



Canadian Centre for
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worklife

Lots to Consider this Labour Day

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September marks the end of summer, the return to school and Labour Day, an opportune time to step back and reflect upon the world of work, and the well-being of all workers.

Labour-force issues are never static, but the past three years have been unprecedented in terms of what workers have faced. The coronavirus pandemic saw public-health concerns drive the shutdown of major sections of the economy, here in Canada and globally. Millions of Canadian workers were forced out of their jobs.

Many more workers, performing essential jobs such as in health care, long-term care, retail foods and transportation, had to remain on the job, often in dangerous conditions. When this occurred, many always-present but rarely discussed labour force issues emerged and were widely publicized.

The public learned a majority of the Canadian workforce had little or no right to paid sick leave, an obvious dilemma for workers who depend on a paycheque but are told to stay home if they display any COVID-type conditions.

We also learned many “essential” occupations pay poorly. Most health-care aides, working at the bedside in hospitals and long-term care facilities, earn less than \$20 per hour. Many work full-time hours but cannot obtain a full-time job, so they work at two or three facilities.

COVID-19 both exposed and interrupted this method of operation.

At-home or remote working became a reality for about 40 per cent of the workforce. Much has been written about workers not wanting to return to their offices; not so much has been written about increasing employer monitoring and surveillance of remote workers.

The New York Times recently reported on increased digital productivity monitoring, including a story of hospital chaplains who receive “productivity points” based on how many terminally ill patients they see in a day.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that most employers have no intention of allowing remote work without demanding enhanced digital surveillance.

At a macro level, we have witnessed in recent decades some disturbing trends, including an increasing share of the economy’s output going to corporate profits, with the share going to workers’ wages declining.

Unionization rates, particularly in the private sector, have declined sharply. The recent uptick in organizing in the U.S. is a good sign, but employers tying up certification applications in legal proceedings, sometimes for years, are realities that

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aren't going away.

Then there is inflation, which is hitting 30-year highs and threatens to reduce the already-declining real wages of many workers. Sadly, but predictably, we recently heard the governor of the Bank of Canada urging a business audience to avoid long-term contracts with inflation-level wage hikes.

Canadian Labour Congress president Bea Bruske correctly admonished the governor, reminding him it is not his job to undermine the collective-bargaining rights of Canadian workers.

Globally, the picture is more dismissal when it comes to workers' rights. Britain's *The Guardian* gained access to 124,000 leaked documents, the so-called Uber files. They show a mammoth corporate entity spending millions on a global lobby to destroy the taxi industry and free up Uber drivers to work whenever they want, not as employees, but as independent operators.

The leaked documents show Uber's former CEO stating in reply to violent demonstrations by France's taxi drivers against Uber operators, "I think it's worth it, violence guarantee(s) success."

Uber drivers represent the fastest-growing segment of most labour markets — so-called "gig" workers, who receive no benefits, no pensions and no protection by even base-level employment standards legislation.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the perils of long global supply chains, and just how dependent we are on foreign-produced goods. Recently, there has been more focus on the perils of modern slavery practices

when it comes to production of goods for export to developed countries, including Canada.

Here too, Canada trails the U.S., Britain and France when it comes to confronting corporations over modern slavery practices in global supply chains.

Earlier this year the *Globe and Mail* reported on a shipment of clothing and palm oil from a country that allows anti-labour treatment of its workers. The U.S. refused the shipment, and the goods ended up, and were sold, here in Canada. The federal government says it plans to introduce legislation, but has taken no action as of yet.

Low unemployment rates are often associated with increased power for workers to demand fair wages and working conditions. This positive must be considered alongside the tremendous downward pressure all workers have felt in recent decades, and continue to face in the complicated times we are living in.

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