March 11, 2020

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing today, on behalf of over 3 million Canadian workers who are members of the Canadian Labour Congress, to urge you to immediately appoint the Minister of Labour, the Honourable Filomena Tassi, to the new Cabinet Committee on the federal response to the coronavirus (COVID-19).

The coronavirus is already having a negative impact on economic activity and working Canadians are increasingly concerned about their health and safety. This includes workers who have extensive interaction with the general public as part of their jobs, but especially workers who are called upon to provide services to vulnerable populations and people who are already infected with the virus.

While I appreciate the leadership that has been displayed by the current members of this Cabinet Committee, the Minister of Labour can provide unique and valuable insights to the measures required to protect the health and safety of working Canadians and reduce the potential risks to our labour markets and economy.

The Minister of Labour, working with unions and employers, has a crucial role to play in ensuring that all guidance on infection prevention and control is grounded in the precautionary principle and includes an occupational health and safety lens. This includes implementing engineering controls and administrative controls, providing prevention training and personal protective equipment, and working with health and safety committees and unions representing workers on the frontlines of the outbreak.

Further, the Minister of Labour has a vital role to play in ensuring that workers who are experiencing symptoms and choose to stay home are not at risk of being fired, disciplined, or facing income insecurity. This is a major concern for low-income workers and vulnerable workers in precarious jobs. About half of Canadian workers live paycheck to paycheck. Low-wage workers typically do not have paid sick leave from work; if they don’t show up, they don’t get paid. Their jobs are also at risk if they don’t come to work. A majority of working Canadians have no access to paid sick leave at work, and many workers lack the 600 hours of insurable employment to access Employment Insurance sickness benefits.

No worker in Canada should ever be forced to choose between keeping their job, paying their bills, and protecting their health and the public interest. The Minister of Labour, in collaboration with unions and employers, can bring forward a number of policy measures to the Cabinet Committee that would protect the employment and income security of workers, while also slowing the spread of the virus and its impact on the economy.

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Once again, I urge you to appoint the Minister of Labour to the new Cabinet Committee and assure all Canadians that the federal government is prioritizing the health, well-being and economic security of working Canadians in its response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I look forward to working together on this crucial issue going forward.

Sincerely,

Hassan Yussuff
President

cc:  The Honourable Filomena Tassi, Minister of Labour