

PATTY COATES
President

AHMAD GAIED
Secretary-Treasurer

JANICE FOLK-DAWSON
Executive Vice-President



**ONTARIO
FEDERATION OF
LABOUR**

April 14, 2021

SENT VIA EMAIL

Hon. Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Hon. Christine Elliott
Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
5th Floor, 777 Bay St.
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Hon. Monte McNaughton
Minister of Labour
Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills
Development
14th Floor, 400 University Ave.
Toronto, ON M7A 1T7

Dear Hon. Doug Ford, Hon. Christine Elliott, and Hon. Monte McNaughton,

Open Letter – A Call to Protect Ontario Workers from COVID-19

We are writing on behalf of organizations and Ontario unions representing over one million workers. This includes hundreds of thousands of workers who are at great risk of COVID-19 exposure. They include those in healthcare, education, first response, correctional institutions, group homes and homeless shelters, transportation, construction, manufacturing, and food processing.

We are calling on you to strengthen protections for all workers, at this vital time when we know that those who must go to work outside their homes every day are getting sick in greater numbers. Better protection for workers also means less transmission to their families and communities.

Our members have endured severe challenges and dangerous working conditions during this pandemic. Many got sick, thanks to inadequate prevention measures. Unfortunately, some died, while others have taken the infection back home to their families. Official figures indicate at least 20,000 Ontario health care workers have been infected so far. They also say the impacts have been very inequitable; in particular, women, racialized people, the disabled, and precariously employed individuals have borne the brunt. That is but one reason why paid sick days are so important.

We are very pleased to see that vaccinations are finally rolling out. They will make a tremendous difference, over time. On the other hand, the harsh reality is that the COVID-19 third wave is affecting more younger people, more seriously, with increased workplace connections to transmission. Without improved and maintained protections, the human and economic impact will be devastating. Prioritize frontline and essentials workers for vaccination.

As you know, experts around the world – including within Canada – have called for higher levels of worker protection because of aerosol transmission of the virus. This includes improved ventilation, air purification, and a higher level of PPE for those at the frontlines. These proposals and the supporting science are detailed in the letters released on [January 4](#) and its follow-up on [February 19](#). They echo the [voices](#) of thousands around the world from multiple disciplines, who all want an early end to this pandemic.

The proposals in the letters are practical and implementable. We call on you to take urgent action to implement these recommendations:

- Immediately update COVID-19 guidance to incorporate the important role of aerosol transmission of COVID-19 and the consequences for protecting workers.
- Promote understanding of:
 - o Aerosol and airborne transmission.
 - o The related effective preventive measures (e.g., improving ventilation, changing air filters, opening windows, wearing barrier face coverings or respirators).
 - o The need to avoid the “3 C’s” (crowded places, close-contact settings, and confined and enclosed spaces), especially in workplaces (e.g., fewer students in classrooms).
- Improve ventilation by:
 - o Mandating and funding ventilation assessments and upgrades for workplaces and job sites, including essential public institutions such as schools and long-term care homes.
 - o When ventilation is not adequate, mandate and fund appropriately sized portable air filtration (HEPA) units, installed under appropriate professional guidance, as options to filter bioaerosols indoors.
 - o Engaging engineers and other ventilation specialists to develop clear indoor ventilation standards that account for aerosol virus transmission and integrate them in operating guidelines for workplaces with a higher risk of aerosol transmission.
- Minimize harm by expanding access to vaccines:
 - o Design a comprehensive, multilingual public education and outreach strategy including appropriate equity training to healthcare workers and providers.
 - o Ensure that all workers have free access to vaccines, regardless of immigration status, and in ways that do not cause fear of reprisals (e.g., for migrant farmworkers).
 - o Require employers to give workers paid time off to get vaccinated.
- To further protect workers and others:
 - o Enforce the legal requirement that employers provide necessary protective equipment, rather than relying on workers to do individual point of care risk assessments.
 - o Ensure that no high-risk healthcare worker (HCW) or other essential worker is denied access to a fit-tested respirator (N95, elastomeric, or equivalent).
 - o In healthcare, ensure that situations requiring a respirator include all aerosol generating behaviours (i.e., shouting, singing, coughing, sneezing, speaking, and heavy and regular breathing), and account for proximity to other people, time spent with patients and others, building air quality, and patient compliance with masking for source control.
 - o For other essential workers, require respirators in situations involving crowding, close contact, all aerosol generating behaviours, and poor building air quality.
 - o Through the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD), ensure that the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) is followed and enforced (e.g., fully including joint health and safety committees in information-sharing and other activities, inspectors enforce the law).

- Reinforce that section 25(2)(h) of OHS Act requires **all employers** to “take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker”.
- To further protect Ontario’s students and education workers, the Ministry of Education should:
 - Institute smaller cohorts that include the workers in the classroom.
 - Provide enhanced PPE for education workers, teachers, education assistants, designated early childhood educators, and others who routinely work in close contact with special needs students.
 - Improve air quality, especially in schools with outdated HVAC systems or with windows that don’t open, by putting HEPA air purifiers in every occupied room.
 - Mandate active and enhanced screening of everyone entering schools.
 - Dismiss classes/cohorts when at least one case of COVID is identified, including close contacts of the identified case(s), where “close” does not ignore staff wearing barrier face coverings or surgical masks.

Construction workers are highly mobile, often working in remote and difficult conditions. The pandemic has exposed serious deficiencies in basic hygiene on those sites. Workers have been expected to accept unsanitary toilets, clean-up stations without water, and being crammed into elevators. They need better protection now, and in the future. So do others working outdoors and/or in remote settings (e.g., migrant agricultural workers).

Therefore, we also recommend the MLTSD:

- Increase workplace inspections to ensure compliance and prevent COVID-19 outbreaks due to unsanitary conditions.
- Enforce section 29 of O. Reg. 213/91 (constructors must provide, service, and clean adequate toilets and clean-up facilities *with running water* at every project).
- Take similar approaches in other settings with similar hazards and conditions (e.g., agricultural work, public transit operators).

Developing and implementing effective guidance and solutions for all sectors, will require the full range of expertise (e.g., occupational hygienists, ventilation engineers, aerosol scientists, physicians). It will require communications specialists to help prepare and deliver clear messages. And it will require the voices of workers and their unions.

Despite all the difficulties we have faced in the pandemic, we and our members have helped to keep our economy going. Rather than simply asking people to work without effective prevention, we need you to take concrete action to protect all Ontario workers – and therefore, also their families and communities – from this virus. We need you to act on all these recommendations, quickly.

If that happens, workers and their families will know that you have their backs as they continue to step up and do their essential work. They will also want to know that once this pandemic is over, your government will ensure that construction and other employers work with their unions to address the prevention gaps exposed in the pandemic (e.g., construction site hygiene) more comprehensively. We are ready to work with you and our employers to make these recommendations and other measures a reality. For that to happen, we need you to open the door.

Therefore, we request a quick response, followed by effective swift action.

Sincerely,



PATTY COATES

President

PC/RH/sy/jc/Cope343

Signed on behalf of the following organizations that endorse this call, and the recommendations outlined herein.

Alan Willaert, Canadian Federation of Musicians (CFM)
Mark Evard, Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW-Central Region)
Don Foreman, Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW-National)
Fred Hahn, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE Ontario)
Raj Singh, Carleton University Academic Staff Association (CUASA)
Tiffany Balducci, Durham Region Labour Council
Sam Hammond, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
Mark Ellerker, Hamilton-Brantford Ontario Building and Construction Trades Council (HBBT Council)
Brian Ross, Insulators Local 95
Liz Stuart, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)
Janet Paterson, Ontario Network of Injured Worker Groups (ONIWG)
Vicki McKenna, Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA)
Harvey Bischof, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO Provincial)
Craig Reynolds, Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC-Ontario)
Alex Silas, Public Service Alliance of Canada – National Capital Region (PSAC-NCR)
Sharleen Stewart, Service Employees International Union (SEIU Healthcare)
Scott Travers, Society of United Professionals, IFPTE Local 160
Ray Dillard, Toronto Musicians' Association, Local 149 (TMA)
John Nock, UFCW Canada, Local 12R24
Geoff Roman, United Association (UA)
Marty Warren, United Steelworkers (USW District 6)
Barry Fowlie, Workers United Canada Council (WUCC)
Linda Vannucci, Workers' Health and Safety Legal Clinic (WHSCLC)