September 28, 2021 |

Briefs

# Submission to BC Budget Consultations 2022

**Read the full report here.**

## Introduction

Throughout the pandemic workers have been there, providing essential services, from food delivery to health care and beyond. It is due to the sacrifices of essential workers and their families that so many others were able to safely work from home.

While the pandemic did not create them, COVID-19 has exposed inequities and gaps in our public health and social safety systems. The pandemic impacted some communities much more heavily than others. Women, racialized workers, new British Columbians and migrant workers have been hit hardest — both by the outbreak itself and by the economic insecurity it exacerbated. Too many workers have been pushed outside the structures built to protect them. They find themselves in limbo, unsure whether employment protections apply to them.

The BC government has a responsibility to address these gaps as part of its economic recovery plan. That plan must put workers at the centre of every decision and tangibly reduce inequities. Below, we outline some concrete proposals that can meaningfully close those gaps.

### Keeping employers accountable

In 2019, important changes were made by the BC NDP government at the Employment Standards Branch to ensure that workers facing a problem could access a person and not just a self-help kit. However, the Branch has not recovered from the cuts made by the former BC Liberal government, or from the influx of new complaints spurred by the elimination of the self-help kit. Now, workers face unconscionably long delays. It could take more than a year before a worker hears from a case worker, let alone has their issue resolved.

Justice delayed is justice denied. And it is lower-wage, more marginalized workers that are being hurt the most.

There are also thousands of misclassified workers in our province who lack access to justice. They have been told they are independent contractors, but for the majority, this is inaccurate. When misclassified as independent contractors, they are excluded from basic protections under the *Employment Standards Act*, including access to paid sick leave, minimum wage and statutory holidays. A misclassified worker is left with no employment rights as they face the long wait for a determination from the Employment Standards Branch.

The Employment Standards Branch has a smaller budget and fewer offices and employees than it had 20 years ago. Yet there are well over half a million more workers in our province today, as well as a new registry for employers using the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, and expanded responsibilities to support workers flowing from the *Employment Standards Amendment Act*. In addition, the Branch is tasked with delivering on the proactive enforcement that workers rely on to ensure that they are treated fairly and that employers are living up to the minimum standards of the law.

The BC government must work urgently to ensure that when workers come forward and ask for support with rights violations by their employers, the system has the capacity to support them. There is no economic recovery without workers. We cannot leave them behind. Let’s make sure that the Employment Standards Branch is adequately funded to deliver the needed services and supports.

*The BC Federation calls on the government to:*

- Allocate an additional $14 million of annual funding to the Employment Standards Branch in budget 2022.

The BC government has helped businesses weather the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic. Unfortunately, none of the range of financial supports for businesses have been accompanied by conditions that ensure workers see the benefits and protections they deserve. This was a particular issue in the hospitality sector, where many lower-wage workers from equity-seeking groups lost their jobs despite their employers pocketing government grants and wage subsidies. When the BC government provides financial support or incentives to businesses, at a minimum it must include guarantees that workers will be rehired and keep their jobs.

*The BC Federation calls on the government to:*

- Ensure that financial support for businesses comes with clear conditions that ensure that workers retain or are rehired to their jobs.

## Ensure success of skilled trade certification

To spur economic recovery, governments often turn to infrastructure projects. But too often, we have seen these projects reinforce inequities rather than close existing gaps. We need to make sure that women, Indigenous workers and members of other equity groups benefit from these investments with new skills and good jobs. New initiatives like Skilled Trades Certification and continued investments in programs like the BC Centre for the Women in the Trades will support women and members of other equity groups to build family and community supporting careers. The government needs to make sure adequate funding is there to support this transition so workers can succeed.

*The BC Federation calls on the government to:*

- Increase the budget of the Industry Training Authority by 25% to ensure the success of the Skilled Trades Certification program.

## Reduce barriers to unionization

Unions are one of the key counterweights to economic inequality and gender and racial wage disparities. Not only do they lift the health and safety standards, and wages and benefits of their members, they also raise the floor for all workers. When workers come together to improve their working conditions by forming a union, they need the resources to ensure that process is adjudicated quickly and efficiently. Further support is needed to continue the modernization of the Labour Relations Board and its services.

*The BC Federation calls on the government to:*

- Increase the budget of the Labour Relations Board by an additional $1 million per year.

## Conclusion

Investing in the structures that support workers has tremendous payoff. It provides stability, security, safety and justice for workers and their families. It makes our communities stronger and will ensure, as our province begins to recover from the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we do not leave anyone behind.

For the committee's reference, we have also attached two submissions we made to the Premier's Economic Recovery Task Force in 2020 outlining a number of other important investments the province should consider.

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