

McKenna, Neil

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A list of implementation ideas from Labour after a call hosted by CLC

Additional Labour Priorities for Income Support Measures in the COVID-19 Crisis

March 21, 2020

Employment Insurance

1. Government should immediately and automatically approve every EI applicant and immediately begin paying out \$450/week EI benefits. Details regarding eligibility criteria, overpayments and source of EI income, whether CRA (EI Emergency Support/Care Benefit) or ESDC (EI regular/special benefits), can be sorted out and rectified after the fact.

The top priority for government is getting income quickly into the hands of workers and families. The spike in EI claims is overloading Service Canada and threatening further delays in rolling out desperately needed benefits. Although ESDC is struggling to simplify administration, the system is too confusing and bureaucratic for most workers. All bureaucratic and supervisory obstacles that interfere with immediately getting money to needy individuals must be suspended.

2. Set a single, nation-wide 360-hour threshold for qualifying for all EI benefits, so that more workers can receive the EI benefits they have paid for.
3. Immediately eliminate all job search requirements.
4. The waiver of the one-week waiting period for EI Sickness Benefits should be extended to EI Regular benefit claims.
5. Waive the EI regular benefit requirement for at least 7 consecutive days without work and pay in the last 52 weeks to provide access to EI benefits for workers suffering from reduced work-hours
6. Increase the benefit rate from 55% to at least 75%. The 55% benefit rate is too low for low-income earners, and inadequate for modest and middle-income workers to cover mortgage payments and other costs.
7. As was done during the 2003 SARS epidemic, introduce special EI income support measures for full-time and part-time workers in the health care sector, who are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19;
8. Expand the EI supplement beyond low-income families with children and establish a minimum weekly EI benefit floor to prevent unemployed workers falling into poverty.

9. Implement enhanced EI measures that accommodate those service-sector workers whose income comes partly from tips and gratuities (restaurants, casinos, taxis, etc).
10. Immediately increase the duration of EI sick leave from 15 to 26 weeks and extend the maximum 45-week duration of EI regular benefits so that no one exhausts their EI benefits while the crisis persists.
11. Provide special assistance to workers returning from maternity and parental leave who have exhausted their EI benefits and lack sufficient hours to access regular benefits;
12. Drastically simplify and facilitate immediate access Work Sharing, as well as remove restriction on public-sector access.
13. Increase Service Canada call-centre staff and increase phone lines available for EI claimants and employers. Provide unions, legal clinics and others working with larger groups with single points of contact (e.g. Regional Liaisons) in order to problem-solve, clarify process and rules, access Work Sharing, etc.
14. Suspend the requirement to repay EI Regular Benefits when filing of an income tax return for the 2019 tax year.
15. Ensure that COVID-19-related EI benefits don't diminish eligibility for other EI benefits after the crisis is over, including parental or regular benefits.

Additional Assistance

1. Federal government should introduce 14 days paid sick leave under the Canada Labour Code.
2. Increase the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) to assist vulnerable seniors pay for grocery home delivery and other added costs.
3. Require that as a condition of any loans, loan guarantees, tax and regulatory relief to businesses, employees must continue to have access to extended health benefits and retirees to other post-employment benefits.
4. Provide funding, goods (especially food and medical supplies) and information resources to support Indigenous communities in developing and implementing their response plans.

Personal Protective Equipment

1. Ensure that appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) is consistently available to workers performing vital services at elevated risk of exposure to COVID-19. Airport screening officers, grocery store workers, security workers, health sector workers, corrections officers and even construction workers are being denied proper PPE or being given contradictory and varying levels of protection and advice.

Provincial and Municipal Support:

1. Provide health care services free of charge regardless of citizenship, including to migrant and undocumented people and families.
2. Necessary prescription drugs should be made available free of charge to everyone who needs them.
3. Governments should immediately and significantly increase social assistance and disability benefit rates, relax eligibility restrictions, and eliminate work search requirements.
4. Governments should increase the provincial sales tax credit, complementing the GST/HST credit increase.
5. Guarantee and expand paid sick leave for all workers.
6. Implement a rent freeze and increase rental assistance for low-income residents and seniors. Freeze evictions and foreclosures.
7. Implement a moratorium on all utility disconnections for individuals and small businesses.
8. Provide dedicated resources to legal aid and advocacy groups to provide information and advocacy for low-income individuals needing help navigating government services and systems.
9. Provide expanded support for services to address and respond to increased mental health needs, substance abuse, and domestic violence during the crisis.

Additional Steps

1. All levels of government should commit to Canadians that all civil liberties and Constitutional rights will be protected during the crisis.

2. The federal government should create a standing joint task force consisting of unions, employers and other key stakeholders to monitor and provide advice on emergency economic measures.
3. With the consent of plan members, provide appropriate solvency funding relief for defined-benefit pension plans hit by the collapse in share prices and falling long-term interest rates.