

Workers in Canada can't afford to get sick

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Front-line workers stage a 'die-in' protest to demand paid sick days in front of the Ontario provincial legislature in Toronto. (Photo: Carlos Osorio / Reuters)

Toronto, January 25 (RHC)-- When Carolina Lopez woke up with a sore throat in November, her mind immediately went to the worst-case scenario: COVID-19. For the Toronto resident, who works two jobs as a restaurant server and cleaner, a COVID-positive diagnosis would not only affect her health – it could mean losing the pay she needs for rent, groceries and transportation.

“Every time you go outside, you are at risk of getting sick and you just can’t afford to get sick,” Lopez told reporters. “If you get sick and stay home, you’re not going to receive money to pay for your basic needs.” Lopez ultimately did not have COVID-19 and she recovered from her illness after a few days.

But her fear that a positive COVID-19 diagnosis would spell financial disaster is shared by thousands of essential workers around the world and in Canada, where a surge of infections is pushing healthcare systems in many provinces to the brink.

The second wave has also prompted growing calls for paid sick leave in Canada’s most populous province, Ontario, where worker advocates, city officials and public health experts say workers cannot stay home when they are ill, which fuels the spread of the virus.

Ontario on January 22nd reported a seven-day average of 2,703 new daily COVID-19 cases – and the province overtook Quebec over the weekend to record the most total infections in the country, at more than 252,000 since the pandemic began.

Amid recent rising cases and hospitalizations, the Ontario government issued an emergency stay-at-home order earlier this month, imposing stricter lockdown measures until at least February 10 across the province.

But Premier Doug Ford did not address the growing demand for paid sick leave for essential workers – fuelling frustrations among workers’ advocates who say such a measure is necessary to stem infections.

Shortly after he was elected in 2018, Ford moved to eliminate emergency leave provisions for workers in Ontario that were introduced by the previous government, including two guaranteed sick days. Currently, Ontario workers can take three unpaid sick days once they have worked for two weeks. The province also passed new rules to allow employees to take “job-protected infectious disease emergency leave” for reasons related to COVID-19 – but that too is unpaid.

There are currently 256 workplace outbreaks in the province, according to most recent data, including 46 in retail and 24 in food processing.

Dr Eileen de Villa, Toronto’s medical officer of health, recently recommended Ontario guarantee five permanent paid sick days for workers after three months of employment. That figure, she said, should increase to 10 days during an emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

De Villa said in her report that only 42 percent of Canadian workers have access to paid sick days, while that rate drops to around 10 percent for low-wage workers, many of whom have been deemed essential during the pandemic.

Toronto’s board of health also urged the province to take up de Villa’s recommendations on paid sick days, as well as ensure all workers could take protected, paid leave to care for loved ones who are ill.

Joe Cressy, a Toronto city councillor and chair of the board, said: “The truth is, COVID will continue to spread through essential workplaces and our communities unless we guarantee paid sick leave now.”



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