

Social Justice Vestry Motion 2022: Justice for Workers

“We, the vestry of [name of parish] urge the provincial government to support Ontario’s most vulnerable workers by passing legislation to implement the following measures:

- 1) 10 days of employer-paid sick leave per year for all workers, without requiring workers to submit doctor’s notes, with an additional 14 days’ sick leave during public health emergencies.
- 2) Require employers to give workers a minimum number of hours per week (based on the job) and to give reasonable advance notice of work schedules.
- 3) Require employers to provide equal pay and benefits to all workers doing the same work, whether they are part-time, temporary, or contract workers, and regardless of immigration status.”

The Social Justice & Advocacy Committee of the Diocese, with the support of the College of Bishops, commends the above motion for parishes to consider and present at their upcoming Vestry meeting.

The Bible calls us to justice for those who are most vulnerable, including vulnerable workers in our society. After God’s people were brought out of slavery into freedom, they were reminded to treat their hired labourers – including “sojourners in the land” – with fairness and dignity (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Likewise, Paul’s letter to Timothy repeats the adages “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” and “The labourer deserves to be paid.” (1 Timothy 5:18)

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that many workers in essential workplaces – from health-care and long-term care facilities to manufacturing, warehousing, and logistics, farms, food processing industries and grocery stores – are precariously employed. This means that they are not only low-paid but that their employment is also characterized by uncertain hours and/or a lack of workplace benefits and protections. For instance, workers who make less than \$33,000 per year are also those least likely to have paid sick days. Part-time workers not only are frequently excluded from workplace benefit programs, but face uncertainty about their hours of work from week to week, making it difficult to plan their lives, arrange for childcare, or accept other employment to be able to make enough income to meet their needs.

Precarious work has a harmful effect on the physical, mental, and emotional health of workers, and their families, with repercussions felt in the wider community. During the pandemic, we have seen many workplaces become hubs of COVID-19 transmission. When the employment laws allow employers to hire people at sub-poverty wages and in dangerous working conditions without adequate protection, these workers pay for this with their health and even with their lives.

Low-wage workers who lack employment benefits and face erratic schedules are also overwhelmingly likely to be vulnerable due to gender, racialization, immigration status (such as newcomers and migrant or undocumented workers) and disability. Decent work is thus not just a matter of economic justice, but a matter of gender and racial justice as well.

The 2017 Changing Workplaces Review examined the growth of precarious work in Ontario and recommended measures to level the playing field for vulnerable workers. Many of these measures were

included in Bill 148 brought in by the previous provincial government. However, after a new provincial government was elected in 2018, many of the provisions of Bill 148 were repealed or reduced.

Paid Sick Days allow people to stay home and not pass on illness to co-workers and customers. They also allow parents to stay home with a sick child without jeopardizing their income or job security. A recent study found a 40% reduction in flu transmission when paid sick days were introduced. Had Ontario had paid sick days before the pandemic hit, our rates of workplace-related COVID transmission would have been significantly reduced.

In April 2021, after months of pressure and with COVID case numbers soaring, the provincial government finally brought in a temporary provision for three paid sick days in certain circumstances. This provision not only does not provide enough days; it is only available for certain reasons related to COVID, requires the worker to apply for the benefit, and is set to expire in July 2022. Also, this measure entitles the employer to be reimbursed by the government for providing the benefit. In other words, public funds are being used to subsidize those employers unwilling to provide this benefit while those who already do so have been covering the cost themselves. This is not fair to the good employers.

While 10 sick days might be enough in ordinary times, during public health crises like the COVID pandemic, additional days are needed to allow workers to comply with testing and self-isolation requirements, which can quickly use up a worker's allotted sick days.

Fair Scheduling: Uncertainty over the number of hours of work and what one's schedule will be makes it difficult for workers to know how much money they will make, or to arrange childcare, never mind supplementary income-earning opportunities or additional education and training to help them find better jobs. This creates mental stress, jeopardizes the health of workers, and keeps them from being able to give their all to their work. Having to juggle more than one job because hours are uncertain at one workplace is one reason that COVID-19 was so easily spread in long-term care homes during the first wave, due to care workers working in multiple facilities. Allowing workers to know the minimum hours number of hours they can expect from a particular job, and giving them reasonable advance notice of their schedules, would help them plan their childcare and other work or study arrangements, bringing greater stability into their lives.

Equal Pay for Equal Work: Allowing discrimination in pay and benefits between full-time workers and those who are part-time, temporary, or contract workers makes employers more likely to create precarious jobs. It can even create situations where workers earn less than minimum wage, because of what is taken off by the temp organization or subcontractor. Bill 148 abolished these distinctions, but that provision was repealed after the current government came to power. It's time to treat these workers equally for doing equal work.

In addition, migrant workers and others who do not have permanent residency status are at risk of deportation if they speak up about dangerous working conditions or unjust treatment. These are some of the most vulnerable workers in Ontario, and they must be able to enforce and exercise their rights as well.

The pandemic has taught us that when workers are protected, all of us are better protected. More importantly to us as Christians, we need to realize that when we advocate for justice and dignity for workers, we are re-aligning ourselves with God's desire for our life together.