March 19, 2021 |

Op-Eds

B.C. can continue leading Canada with paid sick leave protection for all workers

by Laird Cronk and Sussanne Skidmore

There are many measures we've taken as a province and a country to slow or stop the spread of COVID-19: Physical distancing, mask mandates and more.

But there's one measure we could be taking that would get us through this pandemic with fewer cases and a lower toll. What's more, it would make our community and our economy stronger in the face of everyday infectious diseases as well as future pandemics.

That measure is paid sick leave for every worker.

Right now, over half the workers in B.C. have no paid sick leave at all; if they miss a day's work, they lose a day's pay. When they wake up feeling sick, they face an impossible choice between staying home and paying the bills.

That dilemma isn't just a personal one. When we penalize sick workers for staying home, the result is more — and more severe — workplace outbreaks.

The new federal Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, introduced last fall, is a stop-gap measure that certainly helps, but falls far short of what workers need. And while that hasn't stopped some

conservative premiers from using it as an excuse not to bring in true paid sick leave, the gaps are glaring.

The federal sick benefit doesn't replace a worker's full wages; the maximum amount works out to less than the equivalent of a full-time minimum wage. It's only for COVID-related leave, and it ends when the pandemic does. If you're away for less than half a week, you get nothing. And when you do claim it, you must absorb the lost pay and wait to find out if you'll be reimbursed.

No wonder there's so much momentum for universal paid sick leave building across the country. In B.C. alone, our polling has consistently shown three-quarters of the population supports it. Vancouver's city council voted unanimously last month in favour of paid sick leave, and the mayors of Ontario's 29 largest cities have said it "is needed immediately as a measure to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and protect the health of essential workers." And last month, every provincial and territorial federation of labour released a united statement calling for paid sick leave for every worker throughout Canada.

Once paid sick leave is in place, we'll all come out ahead: Governments will see lower health costs, and our communities will benefit from a healthier, safer population. Employers will also benefit from paid sick leave with higher productivity, fewer days lost to employee sickness and higher customer confidence in their own safety — not to mention the reduced likelihood of an outbreak triggering a shutdown. And labour's call for paid sick leave includes a provision for initial financial support from government to lend a hand to employers that are still struggling from the pandemic.

The benefits from paid sick leave go beyond COVID-19. It helps prevent the spread of all infectious diseases, from the common cold to seasonal flu — including its deadlier variants. And we're far better protected from future pandemics when workplaces serve not as microbial incubators but firebreaks.Since the pandemic began, British Columbia has consistently led Canada with steps to ensure workers are at the forefront of our response — from being early out of the gate with job-protected sick leave to financial support and rent protections for laid-off workers and presumptive workers' compensation coverage for COVID-19. Our country continues looking to B.C. as the leader in protecting workers, and this is the time for our province to once again rise to that challenge.

But we need to act now. While the vaccine rollout is in its early stages, the pandemic isn't done with us yet. With contagious new variants on the rise and the clock ticking on vaccine deliveries, it's urgent that we move now so we don't lose ground on the progress we've made. You can learn more and add your voice at FutureForAll.ca.

This has been a difficult year for businesses, communities, families and workers alike. We've all paid a heavy price in this pandemic. But by bringing in paid sick leave coverage for every worker, B.C. has an opportunity to ensure a legacy that lasts long after the last dose of vaccine is administered.