

Labour Reporter

The voice of Saskatchewan's working class since 1956



Winter 2020

Putting Workers First

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HELP STOP THE SPREAD OF COVID-19



• WEAR A MASK • WASH YOUR HANDS • PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING •
PROTECT YOURSELF, PROTECT OTHERS, AND STAY SAFE.



Labour Reporter

Labour Reporter is proudly published quarterly by the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour. It is sent directly to the homes of working people and to the offices of their unions.

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SFL President Lori Johb.

Putting workers first is vital for COVID-19 recovery

This is not how any of us imagined 2020. In a short period of time, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed everything about how we live, how we socialize with our friends and family, and especially how we work.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in March, workers across the province have faced unimaginable challenges. Many were laid off and saw their jobs and livelihoods vanish overnight. Others faced uncertainty, as frontline workers put their own health and safety at risk working in our schools, hospitals, crown corporations, grocery stores and gas stations to ensure that people had access to necessary supplies and vital public services.

Despite difficult circumstances, working people have risen to the challenge, and for many, COVID-19

“Despite difficult circumstances, working people have risen to the challenge.”

brought to light the importance of the role frontline workers play in providing so many of the services they depend on. We saw that earlier this year, when people from across the province came together to thank our frontline heroes for their hard work.

Nine months later, schools and businesses have reopened and people have started to adjust to a new “normal.” However, COVID-19 cases have again started to rise, and while there has been support from the

federal government through programs like CERB, supports for workers from the provincial government during the pandemic have been seriously lacking. While the Sask. Party government joined in thanking frontline workers at the start of the pandemic, they are once again ignoring the needs of workers. This is unacceptable. As the virus continues to spread, our health care system is being pushed to its limits, frontline workers are overworked, classrooms are overcrowded, and workers are concerned about their health and safety. The province's economy is also struggling, and too many workers are still dealing with unemployment. Our government must do better, and come up with a pandemic response plan that puts workers first.

Unfortunately, in the recent election, the Sask. Party campaigned on plans for an economic recovery that excludes working people, promising years of austerity and cuts instead of investing in health care, education, and other public services. History tells us that this is no way to create jobs and boost our economy. If our provincial government expects our economy to fully recover from the damage done by COVID-19, workers need to be part of the discussion, and we need to demand that our government include

workers in their plans for economic recovery.

Even before the pandemic, Saskatchewan workers were feeling the effects of economic inequality, wage freezes, the rising cost of living, and government cuts to public services. Now, more than ever, workers need a plan that guarantees future economic and social security as we rebuild post COVID-19. We need an economic recovery that

“If the government expects our economy to fully recover from the damage done by COVID-19, workers need to be a part of the discussion.”

puts workers first. That's why we're fighting for:

- Improved access and higher quality public services, including in healthcare and education.
- Reinstating minimum standards for long term care.
- Safer workplaces with strong protocols for cleaning that includes proper PPE and worker input, as well as the right to refuse unsafe

work.

- A \$15 an hour minimum wage to stimulate the economy and create jobs.
- Continued public ownership of Saskatchewan's Crown Corporations.

COVID-19 has highlighted the many challenges and inequities faced by working people in the province. In the coming years as we recover from the effects of COVID-19, workers will play a vital role in the economic recovery of our province. It's time for us all as working people to come together, show our solidarity, and fight for our voices to be heard. Together, we can fight for an economic recovery that puts workers first, and ensures the health and safety of all workers.

Labour leaders and activists mobilize to put workers first during provincial election



Workers were on the move during the provincial election to elect MLAs who would fight in the legislature to make life better for working people in Saskatchewan.

This year, a key part of the SFL's provincial election campaign involved getting out on the doorsteps and engaging with voters in key constituencies, encouraging them to support candidates who were committed to putting workers first through things like a \$15 an hour minimum wage, universal childcare, improved public services and stronger crown corporations.

Our campaign brought issues facing working people to over 10,000 doorsteps across Saskatchewan, and our team of volunteers, labour leaders and union members banked hundreds of kilometres reaching

out to voters with the message that it's time to put workers first.

As a result of our campaign's work, the SFL helped to elect MLAs to the legislature who will be strong advocates for working people in Saskatoon University with Jennifer Bowes, Saskatoon Eastview with Matt Love, and Regina University with Aleana Young.

Our campaign engaged unionized and non-unionized workers on an unprecedented scale -- but we know the work doesn't end when the final ballot has been counted. We're ready to continue engaging folks and building our capacity to put workers first in our province.



I'M IN TO WIN THE

**FIGHT
FOR 15**

“An embarrassment:” Sask. Minimum wage remains the lowest in Canada

In October, minimum wage earners in Saskatchewan received a “raise,” going from earning the least in Canada to...still earning the least in Canada. Originally announced in June, October’s increase of thirteen cents will see the minimum wage adjusted for inflation, from the staggeringly low rate of \$11.32 to the staggeringly low rate of \$11.45- the lowest minimum wage in all of the provinces and territories.

“This year’s so-called increase is an embarrassment,” said SFL President Lori Johb. “At a time when we need to be working to stimulate our economy and invest in our communities as the province works to recover from COVID-19, anything less than \$15 an hour is simply not enough. Workers are worth more than thirteen cents.”

“Workers shouldn’t have to work full time and still struggle to make ends meet.”

Johb noted that COVID-19 has shown that raises for minimum wage workers are possible, and could be implemented immediately.

“At the start of the pandemic, many of the large corporations that employ minimum wage earners announced ‘hero pay’ for their workers- increasing their wages by several dollars per hour. Now, those raises have been taken away, while the same corporations make billions in profits and frontline workers continue to risk their health and safety.”

The minimum wage became an issue in the provincial election, when the NDP promised to implement a minimum wage of \$15 an hour while the Sask. Party defended the status quo, despite the fact that more and more Saskatchewan people are finding it difficult to make ends meet. With the Sask. Party's recent re-election, the labour movement will continue the fight for a \$15 an hour minimum wage in the province.

"Workers shouldn't have to work full time and still struggle to make ends meet," Johb said. "It's time for the Sask. Party government to put workers first and finally increase the minimum wage to \$15 an hour."

Minimum wage facts:

- 60 per cent of minimum wage earners in Saskatchewan are over 19 years of age;
- Large corporations are the most significant employers of minimum wage earners and workers earning less than \$15 per hour – not small businesses. Large corporations can easily afford to pay at least \$15 per hour;
- Studies of jurisdictions that have raised the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, or near it, have consistently shown an increase in jobs.

SFL News Briefs

SFL moves online with OH&S Conference, webinar series

With the cancellation of all in-person events for the remainder of 2020 and beyond, the SFL has been reaching out and engaging with union workers across the province online. In the summer, we held our "Putting Workers First" webinar series, which featured engaging webinars on topics including winning the fight for \$15, how to get legislated paid sick leave for all workers, and protecting our crowns. In September, we held our annual Occupational Health and Safety Conference in an online format. The conference featured panels on workers' rights, protecting workers' mental health, and using OH&S Committees effectively during COVID-19. The webinar series and conference were attended by hundreds of union members from across the province- thank you to everyone who joined!

As in-person events continue to be postponed heading into 2021, the SFL is planning for ways to continue to engage with members online. Keep an eye out as we announce more information on future webinars, and conferences including

information on our annual convention next year.

SFL donates to Regina and Saskatoon food banks

Due to the cancellation of the annual Labour Day picnics in Regina and Saskatoon, the SFL and Saskatchewan Building Trades decided to give back to our community in a different way, and made donations of food, as well as a financial contribution, to the Regina and Saskatoon Food Banks. The SFL is proud to support our local food banks and their mission to end hunger and food insecurity in our communities.

Sask. NDP announces labour critics

Following the provincial election, the Saskatchewan NDP has named Carla Beck, MLA for Regina Lakeview as the critic for labour. Jennifer Bowes, MLA for Saskatoon University has been named associate critic for labour. The SFL looks forward to working with them both to make sure that worker's voices are being heard in the legislature.



Our three fundamental workplace rights must be respected by employers, protected by governments, and exercised by workers.

**RIGHT TO KNOW
RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE
RIGHT TO REFUSE**



COVID-19 and your rights at work

Too often, workers in Saskatchewan face situations in their workplaces that are unsafe, and COVID-19 has increased the risk of workers becoming ill from being exposed to the virus in unsafe work environments.

We have laws in Saskatchewan that are there to protect workers, and these laws continue to apply during the COVID-19 pandemic. Occupational Health and Safety legislation is designed to protect workers from being injured on the job or suffering illness from unhealthy work environments. Workers have three basic rights: The right to know, the right to participate, and the right to refuse. When respected, protected, and exercised, our three fundamental workplace rights go a long way to avoiding workplace deaths and injuries.

1) Right to Know

Workers have the right to know about the hazards of their job and how to control and handle them safely. A hazard is any activity, situation or substance that could harm a worker.

2) Right to Participate

Workers have the right to participate in health and safety at work. Workers can help identify and correct hazards; serve on an occupational health committee (OHC); and/or serve as a worker health and safety representative.

3) Right to Refuse

A worker has the right to refuse to do any specific job

or task which they have reasonable grounds to believe is unusually dangerous to themselves or to other workers.

Under the Act, workers who use their right to refuse are legally protected. That is, an employer can't fire or discipline a worker who refuses to do unusually dangerous work.

In May of 2020, the Deputy Minister of Labour Relations and Workplace Safety, Donna Johnson, stated in an interview that COVID 19 does not count as unusual danger. She went on to say that if you follow the guidelines set out by the chief medical health officer (keeping two metres apart, washing your hands regularly and not touching your face) you can be confident that you will not get sick. She also said that if the employer isn't addressing concerns, complaints can be made with the OHS division. Unfortunately, once there is an outbreak, a complaint does little to prevent serious illness or perhaps death.

While workers cannot refuse work simply due to the COVID-19 pandemic, you may be able to if there is a link between COVID-19 and being at risk of injury or illness. For example, a worker may be able to

refuse work if their employer is not properly managing your risk of exposure by failing to provide proper personal protective equipment. Employers must provide workers with the proper personal protective equipment to perform their jobs safely. It is also important to note that the right to refuse unsafe work is an individual process. Refusing work in solidarity because others are refusing opens the door

“We have laws in Saskatchewan that are there to protect workers. These laws continue to apply during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

to potential discipline. All workers must report their refusal individually. Employers cannot threaten workers with discipline for refusing unsafe work. Workers who are refusing unsafe work should make it clear that they are refusing work because they are concerned for their health and safety. Workers cannot be subjected to threats of disciplinary action because of their

refusal to perform work that they believe is unsafe.

Employers must ensure that they are going above and beyond the necessary measures to ensure that workers are kept safe and do not contract COVID-19. However, we know that employers all too often try to cut corners when it comes to the health and safety of workers. It is vital that workers are aware of their rights so that they are able to exercise them should they need to.

Paid sick leave essential to prevent spread of COVID-19

There are serious concerns when it comes to the health and safety of workers and the spread of COVID-19 in workplaces. While workers are being told to stay home if they are displaying symptoms, many do not have access to paid sick leave, and cannot afford to take time off. Workers who do get sick also, in many cases, don't have access to paid sick leave.

That's why we need to ensure paid sick leave for all workers. No one should ever have to make a decision to either go to work sick, or go without a paycheque. It's time for the provincial government to put workers first and commit to paid sick leave.

WORKING PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER

