

Counterpoint

SPECIAL EDITION COVID-19

CUPE members
at the front lines
of the pandemic
tell their stories

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AT RISK

Repercussions
on the economy
and on
bargaining

A close-up portrait of a woman with long, light brown hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a white top. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

ELLIE SCHMIDT
Dietician, CUPE 15

“We do what we have to in order to protect ourselves, but we’re convinced that information is essential during these times of crisis.”

Bryan Chauveau, writer, editor and CUPE 687 member, p. 5

Critical needs for Indigenous communities

Across Canada, communities are fighting the COVID-19 pandemic on many fronts. This new situation has exposed deep inequities in our society, including for Indigenous peoples. Chronic underfunding of services and infrastructure in Indigenous communities threatens to turn the COVID-19 crisis into a disaster.

Across Canada, provinces have declared states of emergency and are preparing for the worst. The federal government has announced over \$107 billion in aid to support individual Canadians and boost the economy. Within that amount, only \$305 million has been earmarked to support Indigenous communities. While some Indigenous leaders welcomed the announcement, others were concerned the amount is just a fraction of what is needed.

On March 24, Perry Bellegarde, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, declared a state

of emergency over COVID-19. The declaration recognizes that federal, provincial, and territorial governments have not adequately addressed the needs of Indigenous communities and calls for more resources and support.

If nothing changes, COVID-19 is a disaster waiting to happen. Indigenous communities across Canada fear the worst across all measures of health. That is compounded by a history of Indigenous communities struggling with housing shortages, lack of access to adequate health care, and boil water advisories.

The Public Health Agency of Canada says the best ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are physical distancing and hand washing. This is almost impossible for Indigenous peoples who are living in communities with overcrowded housing and no clean water.

Previous pandemics have hit Indigenous communities the hardest in Canada. In 2009, H1N1 rapidly spread across the globe and did not spare Indigenous communities in Canada. Indigenous leaders called on governments for support, only to be met with bureaucratic delays.

During the H1N1 pandemic, Indigenous peoples in Canada were more likely to be infected, require hospitalization, and suffer from critical illness compared to non-Indigenous Canadians. Several First Nations in northern Manitoba requested medical equipment and support from Health Canada and were sent body bags. Health Canada apologized, but the message Indigenous communities got was that they could not depend on Canada to support them in a crisis.

The federal government is now telling Indigenous communities to update their emergency pandemic plans and prepare for cases of COVID-19. Marc Miller, minister of Indigenous Services, has said “this is not a question of if—it’s a question of when” the virus will make its way to Indigenous communities.



In a matter of a few weeks, Canada has quickly made huge strides to acknowledge the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it remains unclear what lessons Ottawa has learned since the H1N1 pandemic, when it comes to Indigenous communities.

Federal, provincial, and territorial governments must make a greater commitment to Indigenous communities, and work towards lessening the impact COVID-19 will have on our most vulnerable to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

■ Dana Wesley

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Helping the most vulnerable



For most Canadians, the COVID-19 pandemic is an extraordinary crisis, in which the call for social distancing has posed unsettling challenges to daily routines. But for vulnerable residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), where crisis is an every-day reality, self-isolation is potentially deadly if there's no place to go and no food to eat.

It's a problem community health workers, like CUPE 15 member Ellie Schmidt, have to tackle.

Schmidt, a 20-year veteran of frontline health

care delivery in the DTES, is a registered dietician with Vancouver Coastal Health. Assigned to three primary care clinics in the area, she works with the most marginalized population in Canada as part of a team that also includes doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners, community outreach support workers, social workers, pharmacists, respiratory therapists, mental health specialists and addiction counsellors.

"We work with clients wherever they are and in whatever way they can accept our services," says Schmidt, noting that she not only works in the clinic, but also visits clients at their single-room-occupancy hotels, on the streets or in the parks.

"The clients I see in the Downtown Eastside often have complex medical needs. They're living with multiple chronic health problems such as HIV, Hep C, cardiovascular disease, COPD, or diabetes, to name a few."

"Add to that substance use and mental health diagnosis, homelessness or deplorable living conditions and poverty, and it's clear that providing nutritional health education in these circumstances is certainly not learned from a textbook", added Schmidt.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, Schmidt and her health care colleagues have had to keep the contact with their clients to a minimum.

"As health care workers, we're trying to protect the community of the Downtown Eastside from us. We're the ones who are more likely to be bringing it into the neighbourhood."

The first challenge Schmidt has had to address is food access. With the Provincial Health Officer closing all cafés and restaurants, the low-cost meals that her clients normally rely on are no longer available. Nor are the programs that normally offer free meals for hundreds of people at a time.

"On March 16, [the pandemic] hit us front and centre, and we started changing the way we work. For me personally, I spent that week basically working with all the clinics to develop emergency food bags."

Connecting with community partners, Schmidt and her health care team were able to set up an online source of information on where and when clients can get take-out meals. The result was a map to food in the DTES, which the health care team prints out and distributes throughout the community.

"With an awful lot of help from an awful lot of people, there's now a system in place for community members to find out

where they can get a meal, where they can go and safely consume drugs, and where they can find hand-washing stations," she says.

The biggest challenge, however, remains the social distancing imperative.

"When we're doing clinical assessments and a client has significant COVID-19 symptoms, whether the directive is to test them or not, we need to try to get our clients to self-isolate. Right now, our biggest challenge is trying to figure out how to isolate people who don't have homes. But we've always had to work outside the box, so that is nothing new for us," says Schmidt.

■ Daniel Gawthrop



NATIONAL PRESIDENT MARK HANCOCK

Thank you

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most chaotic times any of us have experienced. This crisis has put many of our jobs on the line. It has created untold amounts of stress inside and outside of the workplace. And it's created a lot of uncertainty about what the coming weeks and months hold, and what our world will look like on the other side of this great challenge.

If there is one thing I do know, it's that we will face this challenge together.

CUPE has always been there for our members, and that has not changed. Throughout this period, you can trust that CUPE is still here, fighting for you.

We joined with our allies to lobby the federal government for immediate measures to support workers during this pandemic – whether they belong to our union or not. And we will continue, always, to advocate for workers' rights.

We are working night and day to make sure employers treat workers with respect.

And from coast to coast to coast, we are putting pressure on employers and governments at all levels to protect your jobs, and the important work that you do.

It has been a difficult few weeks, and the weeks and months ahead will continue to push us all to our limits. But I know CUPE members across Canada will continue to show strength in the face of adversity, like we always do.

I know we will continue to prove the importance of strong, well-funded public services.

And I know we will continue to show the country the unmatched commitment and dedication of our members to their communities, even in the most difficult and uncertain times. Our members are the heroes fighting on the front lines of this crisis.

I want to thank each and every one of our 700,000 members for soldiering through this crisis with strength and determination. You have done our union and our whole country proud.

MARK HANCOCK ONLINE  twitter.com/MarkHancockCUPE





ON THE FRONTLINES OF A PANDEMIC: CUPE MEMBERS SHARE THEIR STORIES

From flight attendant to medical officer

In normal times, flight attendants and other airline workers are a familiar and welcome sight, helping travellers get to their destinations safely and comfortably.

These times are anything but normal.

Airline workers found themselves on the very front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually from the beginning, transforming overnight from ‘customer service ambassadors’ to guardians and life savers, as the Coronavirus began ravaging one country after another.

“As far as we’re concerned, we’re on the front lines of this and have been from the very beginning,” said Christina (not her real name), a flight attendant for Air Canada’s main line.

Christina is a veteran flight attendant. She was working during the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and during H1N1, the most recent flu outbreak.

“This is all deja-vu for me,” she said.

In the early days of the Coronavirus outbreak, Christina found herself flying several times in and out of an early North

American hot spot. Almost overnight, she and her colleagues found themselves dangerously exposed, without clear guidelines from governments and their employer, and with little personal protective equipment.

It is in this environment that Christina and all of her Air Canada Component colleagues found themselves on the front lines of defence against a highly contagious viral outbreak.

On one of the last flights in this particular cycle, a passenger in transit from hard-hit Italy boarded the flight and complained of feeling unwell, demonstrating symptoms of COVID-19.

“He clears customs with no checks and balances, then gets to the aircraft complaining of feeling ill and we’re the first line of defence. You have to switch to a different mode and put on your safety hat,” said Christina.

After consulting with the flight captain, Christina and her fellow flight attendants made the decision to keep the passenger off the flight.

“The paramedics came, fully suited up in gloves, gowns and masks. It was a very scary and disruptive situation just before a flight, and I thought to myself we’re going to be seeing this more and more,” she said.

From this moment, it was clear to Christina that she and her colleagues were going to wear many different hats to ensure both personal and passenger safety.

In the ensuing weeks, Christina and her colleagues were caught up in a whirlwind of activities, as travellers raced to get themselves home before nations closed their borders. Now, they face more uncertainty as COVID-19 plunges the global economy into a recession.

“This is going to be far more impactful than 9/11 for our industry,” said Christina.

Commercial air travel has ground to a virtual standstill. There is no immunity from layoffs.

“Despite all the uncertainty, fear and upheaval, airline workers like Christina have consistently demonstrated their skills and professionalism,” said Theresa Mitchell, vice-president of the Air Canada Component of CUPE.

“We are so proud of them, and so committed to doing everything we can to help and support flight attendants ... on a very basic level, we understand how difficult this is,” said Mitchell.

“As an executive, we have never felt more unified with our members. They need our support and we are doing everything in our power to help them,” she added.

■ Kevin Wilson



Journalism: an essential service

At his daily press conference last March 23, Quebec Premier François Legault declared what many have known for a long time – journalism is an essential service.

Never has it been so difficult to work as a journalist, but never has it been so important. In spite of the unprecedented health crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus, CUPE members must continue doing their invaluable work either at the office or, at times,

from home.

Raquel Fletcher, normally a Global Television correspondent at the Quebec National Assembly, is now working from home. She turned her bedroom into an office, and her living room into a studio.

“The first few days were rather difficult, because several technical problems had to be ironed out. How was I going to work with my cameraman/editor remotely? How was I going to have good sound quality to record my voice? How



Bryan Chauveau in studio

was I going to conduct all these necessary interviews over the phone? But despite the odds, we managed to do it,” explained Raquel Fletcher.

According to her, the key to success during these chaotic times is the incredible collaboration between colleagues, politicians, commentators and even journalists from other media organizations.

“Not too long ago, all of us were working side by side at the National Assembly Press Gallery. We’re attempting to recreate this camaraderie, while maintaining the critical mind that is a must in our profession,” added Fletcher.

Bryan Chauveau is a writer/editor and at times the Bureau Chief at LCN, a 24-hour news network in Quebec. Although his building is virtually empty, not all employees can work from home. Some of them, including him, have to come into the studio.

“It’s almost impossible to do studio work at home, so we changed the way

we produce news to reduce the probability of contamination,” said Chauveau.

Historically, newsrooms have been hives of employees searching for, gathering, editing and releasing news. Today, they have undergone a total metamorphosis, and flitting around from one place to another is now forbidden.

“Reporters in the field are no longer in direct contact with us. Their offices have been moved to another floor. They have poles that keep them apart from their interviewees. Our office spaces are cleaned several times per shift, and we physically keep our distance. In short, we do what we have to in order to protect ourselves, but we’re convinced that information is essential during these times of crisis.”

■ Lisa Djevahirjian

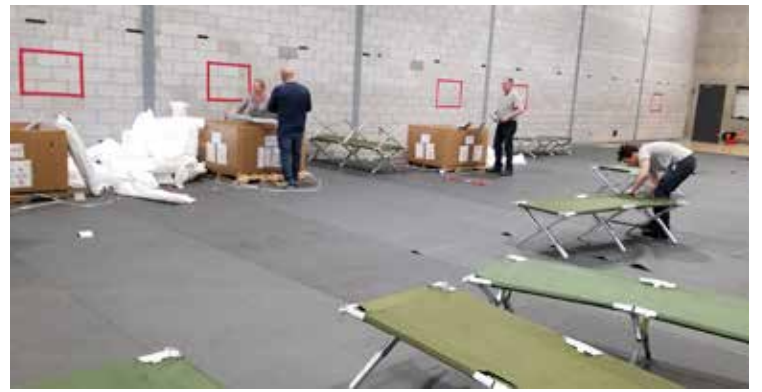


Raquel Fletcher working from home



BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS ON MONTREAL ISLAND ARE DOING THEIR SHARE

Bruno Loiselle and his blue-collar colleagues helping build a temporary shelter in Montreal



Despite the general commotion caused by the spread of COVID-19, thousands of CUPE members are continuing to provide essential services to the public, even at the risk of endangering their health and that of their family members.

In Quebec, unions in the municipal sector quickly came to an agreement with cities and towns to negotiate flexibility in their collective agreements. Answering urgent requirements, providing essential services such as garbage collection, and ensuring that critical infrastructures like water and wastewater treatment plants were the focus of all parties.

Some blue-collar workers decided to volunteer to help food distribution organizations, such as Moisson Montréal. Many community-based organizations are contending with a severe lack of volunteers these days.

The authorities are going that extra mile to protect the homeless, a clientele that is particularly vulnerable at this time, especially since one of them who had gone

to the Old Brewery Mission tested positive for COVID-19.

At the Complexe Guy-Favreau and the YMCA in downtown Montreal, Bruno Loiselle and about 20 of his blue-collar colleagues have been transporting beds and setting up equipment. Both locations have been designated as temporary accommodation centres and will be welcoming numerous homeless persons from across the city.

“I personally take a measure of pride in helping our citizens. A city is a local government, and its employees are essential, especially during crisis situations such as the one we’re going through. We’re aware that there are people worse off than we are with all of this upheaval,” said Bruno Loiselle.

Blue-collar workers on the island of Montreal will continue to work throughout this pandemic to help the city provide emergency services to citizens, while at the same time following public health and safety directives very carefully.

■ Ronald Boisrond

NATIONAL SECRETARY-TREASURER CHARLES FLEURY

CUPE’s services to members maintained despite impact of COVID-19

Like all governments, employers and other organisations, all levels of CUPE will be hit by the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, at the national level, CUPE’s financial situation is still solid and allows us to continue the important work we do for our 700,000 members across the country.

Despite the extreme difficulties we are all facing, CUPE is here to support all chartered organizations and their members during these difficult times. We still offer critical support services such as: servicing, legal, communications, health and safety, worker’s compensation, job evaluation, research, human rights, organizing and education, all provided remotely by our dedicated staff. Our administrative,

technical and clerical staff continue their work, making sure the phone lines remain open and mail is monitored.

We are also implementing internal administrative measures to help chartered organizations. We are extending the deadlines for current cost-shared campaigns, and we negotiated extended deadlines for trustees’ reports, so that bonding insurance can continue.

At the same time, CUPE is working on a revised budget to make sure we are fully back on track when this crisis is over. To maintain our revenues stream, we will make sure employers understand that dues deductions must continue as usual. For our union to stay strong, we also need our local financial solidarity more than ever. Therefore, for the benefits of all our members, per capita payments remain mandatory. I know we can count on you because in CUPE, we always have each other’s back.

In closing, I want to thank each and every one of you who continue to take an active role in our union, and those who are on the front lines of the crisis caring for the sick, operating our transportation systems and making sure our public services continue to support our communities.

Solidarity!

CHARLES FLEURY ONLINE  twitter.com/CUPENatSec



COMMITMENT. COURAGE.

THANK YOU,
FRONT-LINE
WORKERS.



CUPE