

A Community Letter to the Cabinet Committee on COVID-19:

- Hon. Chrystia Freeland, Deputy Prime Minister, and Committee Chair
- Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos, President of the Treasury Board, and Committee Vice-chair
- Hon. Navdeep Bains, Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry
- Hon. Bill Morneau, Minister of Finance
- Hon. Melanie Joly, Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages
- Hon. Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion
- Hon. Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health
- Hon. Bill Blair, Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness
- Hon. Kirsty Duncan, Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons
- Copy: The Right Hon. Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister

March 5, 2020

Greetings:

Our organizations, including the Good Jobs for All Coalition which represents more than 30 community, labour and environmental groups in the Greater Toronto Area, welcome the government's decision to establish a Cabinet Committee to oversee the country's response to the outbreak of COVID-19.

First and foremost, we want to emphasize that this is **not just a matter of preparedness, but of responsiveness to already existing impacts on working people** and the labour market more generally.

In the absence of a clear statement of federal initiatives, there is a great deal of confusion and misinformation. This is adding to the tremendous stress for workers and the uncertainty about their rights.

Two parallel developments have been playing out since January. Some workers have already had to enter quarantine. And some workers are employed in sectors where hours are already being cut. To date this has been observed mainly in the Chinese and Iranian communities as customers stay away from stores and restaurants due to fears of COVID 19.

Some measures need to be undertaken by provincial and territorial governments. They include recognition of workers' entitlement to legally protected leave from work due to quarantine or sickness, including paid days of leave. Quebec has the current high water mark with up to 26 weeks of leave including 2 days of paid leave.

We will focus here on federal measures.

As was done during the 2003 SARS outbreak, adjustments to the Employment Insurance program must be made **immediately**:

1. **Waive the one week waiting period** during which EI benefits are not normally payable, on a retroactive basis. Benefits should be payable from the first day in quarantine. We need to encourage compliance with quarantine recommendations for the sake of the individual, their co-workers and the public.

2. **Waive the requirement for a medical certificate.** A simple signed declaration should suffice. We don't need those advised to quarantine visiting doctors or clinics.
3. **Establish a special hotline** to give consistent and accurate information and provide the assistance in different languages including Mandarin, Cantonese and Farsi.
4. **Expedite EI Work Sharing applications** and institute flexibilities so that workplaces can reasonably consider reduced hours occasioned by COVID-19. Given the many smaller enterprises in the restaurant and retail sector, we propose Service Canada administer pilot projects that group employers by sector so that individual employers in a community are not burdened with the application process. This needs to happen quickly as some workers are already losing significant hours and income.

Critically, given the growth of precarious employment since 2003, we also need:

5. **Relief from harsh EI qualifying rules** of 600 hours for sick benefits, and up to 700 hours for regular benefits when workers are on reduced schedules due to COVID-19.
6. **A Special Emergency Fund to provide a living allowance for workers who do not qualify for EI.** Funds were provided in a very limited way in 2003, some directly for health care workers including self-employed, and some indirectly in the hospitality and tourism sector. But the job market has changed considerably since then. In any given month, only 40% of the officially unemployed are receiving EI benefits. The fund could be administered by EI but paid from general revenues.

We believe these are the bare minimum of measures that should be undertaken **immediately** in the face of COVID-19 impacts, including those already felt by workers.

We also hope to see Budget 2020 measures that initiate **a comprehensive review that improves access to EI and benefit levels** for the longer term. A well-functioning Employment Insurance system is clearly in the broader public interest. It is our most effective automatic economic stabilizer in the wake of both epidemics and recessions.

Sincerely,

*Tam Goossen and Carolyn Egan, Co-chairs: **Good Jobs for All Coalition***

*Laurell Ritchie and Winnie Ng, Co-chairs: **E.I. Working Group***

*Deena Ladd, Co-ordinator: **Workers' Action Centre***

*Carolina Jimenez, Co-ordinator: **Decent Work and Health Network***

*Justin Kong, Executive Director: **Chinese Canadian National Council (Toronto)***

*Pam Frache, Co-ordinator: **Fight for \$15 and Fairness***

*Mary Gellatly: **Parkdale Community Legal Services***

*Angela Robertson, Executive Director: **Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre***