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Standing Committee on Finance

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I want to thank the Committee for the invitation to speak to you today on behalf of our 225,000 members across Canada.

No one is untouched by this global pandemic, and USW members are no different. Our union's members work in every sector of the economy, from front-line health care workers to industrial and manufacturing workers, miners, security guards and university workers. Each of these sectors have been affected in different ways – from mass layoffs for some, to a desperate scramble for necessary PPE for our members on the front lines.

If the committee is aiming to determine how well our Federal Government has done to help all Canadians cope with this pandemic, I can say that the government is off to a good start, but there is more that needs to be done.

Governments must apply basic principles of fairness to ensure that Canadian workers are supported through this crisis and beyond. First, we need to work with employers to save and create jobs, but the *focus* should be on the lives of individual Canadian workers and their families.

We may be all in this together, but we are not in it equally.

Second, temporary fixes must be changed into longer term reforms, such as income supports to supplement EI; dramatic reforms to elder care, universal public pharmacare and universal, public child care.

Let's look first at the Canada Emergency Response Benefit – CERB. In our view, it is still the case that too many Canadians are excluded, including the long-term unemployed, those who were forced to resign from their jobs because of Covid and those who do not meet the income threshold. If the crisis drags on – as it appears that it will – support measures must remain in place. No one should be allowed to fall through the cracks.

Many USW members have bargained Supplementary Unemployment Benefits. Indeed, the government has encouraged the negotiation of such benefits. It is unacceptable that the CERB does not have specific regulations to permit the payment of SUB during this crisis.

We strongly recommend the clarification of rules to allow SUB payments without penalty under CERB. During this crisis, workers must be able to maintain their income. SUB benefits are an important part of that equation.

The Federal Government must also put pressure on Provinces to not cut back social assistance as a result of CERB payments. We can't have a situation where one level of government gives while another level takes away.

The emergency economic response has also exposed the need for long-term reforms to Employment Insurance. Specifically, major changes to the current EI program must include:

- A reduced hours threshold and a higher replacement rate, with both of these applicable to parental/maternity leave provisions;
- An extension of eligibility to migrant workers;
- Making expanded work-sharing a permanent feature.

In terms of the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, we were pleased when the government announced this program, which our union had advocated from the outset of the pandemic.

However, in terms of enforcement, the government must strengthen CEWS provisions to prevent wage suppression.

Employers should be required to top-up the additional 25% of wages not covered by the wage subsidy and adhere to collective agreements where they exist. There must be monitoring to ensure that CEWS money is fully applied to workers' wages. Finally, this program must not be used for stock buybacks or increases to executive compensation, and employers should be required to ensure that pensions are protected.

Furthermore, for an employer to be eligible for the CEWS, they must demonstrate that they are not taking advantage of tax havens, and employers must promise to create and preserve jobs in Canada, rather than outsourcing or offshoring.

I also want now to speak on behalf of our essential frontline workers – our members who are continuing to work during this pandemic – whether in long-term care facilities or as truck drivers, airport security workers, or in manufacturing and mining. We continue to see a desperate shortage of personal protective equipment. No one should have to choose between their job and their health. And yet, many Canadians are going to work afraid for their health and that of their family.

Since this pandemic began, we have had to struggle every day with employers and governments to try and get PPE for our members. For essential workers, this government

needs to ensure funds for Personal Protection Equipment, without reservation. Anyone who must work must be protected. Full stop.

Let me conclude by highlighting two longer-term priorities that have been exposed by this pandemic. First, the failure to ensure adequate levels of care and working conditions in the long-term care sector is unacceptable. It is clear that we have failed our elders by not valuing the work of those who are essential to the dignity and care of frail Canadians.

It is a national shame that these workers are underpaid and forced to work in environments that are not designed for social distancing, or even privacy. The Government of Canada must now provide leadership to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again.

Second, the pandemic reveals the need for a new industrial strategy to create manufacturing jobs in Canada.

For decades, our manufacturing policy has largely consisted of signing as many free-trade agreements as possible to secure markets for Canadian goods, while at the same time looking to import the cheapest products available and outsource supply chains.

This has not only left us unable to manufacture critical medical supplies during this pandemic, it has left us with a weakened domestic manufacturing base.

It is time to put a long-term industrial job creation strategy back on the domestic agenda.

And so there is much work to be done. I will end my remarks here and am happy to answer any questions you may have.