

# SAFETY IS NOT NEGOTIABLE FOR ANYONE – INCLUDING HEALTH CARE WORKERS

## JOINT POSITION STATEMENT



March 13, 2020

**The following is a joint statement issued today by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), UNIFOR, the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).**

As labour organizations representing close to a million health care workers, we are calling for the Public Health Agency of Canada and all provincial public health offices to protect health care workers and their patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also urging decision-makers to adhere to the precautionary principle, which calls for reasonable safeguards when a virus is clouded in scientific uncertainty.

Our health care system is already running over capacity; we simply cannot afford to erode staffing levels any further if health care workers become sick and self-quarantine. It is therefore imperative that we protect health care workers so that they can continue to provide safe and effective care.

To health ministers and health employers, we say: this responsibility lies with you. To stop the transmission of COVID-19, health care workers must be equipped with the appropriate fit-tested personal protective equipment. Employers must provide the necessary training and supports – and they must mandate point-of-care risk assessments that empower health care workers to assess their own risk and act accordingly.

In its most recent update on COVID-19, the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that the science remains uncertain on how the virus is transmitted:

*[Respiratory droplets] can land in the mouths, noses, or eyes of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs of those within close proximity. The contribution of small respirable particles, sometimes called aerosols or droplet nuclei, to close-proximity transmission is currently uncertain."*

In addition, a recent study awaiting peer review from scientists at Princeton University, the University of California-Los Angeles and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), posted online Wednesday, suggests that the virus may also be spread through the airborne route (aerosols) or contact with physical objects. The researchers state that "the virus can remain viable in aerosols for multiple hours and on surfaces up to days."

In light of conflicting scientific evidence on how the virus is spread, the precautionary principle must be followed; we must err on the side of caution.

## SAFETY IS NOT NEGOTIABLE FOR ANYONE – INCLUDING HEALTH CARE WORKERS

A recent legal opinion posted by a leading Canadian law firm Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP makes clear that hospitals should defer to “an elevated duty of precautionary care” (which would include droplet, contact and airborne precautions, as in other international jurisdictions). Given the current scientific uncertainty, the firm is cautioning hospitals to review their pandemic plans so that they “reflect the legal lessons learned from the SARS outbreak, including the SARS Commission final report”.

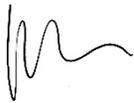
If there is a shortage of personal protective equipment, union leaders can work with governments and health authorities to implement strategies that focus on reducing hazardous exposures to keep frontline health care workers safe.

During this pandemic, our members are going to work – they are caring for Canadians and putting their health at risk to help contain the spread of COVID-19.

The strength of our health care system rests on our doctors, nurses, health science professionals, allied health workers, EMS personnel, DSWs, PSWs, health care aides, orderlies, cleaners, food service workers and others; to treat patients and keep the broader public safe, they need to be protected.

Since the start of this pandemic, unions representing workers in the health care sector have been urging the federal and provincial governments, as well as health care employers, to err on the side of caution – to be safe rather than sorry. We stand by the precautionary principle – a key lesson from the SARS epidemic – and we expect governments and employers to do the same.

Safety is not negotiable!



Hassan Yussuff, President, Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)



Linda Silas, President, Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU)



Mark Hancock, President, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)



Sharleen Stewart, President, Service Employees International Union (SEIU)



Larry Brown, President, National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE)



Jerry Dias, President, Unifor

## **SAFETY IS NOT NEGOTIABLE FOR ANYONE – INCLUDING HEALTH CARE WORKERS**

**For more information please contact:**

Canadian Labour Congress: [media@clcctc.ca](mailto:media@clcctc.ca), 613-526-7426

Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions: [media@nursesunions.ca](mailto:media@nursesunions.ca), 613-406-5962

Canadian Union of Public Employees: Hugh Pouliot, [hpouliot@cupe.ca](mailto:hpouliot@cupe.ca), 613-818-0067

National Union of Public and General Employees: [ANaidoo@nupge.ca](mailto:ANaidoo@nupge.ca), 613-986-5409

SEIU Healthcare: 202-730-7162

Unifor: [communications@unifor.org](mailto:communications@unifor.org), 416-497-4110