

March 13, 2020

Honourable Brian Pallister  
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Honourable Scott Fielding  
Minister of Finance  
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Mr. Wab Kinew  
Leader of the Official Opposition  
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Mr. Dougald Lamont  
Leader of the Manitoba Liberal Party  
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Dear Sirs,

We appreciate that elected and public health officials, and all of Manitoba's skilled and dedicated health care workers, are presently doing everything they can to help keep Manitobans safe and secure and contain the spread of COVID-19.

Given the fact that there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 here in Manitoba, I am writing you on behalf of the 100,000 working Manitobans represented by the Manitoba Federation of Labour to request that Manitoba immediately implement 14 days of paid job-protected leave for all workers in our province. We also call on the Government of Manitoba to issue guidance to employers on workers' rights to refuse unsafe work.

As you know, the Public Health Agency of Canada guidelines suggest that all people who feel sick should refrain from going into work and self-isolate at home. However, for many Manitobans, staying home because they are sick means not getting paid. This is particularly important for those Manitobans working in lower-wage jobs and in the service sector. The vast majority of these workers do not have job-protected paid sick days provided by their employers. We also know that there will be Manitobans who need to stay home from work to care for a loved one who is self-isolating or who has COVID-19, and this paid job-protected leave should be available to them as well.

Many of these people are living paycheque- to-paycheque and simply cannot afford to go without pay for days, or perhaps even weeks, on end. Forcing them into deciding between doing the right thing from a public health perspective and paying the bills is an impossible choice, which can be solved by government.

It is not fair to ask thousands of Manitobans to go without pay for potentially prolonged periods of time without providing a robust system of protection for their jobs and their income. Without legislated requirements for paid employment leave, the fact is that many Manitobans will have no choice but to go to work sick – thereby undermining efforts by public health officials to contain the virus outbreak.

In the case of COVID-19, the public health guidelines recommend 14 days of self-isolation for specific at-risk groups. In essence, many workers are being asked to stay at home without pay for two weeks. The rules are stacked against workers and many of them have no choice but to go to work sick.

It is unfair to ask workers to bear the burden of public-health emergencies like the one that will soon be upon us without providing them the support needed to slow the spread of the disease.

The Employment Insurance changes announced by the federal government last week are helpful and welcome. However, the EI coverage is only available to workers who have been quarantined. It is not at all clear that workers who follow the advice of public health officials and self-isolate would fit that definition, and many working Manitobans are not eligible for EI. It's also important to note that even if workers qualify for this program, workers would receive only 55 percent of their employment income up to a maximum of \$573/week. For many, that would not be enough to remove the financial disincentive to staying home.

The Government of Manitoba can play its part in addressing this situation by changing the rules to allow all working Manitobans to take 14 paid job-protected days per year. This protection needs to be available to all workers – not only those who have been with their employers for prolonged periods of time. It also needs to be made available to workers whose employers misclassify employees as “independent contractors” to avoid their obligations under Employment Standards rules.

Ensuring that workers do not have to choose between public health recommendations and being able to pay the bills is the right thing to do, and will help workers, the health of Manitobans, and our economy. As you know, if we are going to slow the spread, we have to take action now.

In Solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Rebeck', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Kevin Rebeck  
President of the Manitoba Federation of Labour