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Releases

BCFED welcomes federal announcement of new pandemic supports — but it’s not paid sick leave

(Unceded Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam territories — Vancouver, BC) The federal government’s announcement of new pandemic-related benefits and changes to employment insurance are needed and welcome, but are no substitute for permanent paid sick leave that all workers need, BC Federation of Labour (BCFED) president Laird Cronk said today.

“The transition from the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) to employment insurance is welcome. Workers will get some much-needed stability and certainty of the benefits available to them as we face the next year of the pandemic,” Cronk said. The new Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit will also provide badly-needed support for caregivers, he added.

“These benefits are especially good news for people with precarious and gig employment, who have been disproportionately impacted by pandemic-related job losses,” said Cronk.

The Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit offers two one-week EI benefit periods to help the many workers who have no paid sick leave comply with public health guidance around self-isolation for 14 days in case of COVID symptoms. However, this proposal falls well short of a comprehensive paid sick leave plan, Cronk warned.

Specifically:

- The Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit doesn't replace full income for most workers, instead paying a flat $500 per week.
- The new benefit doesn't offer support for workers who only miss a day or two of work and appears to apply only to COVID-19-related illness and symptoms.
- Unlike paid sick leave, the new benefit places the onus on workers to apply, and it's unclear how long they'll need to wait until they receive their pay or if their job is protected while away from work.
- The plan covers the next year of the pandemic and isn't permanent.

"This is a good start, but it still leaves too many workers having to decide whether they can afford to stay home and follow public health guidance when they're sick," Cronk said.

The BCFED released a paid sick leave plan in July that includes permanent job-protected paid sick leave at full pay, as well as ten days of COVID-specific leave during the pandemic.

"The test we have to meet is simple: No worker should ever have to make the untenable choice between staying home when they're sick and being able to pay the bills," Cronk said. "Today's announcement gets us part of the way there, but critical adjustments are needed to fill significant gaps and bring us over the finish line."