

Jan Simpson, National President, Canadian Union of Postal Workers – Presentation to the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, House of Commons of Canada regarding COVID-19 – May 22, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to all the members of the committee for giving us the opportunity to present the point of view of our members in these extraordinary and worrisome times. I first want to acknowledge that I am speaking to you from unceded Anishinabe territory.

Let me start by presenting who we are. The Canadian Union of Postal Workers represents 50,000 workers across every region of our country.

The majority of our members work at Canada Post, but we also represent workers in the private sector, such as couriers, cleaners, and first responders. In short, our union represents the vital frontline workers that never stopped working when confinement orders were given.

I want to salute their work, courage and sense of community. It's not easy going to work when you are told a vicious virus is spreading. Also, I want to thank the public for your support.

I will mostly concentrate my presentation on the issues facing our members working at Canada Post, where federal jurisdictions apply. But let's be clear, all the principles of health and safety for workers should apply to all work places, no matter the jurisdiction.

Our members are worried about contracting the virus at work and the anxiety level rises when you don't know if you will put your own family in danger. We must not treat our frontline workers as though they are expendable.

This is not theory. Up until to now, we have been made aware of 72 cases of postal workers at Canada Post facilities who tested positive for Covid-19.

The number of CUPW members testing positive for COVID-19 is on the rise. However, our union is encountering barriers in our ability to protect these workers.

And that brings me to our first issue.

Our union has a responsibility to our members and a part to play in ensuring their safety at work. We have negotiated provisions in our collective agreements, and labour law, that require Canada Post Corporation to fully involve the union's health and safety representatives from beginning to end, and comprehensively, when there is a health and safety hazard present.

This is the only way we can assure our members that appropriate measures have been taken to protect them.

We have Local Joint Health and Safety Committees, and a National Joint Health and Safety Committee.

Involvement and inclusion of these committees on public health agency methods, investigations, recommendations and resolution have been very uneven from one jurisdiction to another.

In some cases, Canada Post and the public health agency don't properly or promptly inform or consult with our joint committees.

Documentation from public health that should be shared with the joint committees is not always shared. In some cases, we don't know whether such documentation even exists or has been provided in writing to Canada Post Corporation.

Our issue is a combination of Canada Post not doing enough and public health authorities not doing enough.

We know we have a productive part to play in saving lives, within our membership and beyond.

The government must make sure that the Public Health Agency of Canada collaborates with provincial public health agencies, when intervening in a case of COVID-19 in the workplace, to include health and safety representatives from the unions.

Further, we urge the federal government to instruct Canada Post Corporation to be inclusive and transparent with joint health and safety committees because lives are on the line.

The second issue I want raise is the availability of personal protective equipment.

At the beginning of the crisis, our members struggled to access the PPEs they needed. We understand it was a struggle for everybody, but we had to push management to make sure our members were protected.

The situation is better than it was, but to this day we don't know if the inventory is enough to keep us going. As an example, Canada Post is now providing masks after we had been insisting for weeks, but management is by-passing health and safety committees to prioritize the distribution.

For all PPEs, we want to make sure our members are a priority in procurement plans of the government.

We know that we are in unprecedented times. Our central point is to make sure workers are involved at every step in the decision making. They are at the frontlines; they deserve nothing less.

In conclusion, governments and elected officials have to learn and continue to learn from this crisis. One thing is evident, the state has a strategic role to play.

Canada Post is a vital public service with infrastructure present in every community.

CUPW, for years, has been promoting a diversified role for the post office to better serve our communities and be central in reducing greenhouse emissions.

We can use this public infrastructure like other countries, to provide check in services for seniors, postal banking services for underserved communities and electrify the Canada Post fleet. We call our plan Delivering Community Power; it needs to be part of your discussion as we reopen economic activities.

Thank you

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