



Unifor's demands to protect workers as we restart the economy

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As provincial governments across Canada prepare tentative steps to reopen their economies, it is vital that comprehensive measures are put in place to ensure workers' well-being and that no workplace is allowed to resume operations unless a clear return-to-work protocol is in place, which is rigorously enforced. The ramifications of exposing workers to conditions that are unsafe and workplaces that are ill-prepared to deal with the spread of COVID-19 means the real potential for a second round of lockdowns. We cannot risk such a scenario while the Canadian economy is struggling to recover.

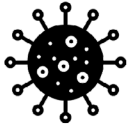
In order to avoid a second wave of the pandemic, strict pre-conditions must be met before provinces reopen their economies. While we recognize that each workplace will have its own specific challenges in mitigating the risk of COVID-19, provincial governments must ensure that the highest workplace health and safety standards are being met across the board and that return-to-work protocols are being tailored to specific workplace needs. The right of workers to provide input into such protocols must be upheld and governments must commit to enforcing the rules rather than allow employers to voluntarily self-regulate. Unifor recommends that the following courses of action be taken:

Ensure that all workers are aware of their legal rights, including the right to refuse, the right to know, and the right to participate.

Workers must be made aware of the legal rights not only to refuse work, but to know about the hazards that they might be exposed to while working. Workers must also actively participate in the mitigation of these hazards through their health and safety committee or as a health and safety representative, without fear of reprisal. Not only should workers be made aware of these rights, but their rights must be actively upheld by effectively responding to workers' concerns, investigating and sanctioning employers where health and safety directives have been violated, and recognizing legitimate work refusals.

Ensure that all employers implement a return-to-work protocol that meets high standards and is tailored to the specific workplace through worker input.

Employers must develop comprehensive return-to-work protocols that mitigate COVID-19 hazards through specific practices and procedures, whether these involve workplace screening, social-distancing, PPE use, sanitization, self-isolation or quarantine, etc. Governments should develop templates for such protocols, in order to ensure that high standards and clear guidelines for health and safety are met. However, it is also important to recognize that no two



workplaces are the same and what constitutes an effective protocol will vary greatly from one setting to another. As a result, employers should be required to tailor their protocols to the specific needs of the workplace with input from workers through workplace health and safety committees. Developing a robust protocol will require commitment and creativity on the part of employers. Governments must enforce that commitment and take the lead in positioning workers and their unions as indispensable strategic partners in the effort to maintain workplace health and safety.

Ensure that employers provide COVID-19 related training, information and oversight.

Employers must be responsible for training workers and providing accessible information on COVID-19 related hazards, hygienic practices, sanitization, proper PPE use, etc. Governments should make it mandatory to appoint a health and safety supervisor tasked with ensuring that return-to-work protocols and public health directives/guidelines are being followed.

Where necessary, ensure that all workers have access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

No worker who is at risk of COVID-19 exposure on the job should be forced to return to work without access to free and effective PPE. Provincial governments must guarantee that workplaces will not reopen until adequate PPE is made available to workers. The challenges of procuring a sufficient supply of PPE will only increase as facilities that have been re-tooled to manufacture PPE switch back to their regular production lines. Governments must have a plan in place to address the current pressures on PPE inventories.

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

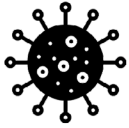
Workers must be able to report unsafe working conditions or possible COVID-19 infections to a responsive provincial body that has the authority to immediately suspend workplace operations and investigate the matter. There have been a number of instances across the country of workers and their unions demanding that operations be suspended due to safety concerns or possible COVID-19 infections, and being subsequently ignored as outbreaks spiralled out of control. With a responsive system in place that takes such concerns seriously, workers and unions can function as a critical part of an early warning system to prevent outbreaks before they happen.

Enforce public health directives and health and safety guidelines proactively through inspections.

While maintaining a responsive complaint system is critical, governments must take proactive steps to inspect workplaces and ensure compliance with COVID-19 public health directives and health and safety guidelines. Thus far, governments have shown ample capacity to aggressively enforce social distancing guidelines in public spaces. Such proactive enforcement is even more important in workplaces, which have been one of the primary sites for COVID-19 outbreaks and community transmission across the country.

Penalize employers who violate health and safety guidelines and public health directives.

Employers who violate public health directives and guidance must be subject to significant penalties and prosecution. Without legal consequences for violating COVID-19 directives, it is inevitable that employers who are asked to self-regulate will begin to circumvent health and safety guidelines to pursue their own interests.



Ensure that returning workers have adequate access to COVID-19 testing.

Proactive workplace testing must become a central component in the fight to contain COVID-19. Testing should not simply be reserved for workers showing symptoms, but for anyone who has been exposed to a COVID-positive individual.

Contact-trace workers who have been infected with COVID-19 and immediately implement quarantine measures without penalizing affected workers.

Jurisdictions where reopening has been successful have relied on both mass testing and rigorous contact-tracing. Public health authorities will need to receive additional funding to develop and implement effective systems to contact-trace COVID-positive workers and quarantine those who have been exposed. Workers who are placed in quarantine must be able to access a minimum of 14-days of paid sick leave.

Increase accessibility to public transit and childcare without compromising health and safety.

In order to successfully return to work, many workers will need to access public transit – which has been cut back in many jurisdictions – and access safe and affordable childcare for their children whose schools continue to be shuttered in many provinces. Workers accessing public transit and childcare in larger numbers will also introduce challenges for frontline workers who will require additional logistical support to practice social distancing and safe hygiene. Governments must ensure that there is adequate funding to ensure sufficient transit and childcare capacity while maintaining proper staffing and sanitization.

If you are concerned about inadequate return-to-work protocols, employers failing to uphold COVID-19 guidelines or employee rights, or any other health and safety concerns, we want to hear from you. Contact your local, your National Service Representative, or the Unifor Health, Safety and Environment department at healthandsafety@unifor.org.