

## MUNFA's Take on

### *The need for a collective, equity-based response to the pandemic*

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Many MUNFA members have contacted us about how care work burdens created by pandemic protocols are interfering with their paid work duties. This situation is not unique to Memorial. A [recent survey](#) by the Canadian Association of University Teachers identified access to safe childcare as among the top resource needs for academics across Canada in the pandemic context.

This need is also not unique to academic staff (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Students, along with administrative staff, per course instructors and our other coworkers, may all face similar challenges. Moreover, while anyone can have caring responsibilities, the burdens are patterned by factors that include age, family status (single parents are particularly vulnerable), socioeconomic position, employment status, race, disability, immigrant status, and gender, which may intersect in compounding ways.

With respect to gender, in particular, as the [Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#) (CCPA) [remarks](#):

The harsh reality of the pandemic is that the economic slowdown is threatening to set women's equality advances back by a generation. ... Without child care, many mothers won't have the choice to take up employment again in the wake of COVID-19—and that's a price no one should have to pay.

In short, the response to the pandemic raises a multitude of equity issues. [Evidence](#) suggests that women's research activities have been [disproportionately affected](#) by the pandemic situation, reflecting women's greater contributions to caregiving, as well as to academic service and emotional labour on campus. Meanwhile, academic staff without the security of tenure, whether due to career stage or because they work on contracts - some as short as four months - are particularly vulnerable both to job loss and the additional burdens of intensified teaching work to facilitate remote instruction.

#### **Supporting our members**

MUNFA is [working to support our members](#), both collectively and individually. On the collective level, we have approached MUN's administration to explore prospects for expanding the capacity of the MUN Childcare Centre. We proposed that the University administration start teaching term contracts earlier than typical and make across-the-board teaching-load adjustments to address the labour involved in shifting to remote instruction. We also asked for a commitment to appropriate flexibility in such areas as Promotion and Tenure and sabbatical leave.

Unfortunately, our employer rejected most of our proposals, including on early start dates for term academics and on adjustments to teaching load, on which it said: "the University does not view the pandemic as being a rationale to depart from the established norms."

We did get some response in relation to P&T timelines. However, [research indicates](#) that the effects of stop-the-tenure-clock policies differ by gender when caregiving is a factor. As a result, we are going back to the administration to request a broader response to P&T assessments, one that recognizes how teaching, research and service may be influenced by a range of factors. Over the long run, MUNFA will continue to pursue a more [holistic approach](#) to assessing scholarly achievement for P&T purposes, with a view to better accommodating diverse career paths, as we did [in the last round of bargaining](#).

MUNFA has filed several Association (policy) grievances related to Memorial's pandemic response. In the meantime, our employer's response to the proposal for teaching load adjustments sends the clear message that management does not expect MUNFA members to do extra work as a result of the pandemic. ASMs should respond accordingly. For some people, that might mean transitioning from in-class to remote teaching with fewer modifications than you might initially have envisaged; for others, it may mean adjusting the balance of time spent on teaching, research and service activities.

We will also support individual members who seek accommodations appropriate to their personal situations. If the employer does not offer a reasonable response, MUNFA will represent members through formal processes, such as grievances. (If you require advice, please contact us at [munfa@mun.ca](mailto:munfa@mun.ca).)

### **The need to make common cause**

Ultimately, however, while the pandemic has exacerbated problems for some MUNFA members, the central issues predate it, and they extend well beyond universities, with the effect on women so marked that the pandemic contraction is being called a "[shecession](#)." People in precarious, part time and low-paid employment – including many of those who would otherwise be working in child care or related fields, [a disproportionate number of whom are women](#) – have been hit particularly hard. As the [St. John's Status of Women's Council](#) put it: "The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted (and exacerbated) the gendered harms and gaps in healthcare, ecological, social, and economic policies in our province."

Here, as in [so many areas](#), the Covid-19 pandemic is diagnostic. It reveals as well as exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities. Ultimately, it underscores the need to deepen our commitment to collective action within our union and beyond it, on campus and more widely. Making common cause with other workers, paid and unpaid, is the right thing to do. Ultimately, our problems will not be solved in anything more than a stopgap way, unless we address wider injustices.

### **Vulnerable sectors, vulnerable workers**

The challenges facing MUNFA members with increased caring responsibilities are inseparable from those of early learning and child care workers. As the [CCPA remarks](#) in its Covid-19 recovery plan:

Early learning and child care was fragile in Canada before the pandemic hit because it is market-based, fragmented, and under-funded. Most licensed programs primarily rely on parent fee revenue.

The predominantly female workforce earns low wages and any raise in compensation translates into higher parent fees, as do any other quality improvements. As a result, recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators is a perpetual serious concern.

Ottawa's recent announcement of "[safe restart](#)" funds for the provinces includes money directed to child care. However, the federal government has been clear that these funds are a band aid, not a national child care plan. Without such a plan, the entire sector and its workers remain [vulnerable](#). So, by extension, do working parents, with the situation exacerbated for those facing systemic barriers related to geographical location, disability, and economic, cultural and linguistic circumstances. Already, local daycares, including [not-for-profit community operations](#), are at risk, in part because they cannot access needed government support quickly enough.

The long-term solution is a universal, publicly managed and publicly funded system for early learning and child care. As the CCPA notes, these measures pay for themselves by allowing labour market participation by mothers. They also benefit preschool children by mitigating unequal access to early learning opportunities.

### **It's not you. It's systemic: Why 'leaning in' is not enough**

While 95% of Canadian children attend public elementary and secondary schools that are free at the point of access, in most of Canada no such provision exists for early childhood education. Likewise, neoliberal public policies have

left many Canadian universities dependent on student tuition, particularly from international students, to make up for revenues previously provided by governments. The result for many students is significant education-related debt. For those who have lost income and savings through the pandemic, determined public action – action that treats post-secondary education as a good to be accessed as of right, similar to how most Canadians understand K-12 schooling and health care – is required to ensure that post-secondary education does not become less accessible.

The danger is not only to individual students. As international enrolments drop off, some Canadian universities are [contemplating](#) or [have implemented](#) layoffs and salary cuts, precisely when Canada needs strong public universities and colleges more than ever, both to retrain workers and as generators of economic and social recovery. As [Shiri Breznitz and Daniel Munro observe](#): “Universities are often the largest local employer and important contributors to social and economic well-being. When universities struggle, the economies and communities in which they are embedded also struggle.”

The pandemic reveals our societal strengths and our shared vulnerabilities. It shows that our ability to survive and thrive over the long term requires action to give substance to what is otherwise a cliché: we’re in this together. The devastation visited on many fellow citizens in long-term elder care is perhaps the clearest example of collective failure: their horrific deaths are [directly linked](#) to the marketization of care and its relegation to private, for-profit providers, which is in turn inseparable from employment practices that [put workers in harm’s way](#).

### **What is to be done?**

Many academics are understandably preoccupied with the impact of the pandemic on their own careers and households. But collective political action is needed more urgently than ever. The Industrial Workers of the World slogan [an injury to one is an injury to all](#) has never been truer.

In addition to working with other unions on campus, MUNFA is affiliated with the [Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour](#), the [Canadian Labour Congress](#), and the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#), each of which has outlined priorities and strategies for social and economic recovery that will serve all Canadians well. We will continue to work with our allies in the union movement and beyond. We will also continue to represent the interests of our members – and by extension, our students and the entire university community – to all levels of [government](#).

MUNFA is also part of [Common Front NL](#), a coalition of labour, social justice, and community groups that advocates for social and economic policies that benefit everyone in our province – for example, through progressive taxation (NL’s highest earners [pay considerably less income tax](#) than our Atlantic Canada peers) and a living minimum wage. Such alliances work in the spirit of [Bargaining for the Common Good](#), a strategy where unions use their collective power to bargain for issues beyond the narrow professional interests of their members, connecting multiple issues through a shared analysis.

For example, the pioneering efforts of the [Chicago Teachers Union](#) involve connecting their working conditions to their students’ needs – for healthcare, second language support, reasonable class sizes, art and physical education for all, and against the marketization of public education. The union’s mantra is [schools students deserve](#). Along with other unions, including teachers in [Los Angeles](#) and the faculty union at [Rutgers](#), Chicago teachers use their union power to fight for racial justice, against anti-immigration politics, and for [climate justice](#).

But of course, any union is only as strong as its members’ willingness to contribute to its ongoing work and campaigns and, when necessary, to take job action.

MUNFA is your union. Please get involved. MUNFA often needs volunteers for specific roles and committees. We have a working group on climate action. At the initiative of a BIPOC member, we are exploring the possibility of a BIPOC caucus. We can also support the creation of new working groups and caucuses. If there is something you

want to pursue – perhaps an equity committee or an action group on child care - contact Travis Perry for more information: [membership.munfa@mun.ca](mailto:membership.munfa@mun.ca)

In the meantime, the following actions will only take a little of your time:

- Use [CAUT's on-line template](#) to send a letter to your Member of Parliament (MP) calling for immediate action to improve the affordability and sustainability of post-secondary education;
- Sign [Common Front](#)'s petition for a fair minimum wage in Newfoundland and Labrador;
- Visit the [CLC's COVID-19 Resource Centre](#) and its [Take Action](#) page for actions and resources to support workers;
- Write to [your MHA](#) and the [Premier's office](#) urging them to recognize and materially support the vital role of comprehensive public post-secondary education and universal child care in our post-COVID-19 recovery;
- In the coming days, MUNFA will be organizing a Solidarity picket with striking Dominion workers;
- Keep an eye on MUNFA's website for a new "Get Involved" tab where you'll find other opportunities.

Stay tuned for more!