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Releases

BCFED: Public Health Order compliance necessary to keep workers safe

(Unceded Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam territories — Vancouver, BC) – BC's labour movement is urging British Columbians to comply with new regional health orders, to address rising COVID-19 cases across the Lower Mainland and keep workers safe.

"The new restrictions are targeted to the Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health Authorities, but we urge British Columbians in every area of the province to be vigilant," said Laird Cronk, President of the BC Federation of Labour (BCFED). "This is a critical time for public health and for our economy. If we want to avoid a further lockdown, our focus must be on keeping workers safe."

Essential and front-line workers are continuing to play a critical role during this pandemic, Cronk said. "From grocery stores to hospitals, workers are taking care of us and we are all responsible for keeping them safe — including the BC government and its agencies, as well as employers and the public."

The BC government, Provincial Health Office and Workers' Compensation Board must ensure the new health orders are followed, Cronk said. "This should include increased inspections to enforce the orders and the issuing of appropriate penalties and fines if an employer fails to ensure a safe workplace." The BCFED continues to call on the province to provide WCB prevention officers with all the tools and resources required to ensure they can enforce PHO orders in workplaces.

The newest public health order is clear in requiring employers to review and redouble their efforts on their COVID-19 safety plans, Cronk said. “Employers have a responsibility to collaborate with workers through health and safety committees: to develop and review safety plans, communicate those plans and make sure workers have the resources and training they need,” he said.

“Health and safety committees are the backbone of safe workplaces, and joint committees and worker representatives are required in most workplaces in BC. Workers are in the best position to identify hazards, conduct risk assessments and put solutions into practice. Effective plans are built on joint participation and strong communication.”

And finally, he said, the public has a responsibility too. “Failing to follow health orders both at home and when shopping and accessing services in their community puts workers at risk,” he said. "Everyone should be maintaining the appropriate physical distance and wearing masks when appropriate. Workplace rules are there to protect workers and to help keep us all safe. They must be respected.”

Eight months into this pandemic, everyone is feeling the strain, Cronk said. "We are very concerned about the risk of occupational disease, but we’re also seeing an increase in mental health injuries — both in the traditional workplace and among those working from home. Government, the PHO, WCB and employers have a crucial role in providing services and supports for workers who may be experiencing mental health conditions.

“We’ll only be successful in overcoming this pandemic when we all work together.”