

AFL-CIO: Statement on the COVID-19 pandemic and Wisconsin workers

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(MILWAUKEE, WI, MARCH 12, 2020, 11:45 AM) — Today, Governor Evers has called for a State of Emergency due to the Coronavirus. We have directly communicated with the Governor's Office and let him know that the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO and the entire labor movement stands ready to respond and assist to this emergency in any way possible.

The first order of business is to make sure that all working people are safe at work and can take sick time without fear of punishment.

People with union contracts have long had the ability to benefit from the negotiated time off provisions within their Collective Bargaining Agreements. Far too many workers without unions do not have this important provision. Because of this pandemic, we as a nation are now acutely aware that when workers do not have paid sick time, they often are forced to make a dangerous choice between coming to work sick and putting food on the table for their kids versus staying at home and losing pay or even their job. That is a choice that no one should have to face. As this crisis progresses, government and industry must work together to support public health by providing a minimum 14-day paid sick bank for every worker impacted by the pandemic.

We further call on officials from relevant agencies to enact the following commonsense policy responses to this emergency:

- Establish a minimum 14-day sick day bank for every worker impacted by the pandemic.
- No worker should be punished or 'dinged' for calling in sick.

- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) must issue an emergency temporary standard to ensure the immediate protection of workers in health care workplaces and other high-risk workplaces identified by the Centers for Disease Control.
- Those who are affected by the virus while receiving unemployment benefits should be exempt from the requirement to search for work.
- Ensure that working people understand that if they are injured or infected as a result of their work, they are entitled to worker's compensation benefits.
- All people should have access to free COVID-19 testing and no person should have to incur any cost whatsoever, whether in the form of copays, deductibles, or out-of-pocket costs, related to treatment for COVID-19. Costs should not be a barrier to testing and treatment.
- Personal Protective Equipment should be readily available for anyone tasked with treating potentially infected populations.
- Coronavirus related time off should not count against a worker's Family and Medical Leave Act benefits.

These are only a few commonsense measures that must be put immediately into place. Union members have long-benefited from strong Collective Bargaining Agreements, which provide for specific provisions around sick time, safety, and whistleblower protections. Now, as we face an ever-growing pandemic, it is important that these workplace protections are expanded to all American workers.

It is up to us individually and collectively to take responsibility to end this epidemic. This means that workers should stay home when sick, companies shouldn't punish workers who do stay home sick, and industry and government must create the funds necessary to ensure that workers continue to receive pay checks. We in the Wisconsin labor movement stand ready to do our part and more.