

Counterpoint



THE REAL WORLD OF TECHNOLOGY, THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UNKNOWN

Organizing during
a pandemic in
the Philippines

Long-term
care – a crisis
unfolding
in real time

PATRICIA RICETTO
Education assistant
at École André-Piolat

SHE SAID

Before the pandemic, we were already struggling with the staff to resident ratio. Now, the shortage of staff has made it even worse. In a span of weeks, numerous staff have contracted the virus,”

*Virginia Monton, President of CUPE 2719.
She works at Maples Personal Care Home in Winnipeg, Manitoba.*



Fighting COVID-19 turbulence in the airline sector

The past year has been a rocky one for the airline industry, but CUPE's airline workers are hoping and fighting for a safe return to flying in 2021. In March, the pandemic grounded flights across the globe. Roughly two-thirds of CUPE's 15,000 flight attendant members were laid off almost overnight.

Since March, help for CUPE's airline members has been slow to come. The federal emergency wage subsidy was supposed to help keep workers on the payroll, but failed workers when many major airlines opted not to take it. Workers have also had to fight to get access to suitable personal protective equipment (PPE)

in a tight work environment where physical distancing is impossible.

CUPE's Airline Division has been busy fighting for members since day one. The Division launched the Safer Skies Now campaign, calling for a federal strategy to boost our domestic supply of PPE and strengthen the rights of workers to refuse

unsafe work. The Division is also pressuring the federal government to implement pre-boarding rapid testing for COVID-19 at airports to help keep airline workers, passengers and the general public safe.

The Division says financial support from the federal government will be critical to protecting the

livelihoods of thousands of workers in the sector. "Our members answered your call when COVID-19 struck," said Airline Division President Wesley Lesosky in a recent letter to Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland. "We now ask that you answer theirs."

■ **Hugh Pouliot**

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Making connections: embracing technology through the pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, Patricia Richetto had worked at École André-Piolat in North Vancouver for 14 years. “School was my comfort zone,” she said. “When the pandemic struck, everything changed. There was a lot of stress and things seemed negative.”



She didn't even have a computer at home. Because her work as an education assistant (EA) switched to remote, online learning, the

school sent her one. “The only thing I could do before this was send emails,” said Richetto. “I had to challenge myself to learn the computer in less than two months. I'm so glad I did, because it's part of life now.”

As an EA, Richetto usually works with students with complex needs, working with 10 students from four classes. Art has been a big part of keeping positive, for both herself and her students.

“I started to do a little cartoon story, drawing the same little girl in different situations, like the first day at school or going to the dentist,” explained Richetto. “Now I'm working with a friend on a podcast project that's an interactive story-book for children.”

“Although being back in school can be stressful, I'm

very happy to be back and working with students,” said Richetto. Her advice to her students is to stay hopeful and live day by day. “It's good to continue to support each other. We help each other and move forward together.”

Richetto said that technology also changed her life on a personal level, by helping her reconnect to her estranged family.

“I had been away from my family for many long years. Because I learned how to use the computer, we started to talk online in Skype meetings,” said Richetto. “It's been so beautiful to see the babies of my niece and nephew—it gives me hope. I'm very happy that I was able to take something so rewarding from this pandemic.”

■ Janet Szliske

NATIONAL PRESIDENT MARK HANCOCK

2021 brings opportunities to create a better future

As we enter 2021, I'd like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the more than 700,000 CUPE members who have worked so hard through the COVID-19 crisis. 2020 was filled with challenges none of us ever could have imagined, but we met those challenges with courage, dedication, and compassion, and did our communities proud.

I am feeling hopeful about 2021. In the aftermath of the pandemic, I see this as the year we rebuild, and make meaningful progress on issues that matter to us as activists and union members.

First and foremost, this year we are going to continue our fight to radically transform the way we care for one another – especially our most vulnerable.

There's evidence that our efforts are already paying off. In the fall Throne Speech from the Trudeau government, we heard commitments to child care, pharmacare, and

national standards for long-term care. CUPE has been on the frontlines of the fight for these critical additions to our social safety net for years.

But we all know that Liberals have always been long on promises and short on delivery. We also know the Conservatives, under their new leader Erin O'Toole, can't be counted on—no matter how much he pretends to be a friend to unions and workers. A Conservative can't change his stripes, and we won't fall for his gimmicks.

That's why we must continue to keep fighting, alongside allies in our communities, the labour movement, and the NDP, for these and other changes.

And our big chance to actually get the change we deserve may come sooner than we think. It's increasingly likely that we are heading into a federal election this year.

The next election, whenever it happens, is an opportunity for us to take the lessons learned from the pandemic and convince people across the country to vote for the future we all want and deserve.

We want a future where no one goes broke because they can't afford to fill their prescriptions. We want a future where parents, especially women, can return to work knowing their kids are being cared for. We want a future where our seniors can live safely and with dignity.

We have weathered the worst of this pandemic. Now comes the opportunity. Together, let's change the way we care for one another, and create a better future for everyone.

MARK HANCOCK ONLINE  twitter.com/MarkHancockCUPE



COVID crisis looms large in long-term care this winter

As the days get shorter and we move into winter, we are also moving deeper into the second wave of the COVID pandemic. Of Canada's COVID 11,496 deaths, 75% have been in long-term care facilities. CUPE members who work in long-term care (LTC) across the country have carried an enormous burden during this time.

A recent Ontario study reported high levels of stress and burnout among CUPE LTC members. "We're so short-staffed, we already know that our residents are not looked after the way they need to be looked after," said one CUPE member, adding that this is nothing new. "Maybe they think that this is all because of COVID, but these are pre-existing problems of understaffing and underfunding. It's the way it is in long-term care."

Virginia Monton, President of CUPE 2719, works at Maples Personal Care Home in Winnipeg, which made news when CUPE members revealed a cover-up by the employer after a devastating outbreak in November. She agrees. "Life working in a long-term care home has been extra challenging these days.

Before the pandemic, we were already struggling with the staff to resident ratio. Now, the shortage of staff has made it even worse. In a span of weeks, numerous staff have contracted the virus," Virginia said, herself among them. "To find replacements for staff that are on self-isolation has been difficult."

In spite of the challenges, CUPE members are doing their best. "I work with a great team where everyone is very supportive of one another," said Gurdeep Parhar, a dietary aide and member of the Hospital Employees' Union in BC. "When there was an outbreak at our centre, we worked really well together as a team to get through an incredibly tough situation."

The pandemic is a struggle, not just on the workers, but on the people

they care for too—at work and at home. "It was hard because our residents needed us, so we were committed to being there. Even though my family was concerned for me," Gurdeep continued, "my 9-year-old daughter understood and would say to me 'Mom, you need to go, they need you.'"

Things were different in the Atlantic bubble. Tina Rideout, member of CUPE 488 in Corner Brook, NL, has worked in long-term care for 30 years. "During the first wave of the pandemic, I think we felt somewhat removed from the reality of what was happening in mainland Canada. COVID had yet to enter our province. We had the advantage of watching and learning from a distance while still being free from the virus," she said. But that has changed. "As our number of active cases increases in the Atlantic provinces, staff and residents obviously feel more threatened. Leaving the Atlantic



Gurdeep Parmar

bubble was the right thing at this time."

Sandy Wilson, from CUPE 2784 in Halifax, feels the same. "We were fortunate in Nova Scotia. But maybe we became complacent because of the bubble. The news was saying it was the safest place to live, people were coming home from out west. But now that we've made that mistake, I really believe people will behave and we'll get back to where we should be."

The winter ahead looks grim but there are some rays of hope. The Ontario government, after 24 years of pressure from CUPE and other unions, has finally committed to a minimum care standard of four hours of daily hands-on care per resident. In Quebec, the government launched an ambitious recruiting drive, putting close to

7,000 candidates through an accelerated training program for personal support workers.

But this piecemeal approach is not enough. Canada needs a comprehensive plan to fix long-term care. Long-term care should be an accessible, publicly funded and universal health care. The federal government must establish national standards of care and dramatically increase the number of long-term care beds and staff to ensure access and quality of care.

You can help make that happen. Visit fixlongtermcare.ca and send a message to PM Justin Trudeau and tell him it is time to fix long-term care now, so that we never have to face another crisis like the one we have been facing for the past nine months.

■ Marnie Thorp

Tina Rideout - Working in long-term care during a pandemic

During the first wave of the pandemic, I think myself, coworkers and residents felt somewhat removed from the reality of what was happening inside LTC facilities in mainland Canada. COVID had yet to enter our province, but preparations were well underway to further protect our most vulnerable. We had the advantage of watching and learning from a distance while still being free from the virus. I believe this gave us the advantage of having more time to prepare. Early visitor restrictions and eventually closing our doors was a huge factor in keeping our LTC residents protected. Very early on, staff were restricted from moving from one facility to another, or even volunteering or working outside our facility at all.

Hundreds of residents means thousands of family members on the outside left trusting us even more than ever to keep their loved ones safe and protected from the virus. Visitation bans left already challenged staff to provide increased emotional, physical and social support to both our residents and their families. The extra duties and responsibilities, sometimes daily changes in rules and regulations, left staff both physically and mentally drained. An increase in mandatory overtime due to staff shortages, an increase in sick leave due to the pandemic itself, and already bare minimum staff has left its toll on myself and coworkers.

There is a very strong feeling of respect and trust in our health care leaders of the province to keep our residents safe. Decisions are certainly not made lightly and have been supported by our health care teams. This has certainly been the most challenged I have ever felt in my workplace in my 30 years as an LPN in LTC.

As our number of active cases increase in the Atlantic provinces, staff and residents obviously feel more threatened than ever before. Again, our leaders continue to work even harder to keep us safe. Leaving the Atlantic bubble was the right thing to do at this time. These further and very challenging restrictions go to show how hard we are willing to work to keep our most vulnerable safe.

Anyone who works in LTC, does not choose to do so because it is easy. As we watched the world shut down, and people work to keep those in their bubble safe, our family bubble increased to include the residents in our care as well. Any decisions made outside my workplace will directly affect the wellbeing of the hundreds of residents within my workplace and their families. A huge burden to bear.

Tina Rideout

LPN with 30 years in long-term care. From Corner Brook area
CUPE 488



Virginia Monton *Tragedy strikes as crisis unfolds in long-term care*

Virginia Monton is President of CUPE 2719, she works at Maples Personal Care Home in Winnipeg, Manitoba. We reached out to Virginia to speak with her about what life was like working in long-term care during a pandemic. We found her in the midst of a COVID outbreak in her workplace, and this is what she shared with us.

Life working in a long-term care home has been extra challenging these days. The fear of your safety and health is always there. We have a moral responsibility to our residents, and we need to be there to ensure all of their needs are met.

Before the pandemic, we were already struggling with the staff to resident ratio. Now, during the pandemic, the shortage of staff has made it even worse.

Unfortunately, in a span of weeks numerous staff have contracted the virus. To find replacements for staff that are on self-isolation has been difficult.

Even though I am away on medical leave, I am still working from home trying to reach out to our members to consider working extra hours to help fill in the gaps. I told them that I know it is physically and mentally hard on everyone, but we need to be there for the residents.

The only time I stopped communicating with them was when I became very weak. Having a fever for 10 consecutive days is not easy, not knowing if you will survive is a very scary feeling. Pneumonia and dehydration have also affected my blood pressure.

I am slowly recuperating, and still waiting for further tests required by my doctor.

My goal now as a COVID survivor is to continue communicating to our members the importance of physical/social distancing and PPE.

This is especially important at the workplace during coffee/lunch breaks.

The importance of wearing our PPE as well as exercising proper hand washing.

*Please stay safe,
take care of yourself
and your family.*





Pandemic heightens government repression in Philippines

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant disruption and chaos for workers around the world. The situation is extreme for workers in the Philippines, where the right-wing government of President Rodrigo Duterte is using the pandemic as an excuse to bring in sweeping new measures targeting labour and social justice activists.

In late October, Raymond Basilio, Secretary-General of the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), joined CUPE's National Global Justice Committee by video to update them on the situation, as a new anti-terrorism law aimed at

silencing critics of the regime was rolling out across the country.

Basilio has been in hiding since 2019 because of harassment and death threats, widespread tactics used to silence activists in the Philippines. He continues to speak out and told the committee how ACT is resisting unprecedented repression, while also fighting COVID-19.

ACT has more than 220,000 members and is a long-time CUPE partner in the Philippines.

The country has been under lockdown since March 2020, but the government has failed to contain COVID-19. The anti-terrorism law and lockdown rules are providing cover for "massive human rights violations," said Basilio.

The people of the Philippines were already facing a human rights crisis before the pandemic. The situation is now far worse. Since March, more than 100,000 people have been arrested, Basilio said. People organizing to defend their rights or criticize the government,

including ACT members and leaders, are being met with escalating harassment, threats, and violence.

"The anti-terror law altered the notion that one is presumed innocent until proven guilty," said Basilio. "Under the law, one is considered guilty unless proven innocent." ACT members are being harassed online and in flyers for actions like a social media post calling for the repeal of the anti-terror law.

ACT members are also being hit hard by COVID-19. More than 2,000 educators have contracted the virus and have no support. "If you get infected, it will be you who will look for ways to pay for your medical bills and support your needs. The government allots nothing for you," said Basilio. Teachers are struggling to support students during the pandemic and are being held back by limited resources and unreliable power and internet.

The government has used the pandemic to try and stop collective bargaining, membership drives and

other ACT union activity.

Basilio credits his "very active and very brilliant members" with actions that forced the government to restart collective bargaining in three regions. ACT also won recognition of online membership applications and has recently certified a new union. Basilio says ACT is moving as much of its work online as possible, although internet service in the country can be unreliable.

ACT also has held mass actions targeting the department of education, winning more funding for teaching supplies and aid for teachers who were laid off when private schools closed.

Basilio says a long-standing campaign to suppress Indigenous Lumad land defenders by attacking community schools has also ramped up. The government has closed all schools on the island of Mindanao, leaving 8,000 Indigenous students without education services, and the Philippine army has destroyed three Indigenous schools with bombs and shells. ACT members in Mindanao have been "red-tagged" as terrorists and falsely accused of crimes.

Despite challenges and danger on so many fronts, "we are very much alive right now," Basilio told committee members.

"We must continue our fight for a just and humane society. We will continue our fight for education as a right. We must continue to fight for a country that will truly take care of its people," said Basilio.

"The support of our brothers and sisters abroad is a big help. Please continue your solidarity with us, please continue to speak on our behalf in the international arena."

■ Karin Jordan



Facing the challenges of working from home



At the recent National Sector Council Conference, held virtually in the fall of 2020, the communications sector met and discussed some of the hard truths of telework.

"We recognize that telework is now a reality for many and we need to address some of the adverse effects of working remotely," said Daljeet Matharu, the co-chairperson of the communications sector and a member of CUPE 1000.

Physical layout of the work

Employers have a duty to provide work tools and see to it that health and safety concerns of workers are addressed. There are many issues associated with the physical layout of the home office space. Teleworkers must have access to the equipment they need – computers, chairs, communication devices, etc. "Ergonomic concerns must be given their proper due because, if not, physical problems such as backaches may arise," said Brian Leclerc, a Telus worker and member of CUPE 5144.

Requirements and supervision

According to participants at the conference, many employers have shown they are flexible when it comes to telework, during the pandemic.

"Telework rules and conditions must be negotiated, and we must work to ensure that there is a clear delineation between the working lives and the private lives of our members," said Tulsa Valin-Landry, from CUPE 2815 and President of the CUPE Quebec communications sector. We must be vigilant with regards to employers potentially using electronic surveillance," she added.

Worker isolation and the potential to create different class of workers

Teleworkers face physical and social isolation. "There's a real danger of creating different classes of workers for the same job, with different wages and working conditions," said Éric Pinsonnault from CUPE 3624. "The isolation of workers represents a challenge for our unions to improve the sharing of information and maintain a sense of belonging and solidarity," added Anne Leclair, from CUPE 4502.

The work of the sector continues as we face increased technological change and remote working.

■ Pierre Ducasse

Embracing technological change from a just perspective

The pandemic has accelerated technological change and the adoption of new tools. Remote learning, working from home, and having virtual meetings went from occasional to routine in less than a year. While some of these will no doubt lose their attractiveness once COVID-19 is under

control, others will have a long-lasting impact on the way we live and work.

Public Services International refers to digitalization in public

services as a whole range of consequences stemming from the interaction between public service users and workers with new digital technologies. Thankfully, CUPE did not wait for the pandemic to start thinking about the effects of digitalization and robotics on work and workers.

In fact, at the 2019 National Convention, CUPE members identified in Strategic Directions

that the changing nature of work was threatening stable and permanent public sector jobs and that “automation, advances in artificial intelligence, and the growing reach of digital networks threatens our members’ work and their privacy.”

CUPE Quebec has established a New Technology Committee to oversee the development of artificial intelligence and other technologies such as 5G, server virtualization, and automation. “As union members, all of us will be confronted by these technological advances in one way or another in the medium to long term. We must be familiar with them to influence government authorities, prevent layoffs and negotiate working conditions adapted to this new context,” explained Tulsa Valin-Landry, acting President of the provincial Communications sector.

For digitalization to be a net positive, we must ensure it lives up to its promise of enhancing public service quality, effectiveness, and accessibility for users, while improving working conditions and creating good employment opportunities.

This is what happened to the members of CUPE 3034, the municipal workers in the Town of Conception Bay South, Newfoundland. The local pushed hard for automation to support their municipal waste collection and its efforts were well rewarded. This adaptation made it easier to tackle their health and safety issues.

“Collecting garbage is dirty, dangerous work. Automation makes that job much safer,” said Corey Mitchell, who worked for the contractor before the town brought solid waste services back in house in 2012, ending 30 years of unreliable and expensive service.

This automation was embraced as it was done publicly, without the use of a public-private partnership. This project has given workers ownership over these technological changes as they look to increase their recycling service rates for residents.

As union members this is what we aim for when we face technological change: better service, no job cuts, improved health and safety and more transparency.

■ Charles Brenchley and Ronald Boisrond



NATIONAL SECRETARY-TREASURER CHARLES FLEURY

CUPE has the technology to support members and staff

Delegates at our last national convention gave CUPE the mandate to monitor new technologies and their impacts on public services and public sector jobs to defend our members and the services they provide. Too often employers use technologies and automation to cut jobs and increase surveillance. And it is not just happening in the private sector. Automation, advances in artificial intelligence, and the growing reach of digital networks threaten our members’ work and have the potential to harm people who depend on the services they offer. The nature of work is changing, and we have to be extremely vigilant.

CUPE will continue to fight for good jobs, ensuring that technology and automation are only used to do work that is dangerous for humans and that no members lose their jobs as a direct result.

That being said, technology has the potential to improve our jobs and working conditions. This is the approach we took within CUPE. Over the past years, we made big investments in technology and worked together with our staff to implement them. These improvements helped us work better for the benefit of our members.

Technology also proved to be extremely useful for our union during the present pandemic. Early in the crisis, we focused on closing our offices and shifted to working remotely. Fortunately, our technology improvements were already in place when COVID-19 hit, and we pivoted very quickly. As a result, we were able to continue to provide quality services to members remotely or from our 68 offices throughout the past nine months.

I want to thank all our locals for their cooperation and commitment to working with the new processes and technology, in addition to all the significant work they do to support our members.

CHARLES FLEURY ONLINE  twitter.com/CUPENatSec





PHOTO CREDIT: BOBBI FLINT

CUPE 1004's new CBA bargaining committee, from left: CUPE Servicing Representative Bill Pegler, Andy Healey, Tuesday Andrigh, CUPE 1004 President Andrew Ledger, Alex Braidek, and Peter Hewlett.

Shift to community health sector honours front line workers in opioid, housing crises

An agreement reached between the Portland Housing Society (PHS) Community Services Society, the Health Employers Association of BC, and

CUPE 1004 has transferred approximately 600 CUPE health services and support workers at the Portland Hotel Society (PHS) from their local collective

agreement to an existing contract in the community health sector.

In October, these workers' collective agreement rights shifted to the Community Subsector Association of Bargaining Agents (CBA) contract. All wage adjustments and general increases of the CBA collective agreement, retroactive to April 2019, took effect for PHS CUPE 1004 members, ensuring wage protection or improvements in every classification.

"This melding of our contract to the CBA agreement is a major development for our local. It represents significant

gains for our members at the Portland Housing Society," said CUPE 1004 President Andrew Ledger.

The PHS runs 19 supportive housing and shelter buildings, and also operates several safe drug consumption sites in Vancouver and Victoria. These CUPE members—mental health, outreach and home support workers, medical and dental assistants, and food service workers—work on the frontline of the opioid, housing, and homelessness crises. The daily challenges of their work have been further complicated this year by

COVID-19.

"This really couldn't come at a better time, given the challenges so many of our members have been facing during the pandemic. Bringing these members into the CBA agreement shows respect for their vital contributions to frontline health care services."

In addition to the annual two per cent general wage increases for members in the community health sector, the CBA wage grid was recently adjusted to reflect low wage redress in moving the community subsector to parity with facilities.

■ Dan Gawthorp

Public sector negotiations in Québec

Quebec's 400,000 public sector employees have been bargaining since their collective agreements, expired March 31, 2020.

Preparations for these negotiations, which are being coordinated by CUPE, began in the fall of 2019 and are being conducted under the umbrella of the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), in conjunction with three major affiliates in the public sector: Local 298 of the Quebec Union of Service Employees, the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union, and Local 800 of the Service Employee Union. To date, the proposals from the Government of Quebec have

been unsatisfactory. They have proposed paltry wage increases of 1.75% (2020), 1.75% (2021), and 1.5% (2022).

The central issues are the establishment of a new wage structure in 2022, a significantly improved employer contribution to group insurance, an increased ratio of full-time positions to head off employment precarity, and better life-work balance through the reduction of atypical schedules.

The talks are taking place during a pandemic, which hammered the health care system during the first wave. There have been close to 7000 deaths across the province, particularly in

long-term care facilities. More than 18,000 health care employees have come down with COVID-19, and 12 have died.

"The government is injecting \$14 billion into infrastructure, in other words, concrete. It is high time that it invests in public services, in persons who, among other things, educate our children and take care of the ill and our seniors. Public services must be a priority for this government. It must act now and improve our members' working conditions," said Benoît Bouchard, President of CUPE Quebec.

Last September, two tentative agreements were

reached with the bargaining team representing the patient attendants and health and social services auxiliaries. The former deals with the staffing of permanent full-time positions across the province, and the latter focuses on integrating new patient attendants into the health care system. We have solutions, and an agreement can be reached.

Another piece of encouraging data emerged. A CROP survey commissioned by the QFL, and its public sector affiliates, said that the majority of Quebecers (75%) believe that an agreement to renew the collective agreements of government employees would help in the

fight against COVID-19.

This fall, CUPE and the QFL called on their members and the public to mobilize in order to force the government to negotiate collective agreements that would significantly improve working conditions, and thereby, alleviate problems of recruiting and retaining staff. In November, workers from all sectors were invited to participate in a gesture of solidarity and take a 15-minute pause at 10 a.m. to salute the men and women working on the front lines in the health care and education sectors.

■ Ronald Boisrond