kept up work, despite public health lockdowns and workplace closures. As a result, retailers are first-movers on piloting workplace safety measures, making operational adjustments, and developing useful guidelines and protocols. Still, workers need assurances that their safety is top-of-mind when employers call them back to work. It is Unifor's view that employers must:

- Clearly communicate all workplace safety protocols with employees, and provide mandatory training on procedures;
- Involve local union representatives directly in the development and monitoring of safety guidelines;
- Provide support for vulnerable employees to remain at home or return to work while the virus is a serious threat. No reprisal for staying at home and reasonable accommodations for at risk workers who come to work and need less contact;
- Undertake regular consultation with the joint workplace health and safety committee regarding health and safety issues, as needed;
- Provide all workers with safety equipment, upon request. Workers must face no reprisal for requesting appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE);
- Accommodate staff schedules to account for family responsibilities, including medical care, child care and transportation needs. Workers must be able to request accommodations without fear of reprisal;
- Maintain a zero tolerance policy for abuse of retail workers;
- Ensure that workers currently receiving a pay premium (e.g. \$2.00) maintain that pay premium, permanently for the duration of their tenure with the employer.

What Retail workers need from Government

Governments have a critical role to play to ensure retail workers are safe, that operating procedures follow the best available public health advice and that return to work protocols are inclusive, fair and available to all workers. It is Unifor's view that government's must:

- Ensure that workers have access to a rapid response complaint system for unsafe employer practices;



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- Increase accessibility to public transit and child care without compromising health and safety;
- Enforce public health directives and health and safety guidelines proactively through inspections, and penalize employers who violate these directives.

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.