

“As a part-time worker I got no sick time, no benefits, and no vacation”

Canadian workers speak out on impact of coronavirus crisis

Our reporters
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Over the past week, workers from across Canada have contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to report on their experiences amid the combined health, social, and economic crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. We strongly encourage our readers to contact us and share their experiences.

Deborah, a part-time cashier from Guelph, said, “Due not only to my own health concerns, but also my husband’s who has some underlying health conditions, I had to leave my job. At my particular store we have no gloves, no shields and, although there are bottles of hand sanitizer at our stations, they are often empty, and there are no longer any bottles on the shelves for us to buy. Because I usually worked closing, my duties included cleaning a lot of common public spaces with nothing more than basic window cleaning fluid. Because my store did not have a credit/debit card tap payment option, I handled a lot of cash, increasing exposure to people’s hands.”

Deborah also took aim at the pro-corporate character of the government’s policies. “It is interesting that grocery cashiers are classified as ‘essential’ [under the Ontario government’s state of emergency] but only receive minimum wage,” she said. “Some big grocery stores have said that they are increasing wages by \$2 an hour temporarily, but that is only for those who work more than 20 hours a week. I think they are doing that to keep people from quitting. As a part-time worker my hours were seldom up to 20 hours and only if I covered someone else’s shift for some extra money. Also, as a part time worker I got no sick time, no benefits, and no vacation. At least one grocery store worker over in

Oshawa has already died from the virus and more have tested positive.”

While the federal Liberal government has claimed it is offering generous support to working people, Deborah’s experience has been very different. “It has been very difficult to apply for Employment Insurance,” she commented. “The offices are closed and the websites are jammed. It wouldn’t cover my monthly expenses anyway and the money the government has allocated seems to be going mostly to big businesses, like banks and airlines, instead of equipment for workers at the medical institutions who are working so hard to keep us safe. Not to mention better support for low-wage people like me. Profit before people. It’s just wrong.”

Rick from Nova Scotia wrote on the rush to re-open stores and factories, “This is what big corporations want. Get all senior employees and people with health conditions to die. Then replace them with new, low paid employees with no health care or benefits and no pensions to pay if deaths occur and corporate profits skyrocket. Old age homes empty due to deaths, new job creation to fill dead peoples’ places, lower unemployment. Only the strong will survive.”

An Ontario autoworker commented, “Us Toyota Canada workers received a communication March 24 that business as usual will resume April 6. The government put out a list of essential businesses that can be open, but were vague on the manufacturing sector so Toyota jumped on this loophole and basically said we are essential! They only did the two-week shutdown over social scrutiny I’m sure. So, if this lock

down gets extended by government, it will be interesting to see what Toyota does!”

Since the note from the Toyota worker, it was announced that a second autoworker at the company’s Cambridge, Ontario, plant has tested positive for the coronavirus. Toyota has announced that its North American production start-up date has now been moved to April 20.

The WSWS also received a letter from a worker at a hot tub manufacturing plant in Ontario. He pointed to the absurdity of his facility being declared an “essential service,” writing, “My workplace of almost 300 has been declared as ‘essential’ to the functioning of society by the Conservative provincial government, even though we manufacture hot tubs, a luxury item purchased mostly by the wealthy.

“For the past two weeks, company management has made a show of providing surgical masks to workers and supposedly implementing social distancing in the plant, although workers come into close contact with each other as part of the manufacturing process.

“A memo posted around the plant claims that the company ‘always puts our employees’ safety first.’ Meanwhile, the company’s Facebook page proudly proclaims that they are ‘up and operational’ during this pandemic, and how wonderful it would be to purchase a hot tub for this time of self-isolation. I guess it would be, for the rich.

“Before the provincial government released their ridiculous list of ‘essential workplaces,’ which includes most of manufacturing, company management claimed that a government lockdown would mean we’d all be given two weeks of paid leave. Now, they’ve forgotten all about their initial proposal.

“Most of the workers here are angry and scared. The only way to avoid coming in to work now is to claim unpaid sick leave, use up vacation days, or just no-show and face the consequences. There is talk of demanding that management give us the two weeks of paid leave, but there have been no definite proposals yet. Some of my co-workers have cited the walkouts at the auto plants as potential examples to follow if we want to protect ourselves and our families.

“Our union, the United Steelworkers, has been more than useless during this crisis. When the outbreak began spreading in Canada, our local president adopted a ‘wait and see’ attitude and assured us that company

management was doing everything they could to address the situation. Since the government’s ‘essential workplaces’ announcement, the union has simply told us that we have to abide by the directive and that they will advocate for our emergency leave.

“Nobody trusts the union, and conversations among rank-and-file workers in the plant exclude them from any possible action we may take. On the United Steelworkers website, there is a list of demands to the provincial and federal governments, including paid emergency leave. We could get this in a heartbeat if union shops across the country went on strike, but the union brass won’t do that, so workers will have to take matters into their own hands.”

Workers in the manufacturing sector are not the only ones exposing themselves to dangerous working conditions. Annie, a childcare worker in Montreal, told us how she and her colleagues face a high-risk situation because they are caring for the children of health care workers, who are more likely to get infected. “We haven’t been trained for this kind of high-risk contagion situation,” she added.

Another worker at a truck repair shop in Montreal criticized the haphazard character of the government’s response, particularly on the issue of financial support for workers. “A lot of things are promised but how is it going to be deployed? A lot of workers could rapidly lack money for food and other basic necessities,” he said.

Canadian workers also participated in Sunday’s online forum on the coronavirus crisis, which called on working people to fight for a socialist and internationalist response. A listener in Waterloo, Ontario, wrote: “Thank you, WSWS, for saying that workers should not return to work. My flatmate’s co-worker tested positive for COVID 19 and his workplace is still open and the employer is requiring the workers to continue working. What more confirmation do people need that profit comes before people in the capitalist system?”



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact