

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE REPORT

MAY 2020

Hello brothers and sisters. I hope you are all coping with our new normal during the pandemic. It has been a stressful time for everyone and I want you to know you are not alone and your union is continuously standing up for our health and safety and basic human rights.

For years, Unifor has been outspoken about the systematic devaluing and dismantling of our health care system as well as the working conditions. Contagious diseases and viruses are a predictable, but more importantly, a preventable situation in hospitals and care homes. Yet, in Ontario, the private and public sector were woefully unprepared for COVID-19. Outbreaks have been devastating to our elderly population and the very workers who care for them. The system, employing many workers who are part-time and casual, and therefore needing multiple jobs to survive, compounded an already deadly situation.

Many of these workers are predominantly women and workers of colour. It has become apparent that their conditions of employment in relation to their pay is seriously undervalued and flawed. We even saw a miracle in that Doug Ford, a staunch conservative, bowed to public pressure and instituted pay raises for front line workers. A paltry sum considering the hazardous conditions they are working in and their inability to walk off the job on their clients. We must put pressure on our government to maintain this pay scale moving forward.

Globally, the vast majority of people dying from this virus are brown and black. They are the most vulnerable and poor, and unable to abide by the World Health Organization protocols of social distancing, handwashing, or staying at home. Many of these workers live in deplorable conditions, with many people sharing households; lack of access to clean water; and government directives that they are “essential workers”, regardless of the conditions at work. In the US, water companies were still shutting off water to customers in default of their bill, even though governments were publicly stating this was not occurring. It is a disgrace.

The only positive I can see from this disastrous global medical crisis is that it provides a spotlight on the inequities working people face and the overt devaluing of human life in the context of capitalism and corporate wealth. Profits over people has never been more apparent. Historically, this type of crisis has served as a catalyst to mobilize worker mobility and resistance. The time is now for change.