

Canada: Absence of sick pay and job security preventing at-risk and ill workers from staying home amid Coronavirus crisis

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As the coronavirus continues to spread rapidly across the world, the urgent need for emergency action to protect billions of people from this potentially lethal disease is becoming ever clearer. As well as free universal testing and high quality medical care for all, all workers urgently require paid sick-leave and full compensation for any earnings lost due to the pandemic.

Hundreds of thousands of workers employed in the so-called gig economy across Canada have absolutely no access to paid sick-leave. For many of them, staying home for the 14 days recommended by medical professionals to prevent the spread of the virus is impossible.

A self-employed single mother from Vancouver, British Columbia (BC), told CBC, “I’d have to be half dead to not go to work ... I’m always one contract away from an eviction notice.” Explaining what the impact would be on her if she followed the recommended quarantine procedure, she added, “I don’t think people really understand what it means to not be able to miss work. It’s the difference between eating or not, the difference between having a place to live or not.”

Her sentiments reflect the worries and fears of hundreds of thousands of Canadians precariously working in the so-called gig economy. Financial pressure in the absence of paid sick-leave is compelling them to work even when experiencing symptoms of illness, which will accelerate the spread of COVID-19.

A third of new jobs created in BC since the 2008-09 recession were non-permanent, according to the latest figures from the BC Bureau of Labour Statistics. Nationwide, more than a fifth of professionals have precarious jobs, almost all of which do not offer paid

sick-leave. Overall, 13 percent of Canada’s workforce was employed on temporary contracts in 2018, according to a Statistics Canada study.

Workers in the critical health care fields who are at increased risk of exposure to the virus are also faced with job precariousness. An estimated 5,000 long-term care aides, who in BC are paid as low as \$16 an hour, would not have enough paid sick-days to cover the duration of the quarantine period. The province’s 50,000 unionized nurses can only earn 1.5 working days of sick leave per month, and that is if they are a full-time employee. Thirteen percent of BC Nurses’ Union members are casual workers, many with very few accrued sick-leave hours. Others are not entitled to paid sick-leave at all.

The federal Liberal government and the various provincial governments have nothing to offer these workers. On Wednesday, the Prime Minister announced a plan to temporarily waive the one-week waiting period before workers can obtain Employment Insurance (EI) benefits for those forced to go into 14 days of quarantine. But the sustained austerity measures and attacks on workers’ rights mounted by big business governments since the 1980s mean that barely 40 percent of Canadian workers even qualify for EI benefits.

There is no legislation at the federal level to compel employers to provide paid sick-leave to workers. Provincial regulations differ, but none of them come even close to covering the 14-day quarantine period necessary to restrict the spread of the coronavirus. In 2018, the Ontario Progressive Conservative government under Doug Ford eliminated the two paid sick-days that workers were entitled to per year. In

order to “lower business costs and boost competition,” the government replaced them with three days of unpaid leave. In Quebec, workers can take two paid sick-days, while BC provides for five unpaid sick-days, a useless measure for most low-paid workers who cannot afford to lose a single day’s pay.

Hospitals throughout Canada are warning the federal government that they are ill-prepared for the coronavirus pandemic, underscoring that workers who contract the disease because they have been compelled to turn up for work will receive sub-standard treatment. The lack of testing kits, respiratory equipment, and hospital beds exposes the devastation wrought by decades of job and service cuts by governments indifferent toward health care worker protections and the critical needs of sick patients. On Monday, a Reuters report revealed that the 55 million N95 masks purchased by Ontario in the wake of the 2003 SARS outbreak have all passed their expiration dates. Despite warnings about this from the auditor general as long ago as 2017, no action was taken to replace them.

The Lynn Valley Care Centre in North Vancouver, where the first fatality in Canada from COVID-19 occurred Sunday, provides a microcosm of the chaotic scenes that will soon play out across the country if urgent action is not taken. Relatives of residents report that they have been forced to feed them and help with cleaning the centre because only two members of staff are left to care for 50 residents. Two care workers have gone into quarantine, while others have refused to turn up for work due to a lack of precautionary safety measures. “We were trying to keep them [the residents] apart, but that was one of the issues. We could not maintain the procedures (officials recommended) to protect everyone,” commented one woman, whose 96-year-old father lives at the centre. “It’s dangerous and a really atrocious situation we’ve got here.”

Even less support is available to the thousands of homeless people across Canada. Cathy Crowe, who has worked as a street nurse for years in Toronto with homeless people, told CBC that the combination of overcrowded shelters, drug addiction, transience, and chronic health problems make the city’s homeless population of approximately 8,000 on any given night at high-risk for contracting and spreading the disease. “Shelters are like a petri dish waiting for COVID-19 to arrive,” wrote Crowe in a blog post. “The conditions in

the shelters are so severely crowded. Depending on who you talk to, there’s maybe 700 to 1,000 people sleeping outside because the shelters are full. It’s very much linked to the potential risk which is now at our doorstep,” she added to CBC.

Roxie Danielson, another street nurse, called on the government to increase shelter spaces by 2,000 to reduce overcrowding and use motels to isolate infected people. “I’m extremely worried about this because I know how deadly it could be if it hits the shelter system,” she said.

The utter failure of Canada’s ruling elite to protect workers and the homeless from the coronavirus pandemic poses the urgent need for the working class to intervene with its own program to protect the health and well-being of all. Workers must demand:

- Paid sick leave for all workers
- Free and universal testing for the coronavirus
- Free high-quality treatment and equality of care for all

To fight for these demands, the Socialist Equality Party urges workers to form rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees to coordinate their activities, mobilize their collective strength, ensure that those who are sick receive social support, and monitor working conditions to enforce a safe environment.

The authors also recommend:

The response of the working class to the Coronavirus pandemic

[11 March 2020]

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