



August 2021

Which side are we on? OFL position on a comprehensive immunization strategy provincially and across the country

The following statement was developed in conversation with the Ontario Federation of Labour's Section 21 Healthcare Committee, Expanded Section 21 Labour Caucus Committee, and in consultation with OFL legal counsel, in response to provincial and federal mandatory vaccination policies. We consulted with workers and their representatives, both provincially and federally to develop what we believe is a prudent pathway to an immunized workforce and population.

The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) supports a **comprehensive immunization strategy** in Ontario, and across Canada, aimed to reduce and ideally eliminate the spread of COVID-19.

Public health and government must provide a science-based policy framework on vaccinations and testing, that consider key questions below. And employers must develop specific workplace policies jointly and in consultation with joint committees and unions.

The first part of a comprehensive immunization strategy is ensuring essential sectors such as healthcare and education have access to vaccines. A vaccination is the term used for the act of getting a vaccine – immunization is the process of building up immunity to the virus after receiving a vaccine. If workers cannot get vaccinated for Code-protected reasons (e.g., medical or religious), rapid tests must be both available and conducted regularly. If workers choose not to be vaccinated, regular testing must be mandatory, and employers must ensure the full range of precautions are provided (see [OFL toolkit](#) and measures listed below).

The OFL is on the side of science and worker protections, and all Ontario workers have a right to a healthy and safe workplace through access to vaccines, rapid testing, and other key precautionary measures.

The issue of vaccinations is far more nuanced than current politics and media suggest. We would like to ask the federal and provincial government to answer some key considerations about vaccine policies:

- Are there enough vaccines and rapid tests province and nation-wide to support a comprehensive immunization strategy, such as in rural and remote areas?

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- What is the government doing to educate Ontarians about the safety and effectiveness of vaccines?
- What policies will the government put in place to ensure employers maintain the confidentiality of vaccination information, pre and during employment? How long will it keep these records and when and how will they be destroyed?
- Will a vaccine be a condition of employment? If so, will employers be providing the vaccine?
- Will the employer provide accommodations, such as working from home, if workers cannot get vaccinated? How far will the accommodations go (recognizing accommodations are on a case-by-case basis)?
- How long will vaccination policies be in play for?
- How will the government respond to policies of unpaid leave for those who choose not to or cannot receive a vaccination?
- How will the government distinguish policies for those who *choose* not to get vaccinated from those who *cannot* get vaccinated?
- How will the government handle or implement the possibility of a third vaccine for vulnerable workers?
- How will the government avoid disadvantaging equity-seeking communities with vaccination policies?
- What research has the government done on the financial impact of mandatory vaccinations on historically disadvantaged groups with vaccine hesitancy, and on people of different genders, age, race, ethnicity, class, and ability?

As the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) states in [their position on mandatory vaccinations](#), the OFL rejects the threat of discipline or termination as a sound approach to increasing vaccination rates.

Vaccines are the most effective means of quashing COVID-19 and its variants. But other tools can complement vaccines. Even if a vaccination policy is introduced into workplaces across Canada, workers must be provided the highest degree of protection – including against airborne transmission of COVID-19 which has been skirted by public health and government for far too long. As the OFL demands in its “Follow the Science, Enforce the Law, Protect Workers” [toolkit](#), the government, public health, and employers must ensure:

- Enhanced and sufficient ventilation, including government-mandated and funded assessments and upgrades for all essential public institutions
- Strong Ministry enforcement of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*
- Hazard assessments that consider all forms of transmission and variants
- Adequate and highest-level Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including direct, appropriate respiratory protection for all workers

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- A review of transmission infection and control measures, before and after outbreaks
- Proper, immediate exposure investigations that include contact tracing
- Genuine consultation with joint committees and unions
- Fair and swift compensation, including paid time to receive vaccinations and to recover from any side effects, and paid sick leave when symptomatic or when isolating.

We say this knowing that the Ford Government has done as good as nothing before September to protect education workers and students from the impending fourth wave. One damning example is [failing to provide ventilation upgrades for many major schools](#). First, the government failed seniors, Indigenous, and racialized workers and communities, migrant and precarious workers, and healthcare and education workers – and if the government does not act now, they will fail our children, too.

The OFL does not choose to be cornered by a political wedge issue. The application of vaccination policies – mandatory or not – must be applied thoughtfully. Without the leadership of public health and provincial government, employers are applying vaccination policies unevenly. We demand both bodies take leadership and answer these crucial questions before paying political lip service to a strategy that could save countless lives.

Vaccines are the most effective method against COVID-19, but we must not lose sight of the many additional life-saving precautionary measures that must be in place for workers.

Only then will we be able to move towards what we need to fend off COVID-19 and its variants – a concerted effort for an immunized workforce and population.

A comprehensive immunization strategy.

Sincerely,



PATTY COATES
President

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