



NEB Statement on Comprehensive Workplace Immunization Programs and Mandatory Vaccinations

August 2021

Despite significant progress made in Canada's campaign to stop the spread of COVID-19 over recent months, including nearly three-quarters of eligible people being fully vaccinated, the country is staring down a fourth wave of the virus.

Sadly, this comes as little surprise. Epidemiologists the world over continue to warn that until vaccines reach a critical mass of people, globally, variants will spread – evolving into more highly transmissible and potentially deadlier strains.

In low-income countries across the Global South, just over one percent of people received a vaccine. Distribution challenges, in part due to restrictive intellectual property rules that benefit wealthy pharmaceutical firms, are to blame. Meanwhile, in the Global North, quick re-starts to regional economies, despite modest vaccination levels, are resulting in case spikes (almost entirely among those not vaccinated), increased hospitalizations and the re-introduction of business restrictions.

Despite its promising start to vaccination, Canada is far from ending the COVID-19 crisis. National case counts and death tolls continue to climb. Our union will never forget those members we have lost to this terrible virus – beautiful lives taken, and families left reeling. If, through our collective actions, we can prevent even one more tragedy from befalling a member of our union, then those actions will have been worth the effort. A halfway approach to protecting public health and the health of working people is simply not good enough. More needs doing.

Higher vaccination rates needed for a sustained, resilient recovery

In May of this year, Unifor's National Executive Board unanimously endorsed a statement entitled [Vaccine Certificates and Considerations to Guide the Re-Opening of Canada's Economy](#).

In that statement, the Board articulated its support for additional measures to ensure a safe and fair reopening of the economy. This included the introduction of proof of vaccination certifications, where appropriate, guided by science, in compliance with human rights statutes and governed within a national framework. Such certificate programs must also include strict pre-screening and diagnostic testing. Unifor continues to support this position.

In this statement, the Board also identified "critical mass" vaccination as the union's stated goal. Only through large-scale vaccination, can governments and employers move forward with reopening and return-to-work plans, while protecting public health. This is the guidance

provided by leading public health officials both in Canada, and internationally. Unfortunately, Canada has not yet achieved this goal.

Helpful campaigns to encourage vaccinations, and eliminate barriers to access, in recent months appear to have run their course. Vaccination rates are plateauing. The risks to public health of future waves of this pandemic is too high. This includes risks to public-facing, front-line workers and those who, by necessity, work in close quarters and have a right to a healthy and safe workplace.

It is incumbent on governments to take the necessary steps to protect all people in Canada from further spread of the virus, including children and those who are immunocompromised, enabling us all to move forward into recovery. People in Canada have a responsibility, too, to protect one another.

Mandatory workplace vaccinations, one of many tools to keep workers safe

Organizations must utilize all of the tools at their disposal to stop the spread of COVID-19. For employers, this includes mandatory vaccination of workers, especially for those in public-facing or congregate work-settings where risk of transmission is high. This also includes regular testing, pre-screening, greater availability of personal protective equipment, and other reasonable safety measures.

To be clear, the Board believes such requirements are necessary to protect the health and safety of workers. Unifor members have a right to be safe at work, and it is our union's duty to uphold that right. This is of paramount importance to our union. Of course, any such mandate must accommodate for legitimate health exemptions, address personal privacy and data protection issues and uphold relevant human rights statutes - not unlike existing mandatory vaccine measures employed in Canada.

Across workplaces, employers must also ensure that any mandatory vaccine policies, advanced screening, testing and other measures have input from Unifor. Our union expects employers to adhere to and uphold collective agreement language, where applicable, and collaborate with us on establishing appropriate processes as well as organizing mandatory information sessions for workers. Our union will continue working to ensure members have clearly defined safety protocols and sufficient access to PPE.

This pandemic will not be over for anyone until it is over for everyone.

Unifor commits to relentlessly championing progressive, practical, principled and science-based policies to get Canada through this pandemic and facilitate a safe return to work in the spirit of building a fair, resilient and inclusive economy.

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