



**your voice at work**

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United Food and Commercial Workers Canada Union, Local No. 401

April 21, 2020

VIA EMAIL: [Andrew.follwell@sobeys.com](mailto:Andrew.follwell@sobeys.com)

**Andrew Follwell**  
**Sobeys Capital Incorporated**  
4980 Tahoe Boulevard  
Mississauga, Ontario  
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Dear Andrew,

The COVID-19 pandemic puts Alberta’s food workers at imminent risk. We write to you with urgent concern for the lives and livelihoods of our 32,000 union members and all Albertans that continue to work through COVID-19.

Some of our members in the food sector have now been hospitalized with COVID-19. Many employers have sought to maintain a business-as-usual approach.

While public gatherings have been limited and playgrounds are closed to ensure public safety, our members’ workplaces remain open. Thousands of customers crowd grocery stores every day, congregating in close proximity to employees and each other, despite public health orders requiring social distancing. You have not solved this problem.

Employers and governments have referred to Alberta’s food workers as “essential,” and the public has called them “heroes.” But at their workplaces they are often treated as expendable.

We’ve sought to work with you through good faith discussions for weeks. But for all our discussion about policies, there are still gaps between understandings we might reach through discussion and actual practices at the store level, which are now a matter of life and death.

We are asking you to voluntarily act to ensure an effective on-the-ground approach to the COVID-19 risk our members face. We ask this of you, and we will soon be asking this of policy makers. Only industry-wide regulation and enforcement will work to serve the interests of the public and protecting Albertans’ lives.

We are asking you and will soon be asking policymakers to provide the following for Alberta’s food workers, both at your unionized locations where we are the representative for your employees and at your non-union locations:

## *Social distancing and the obligation to provide a safe workplace*

- Rules for social distancing by customers, enforced by management, including
  - Restricting the number of customers in a store at any given time to a number that truly affects health and safety
  - Mandatory, continuous masking for all employees, customers, contractors, and visitors
  - Mandatory proper barriers for cashiers, courtesy clerks, bakery, deli, floral, coffee bars, general and produce clerks, pharmacy and meat counter workers
  - Mandatory safety markings on store floors to maintain social distance
  - Signs and other tools to educate customers to keep their distance
  - In-store audio announcements reminding customers of social distancing requirements
  - Closure of self-scan stations
- A ban on difficult-to-clean shopping baskets, and making all pay-for-use shopping carts free, to mitigate customers congregating around carts
- Recognition that aggressive and disrespectful customer conduct in stores constitutes a workplace hazard
- Daily disinfecting of all surfaces in stores
- An effective and appropriate temperature check system that is properly sensitive to individual privacy issues
- Endorsement of public education campaigns and enforcement of social distancing in stores to achieve:
  - Grocery shopping by households only once per week, with only one shopper per household
  - Respect for workers' safety while serving customers in these difficult circumstances
  - Appropriate social distancing is maintained from others in the store
- Weekend closing of stores every two weeks for deep cleaning and to allow for staff rest from the stress of working in hazardous pandemic conditions
- Reducing hours and restricting opening times to prevent worker fatigue
- Special hours for at-risk customers including store employees, seniors, the disabled, those with compromised immune systems, pregnant women, women who have recently given birth, essential workers, and workers with family responsibilities, such as single parents
- Mandatory, weekly workplace joint health and safety committee meetings to identify and mitigate risks and deal with employee concerns
- Education and support for workers on how to protect themselves, including their right to refuse unsafe work (to be clear, given conditions in the stores, employees can now exercise this right).
  - Proper training on the use and disposal of PPE
  - Proper training on the proper procedures and processes on cleaning

Michael Taylor is a member of our union bargaining committee. Here's what he shared about measures taken to protect employees: "Everyone fought so hard for the cashiers to get protection in the form of a shield between them and the customers. This shield was deemed necessary because the cashiers were in such close contact with the customers. No thought, absolutely none, went into protection for courtesy clerks. We are as close to the customer, a lot of times closer, to the customer as the cashiers."

## *Outbreak preparedness*

- In the case of an outbreak, immediate closure of the workplace until
  - a 14-day closure has elapsed for isolation of all employees

- COVID-19 testing and contact tracing of all employees is complete
- AHS and OH&S officers have confirmed the workplace is safe to resume operations and the union has endorsed that conclusion
- AHS and OH&S reports must be comprehensive and must include union input
- Mandatory disclosure of all AHS reports to the union
- A guarantee that no worker will lose their job for being too afraid to attend work

### *Policy consistency and enforcement*

- Enforcement of social distancing measures and workplace safety measures with twice daily, unannounced spot checks by special company officials trained and empowered to immediately remedy problems in stores where policies have not been followed.

Catherine Eden, another member of our Safeway union bargaining committee, shared the following on measures taken to date: "The signs designating the flow of traffic down each aisle are hard to see. At one store, it was black and white; at another, the signs were on bright yellow paper. The arrows on the floor are supposed to indicate direction and distance. This isn't understood or enforced."

Grocery stores are some of the last public spaces where people can gather in large numbers that are prohibited anywhere else. Unfortunately, not everyone respects the risks taken by our frontline food workers. We must remind ourselves that those workers go home to their families and move through their communities each day. All Albertans could become the victims of unsafe work environments unless we act now.

Another member of our bargaining committee and Executive Vice President of UFCW Local 401, Judy Hinzman, shared the following: "I received a message about a customer who got verbal with a staff member. He was complaining about not being able to see the arrows (for directional shopping). The employee had pointed them out to the customer and said 'this is what you'll be looking for next time'. The customer replied, 'yeah, thanks a lot captain fucking obvious.'"

### **Are food sector workers "essential" or expendable?**

Food workers are dying across North America. Many are members and leaders in our union. Grocery stores and food processing plants are the last major battlefields to defeat the spread of COVID-19. Surely, we have now learned lessons from the horrific loss of life in nursing homes about the need to be proactive. We still have the opportunity to avoid the same experience. We cannot afford to wait.

We have already had COVID-19 positive cases affecting and even closing several stores. There is no reason to believe that your workplaces, already at risk, will not become the epicentres of new COVID outbreaks, given the government's modelling that predicts 1 in 6 Albertans will become infected. Given the heightened risk of infection inherent in food sector workplaces, I would expect that the rate of infection for these workers will in fact be much higher than that, unless we act decisively now.

We are asking you to act voluntarily on these important measures that can make a difference now. We will soon be asking policymakers to ensure that a consistent approach is applied to the entire food industry. It would be unfortunate if government would have to act because you failed to do so.

I entreat you to consider the lives and livelihoods you have the power to protect. In two years, will we look back at this moment with regret? Or will we say we did everything we could to save lives and put people first?

Thank you for your consideration. We await your response to our requests.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Thomas Hesse', written in a cursive style.

Thomas Hesse, President  
United Food Commercial Workers Canada Union, Local No. 401

CC: Hon. Jason Copping, Minister of Labour  
Sean Naldrett