

Rising Together or Falling Apart?

The Impact of One-Year of the COVID-19
Pandemic on the Manitoba Working Class

Saku Pinta, PhD
Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues



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CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 301-583 Ellice Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3B 1Z7
tel 204-927-3200

email ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saku Pinta is the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues at the Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives.

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Introduction

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC is nothing short of the worst global medical disaster that humanity has faced in a century. It is difficult to think of any single area of life that has remained untouched thanks, in part, to the economic recession that followed the spread of the novel coronavirus. However, it is clear that the impacts of COVID-19, while profound, have been distributed unevenly across both the workforce and Canadian society.

Many essential workers risk their health simply by going to work everyday, contributing to higher rates of COVID-19 within some communities. The pandemic has exposed the racial dimension of many occupations and the increased likelihood of workplace exposure among racialized individuals in specific jobs, above all those employed in food manufacturing, service industries, and transportation. In Manitoba, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour were 1.5 times more likely to test positive with COVID-19 in 2020.¹

The pandemic also heightened economic inequality. While the total wealth of Canada's billionaires increased by \$78 billion in the first year of the pandemic, 5.5 million workers across the country either lost their jobs or had their hours reduced by at least 50% over that same period.² In Manitoba, like in other parts of the country, significant job losses and a much slower job recovery disproportionately impacted young workers and women, both of whom are overrepresented in low-wage, precarious jobs.

The austerity-driven policies of the current Manitoba government have both diminished the province's ability to effectively handle the pandemic and reveal a trend towards a recovery focused on labour market flexibility and

deepening inequality. Cuts to the public sector in the midst of the pandemic demonstrate the persistence of the government's continued determination to undermine public sector unions while slashing public services at a time when they are most needed.

In contrast, the response by the federal government to the pandemic included some significant relief measures. As one recent study has shown, the federal government has covered the vast majority of all COVID-19 spending in Canada, or 86% of the total, with the provinces accounting for the remaining 14%.³ The COVID-19 Emergency Response Act, the largest economic relief program since the Second World War, features several temporary income support programs for workers impacted financially by the pandemic.⁴ However, Canadians continue to be haunted by the spectre of past austerity measures, most notably the decision to gradually sell off publicly-owned vaccine production capacity in Canada by successive federal governments.⁵

This report discusses the impacts of the first full-year of the COVID-19 pandemic on the working class in Manitoba. Working class, for the purposes of this report, is defined broadly based not on considerations such as income or education level, but rather, as a social and economic relationship. The working class is used here to refer to all those who sell their labour-power in order to make a living and do not own means of production, or the various resources and facilities like office buildings, factories, hospitals, machines, or warehouses needed for producing and distributing goods and services. After a brief overview of the first year of the pandemic, the report discusses the impacts of the COVID recession on young workers, women, and the public sector. From there it looks at how remote work and the gig economy have changed working life for many Manitobans before examining the risk of workplace transmission on essential workers, focusing on healthcare workers and racialized food manufacturing workers. An examination of anti-labour legislation in Manitoba precedes a conclusion conceptually framed around two distinct crisis responses: disaster capitalism and mutual aid. Key takeaways from the recommendations include:

1. The rejection of a post-pandemic economic recovery based on austerity in favour of substantial public investment in physical and social infrastructure, with a special role for the public sector, as parts of a green transition
2. A focus on the creation of good jobs along with training and educational opportunities for young workers, aided in part by the repeal of anti-labour legislation and the regulation of the gig economy

3. The prioritization of occupational health and safety with the immediate, legislated implementation of ten paid sick days for all Manitoba workers and the extension of the three basic worker protections (the right to participate, the right to know, and the right to refuse unsafe work) to enhance worker voice in matters of work organization, job design, and other day-to-day matters
4. A substantial overhaul of the Employment Insurance system in order to better meet the needs of workers today

Manitoba stands at a crossroads. Crises often provide opportunities to enact lasting political and economic changes. The decisions that are made today will have long-term consequences in terms of the economic recovery and in how the lingering effects on mental health — arising from stress, burnout, and prolonged isolation — will be managed.⁶ In this undertaking, a new outlook informed by the best and worst of the pandemic is desperately needed as much as a new direction in labour policy. As such, the objective of this study is to provide an evidence-based analysis of labour market and health impacts arising from the COVID recession as a cautionary tale for any future infectious disease outbreaks and in terms of the implications for a post-pandemic recovery. In terms of policy, the report cautions strongly against a model of post-pandemic economic recovery based on austerity and instead stresses the need for substantial public investment in physical and social infrastructure with enhanced protections, rights, and well-being for working people.

One Year of the Pandemic in Manitoba: A Brief Overview

ON MARCH 12, 2020, Manitoba Health Minister Cameron Friesen and Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Brent Roussin confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Manitoba exactly one day after the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus to be a pandemic.⁷ Over the next year the province endured two separate, and very different, waves of the pandemic.

The first wave of the pandemic in Manitoba, which lasted roughly from mid-March to mid-May 2020, was fairly mild thanks to a combination of factors. The relative geographical isolation of the province and great distances between large urban centres enhanced the effectiveness of the first lockdown, as did the earlier outbreaks in other provinces which helped to inform the adoption of state of emergency measures before the outbreak of community transmissions of the virus.⁸ Manitoba came out of the first wave with one of the lowest infection rates in the country. From March to late August 2020, only 578 Manitobans had been diagnosed with COVID-19 with eight fatalities.⁹

The second wave, much more severe than the first, began in September 2020 and subsided in February 2021. Despite the early success in containing the virus, and a period of nearly two weeks without a single COVID-19 infection, Manitoba lost its “pandemic advantage” following ill-advised, and widely criticized, efforts by the Manitoba government to re-open the economy and

ease restrictions.¹⁰ This has been described as a “slow-motion disaster” and must be judged to be a catastrophic failure.¹¹ Plummeting approval ratings evident in multiple opinion polls conducted in Manitoba between January and June 2021 reflected the widespread dissatisfaction with the government response to the pandemic, with then Premier Brian Pallister consistently ranking as the least popular provincial leader over that six month period.¹²

In terms of labour policy, the Manitoba government’s aggressive reopening plan in June 2020 included a scheme to pay workers up to \$2,000 if they agreed to give up their Canadian Emergency Response Benefits (CERB) and return to work. This move has been interpreted as a way to entice low-wage workers – primarily minimum wage earners whose meagre earnings were below the level of CERB benefits – back to their jobs, without adequately addressing working conditions or health and safety concerns.¹³ Also in June 2020, the Manitoba government rolled out an application-based program – cost-shared between the federal government (75%) and the province (25%) – intended to provide a one-time payment to essential services workers. It is estimated that over 78,442 essential workers received the \$1,377 benefit.¹⁴ However, the stringent eligibility requirements – limited to specific industries, positions, and an income below \$2,500 per month for 2.5 months – meant that the “Manitoba Risk Recognition Program” did not spend the full federal amount for essential workers. Ironically, the sacrifice of some low-wage front-line health care workers went unrecognized, as this top-up was intended to do, as they had exceeded the income threshold by working overtime or picking up additional shifts, and thus were ineligible. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the flawed nature of this program more than the fact that the Manitoba government left \$10.5 million unspent for the long-term care top-up, an amount which would have covered more than 7,000 more workers.¹⁵

On October 30, 2020, an open letter signed by 18 physicians to Manitoba’s then Premier and Health Minister published in the Winnipeg Free Press urged an immediate, full shutdown. “This is the time,” the letter stated, continuing: “A couple of weeks from now will be too late. The result will be an appalling and pointless loss of life and a sustained disastrous impact on the economy.”¹⁶ The second province-wide lockdown did not come into effect until November 12, 2020.¹⁷ Like many Canadian jurisdictions, the Manitoba government’s belated adoption of mitigation – rather than suppression or elimination approach, known as the “COVID Zero” public health strategy – had major consequences for the severity of the pandemic. Mitigation, or the aim of containing the spread of the virus to prevent the hospital system from being overwhelmed, was not the only viable public

health strategy, as demonstrated by the Atlantic provinces and countries like Australia.¹⁸

The devastation that the second-wave caused is evident from Manitoba's COVID infection and fatality rates. In the period between August 2020 and March 2021, 31,843 people in the province contracted COVID-19. There were 900 fatalities. Manitoba had the grim distinction of having the second worst coronavirus death rate in the country.¹⁹ Roughly half of these deaths can be attributed to massive COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care facilities. For example, an outbreak at the Maples Long Term Care Home in Winnipeg, infected 157 out of 200 residents and 74 staff members over a three month period, resulting in 56 deaths.²⁰

Finally, calls for paid sick leave for workers remained unheeded during the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Manitoba. It was not until early May 2021, well over a year into the pandemic, that the government launched its "Manitoba Pandemic Sick Leave" program, which provides employers with up to \$600 per worker for up to five days of COVID-19 related sick leave. However, the program is entirely voluntary – rather than being legislated, like paid sick leave in neighbouring Ontario – so the provision of the sick leave only applies to employers who choose to opt in.²¹ Moreover, employers who already provide sick leave are not eligible for the program, meaning that there is no provision of additional leave to allow these workers to test or get vaccinated for COVID.

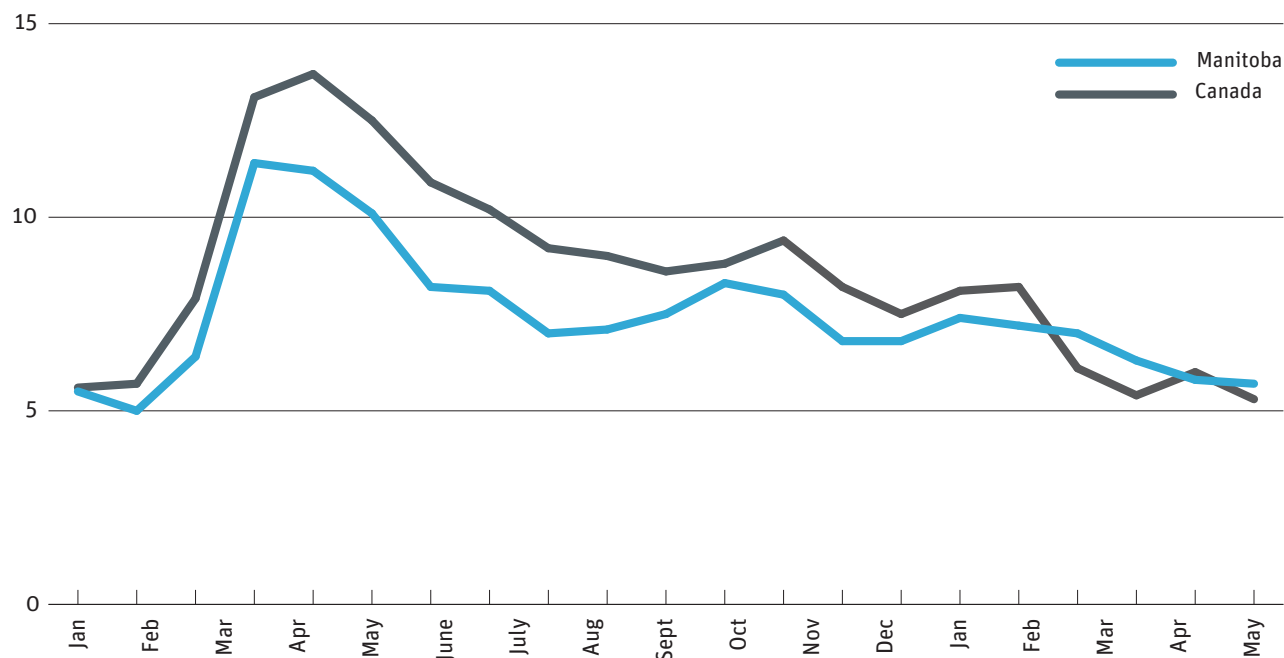
The COVID Recession and the Manitoba Working Class, March 2020 to March 2021

AS WITH THE rest of the country, a ripple ran through supply chains as non-essential businesses — above all in the service-sector — were ordered to close in Manitoba on April 1, 2020 at the outset of the first wave of the pandemic. Retailers halted orders from wholesalers who in turn ceased placing orders with manufacturers.²²

Between April and June 2020, at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, official unemployment numbers in Manitoba for both sexes aged 15 and above reached double digits as layoffs and job losses mounted. 11.4% of the workforce registered as unemployed in April, dipping slightly to 11.2% in May and 10.2% in June. Despite another spike at the end of 2020 and the beginning of the new year, the unemployment rate levelled off to just below 7% for the remainder of the first year of the pandemic.²³

While the official unemployment rate in Manitoba has closely mirrored national figures, a closer look at unemployment data reveals the fact that some groups have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID recession: above all young workers, women, and those employed in the public sector. Also, despite the staggering levels of unemployment during the first year

FIGURE 1 Unemployment Rate, Manitoba and Canada, January 2020 to May 2021

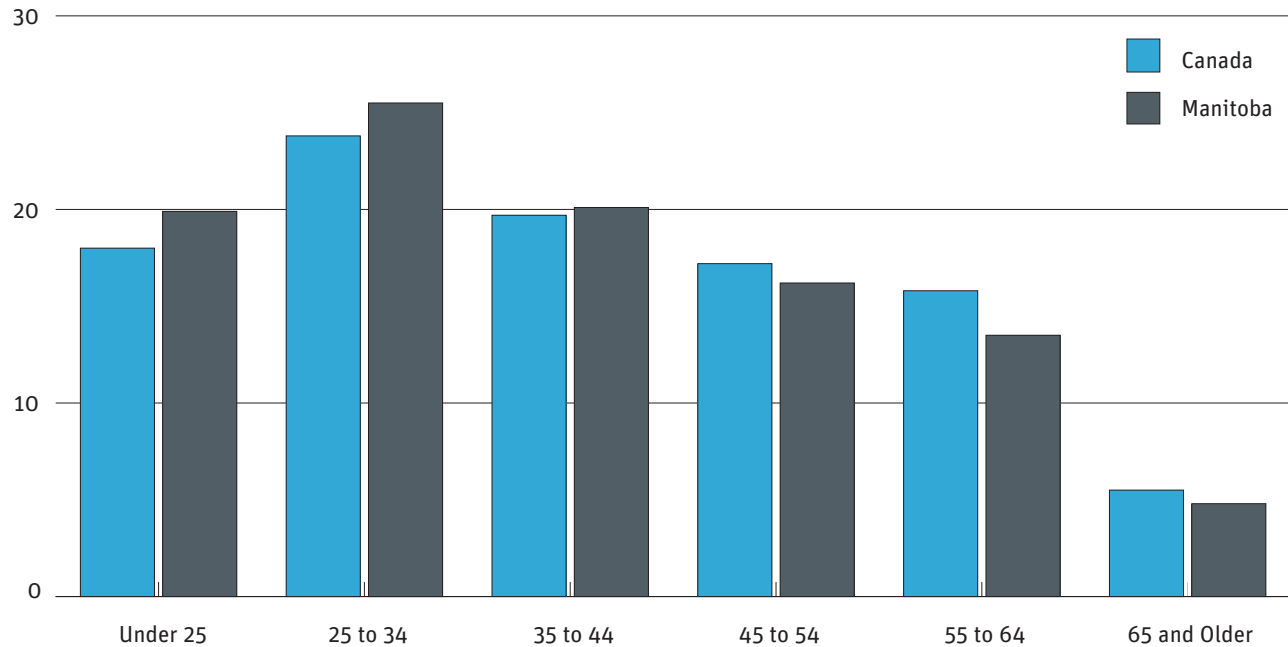


Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey, tables 14-10-0287-01 and 14-10-0355-01 (formerly CANSIM 282-0087 and 282-0088)

of the COVID pandemic, the true scale of unemployment in Manitoba and across Canada may be more than double the rate of the official statistics. As economist Jim Stanford points out: “The official unemployment rate has always been a misleading and ideologically biased indicator of the true extent of unutilized labour.”²⁴ To be captured within the official unemployment data, the worker must be available and actively seeking work. Stanford maintains that a “blame the victim” mentality is deeply embedded in this faulty and skewed definition of unemployment which considers people as “voluntarily choosing not to work” if they are not available and actively seeking jobs which may or may not exist.²⁵ At the end of April 2020, 13% or 2.4 million Canadian workers officially counted as unemployed but taking into account workers who are discouraged, self-employed, working less than they would prefer, or technically employed but not working any hours, the figure rises to an estimated 30%.²⁶ The fact that more than a third of the Canadian labour force applied for financial support provided by the federal government within one month of the pandemic lockdown lends credence to that estimate.²⁷

The bulk of financial support to workers came in the form of the temporary conversion of the Employment Insurance (EI) program into the much more

FIGURE 2 Share of CERB Applications by Age, Canada and Manitoba

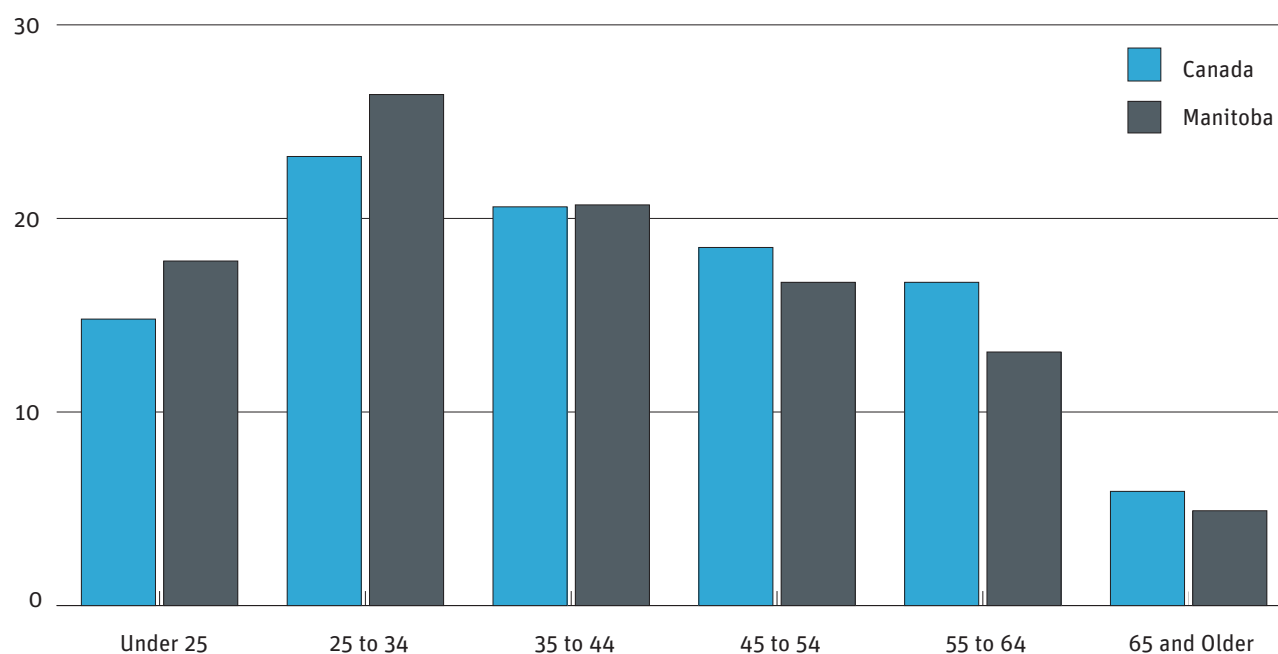


Source: Government of Canada, “Canada Emergency Response Benefit and EI Statistics.”

flexible Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), a financial support program with far less stringent eligibility requirements than regular EI. A total of 8.9 million unique individuals applied for the CERB, representing \$81.64 billion in benefit payments. In Manitoba, between March 15 and October 3, 2020 nearly 40% of the labour force applied for the CERB, or a total of 278,360 workers out of a labour force of 700,200.²⁸ Manitobans aged 25 to 34 were the single largest age group (25.5% of applicants), followed by the 35 to 44 (20.1% of applicants), and those under age 25 (19.9% of applicants).²⁹ Of those age 45 and older, those ages 45 to 54 represented the largest applicant group (16.2% of applicants). The percentage of female (50.1%) and male (49.8%) applicants was nearly identical, with 100 applicants categorized in the official data as “Gender Diverse.”³⁰

Individuals under the age of 44 represented 65.5% of CERB applicants in Manitoba — four percent higher than the 61.5% of CERB applicants under age 44 nationally — although workers in this age group represent approximately 58% of the total labour force in the province.³¹ While the total number of applicants has declined, the age-group share of applications in Manitoba has remained roughly consistent after the CERB was replaced with the new Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) in October 2020, with those under age 44

FIGURE 3 Percentage of Unique CRB Applicants by Age



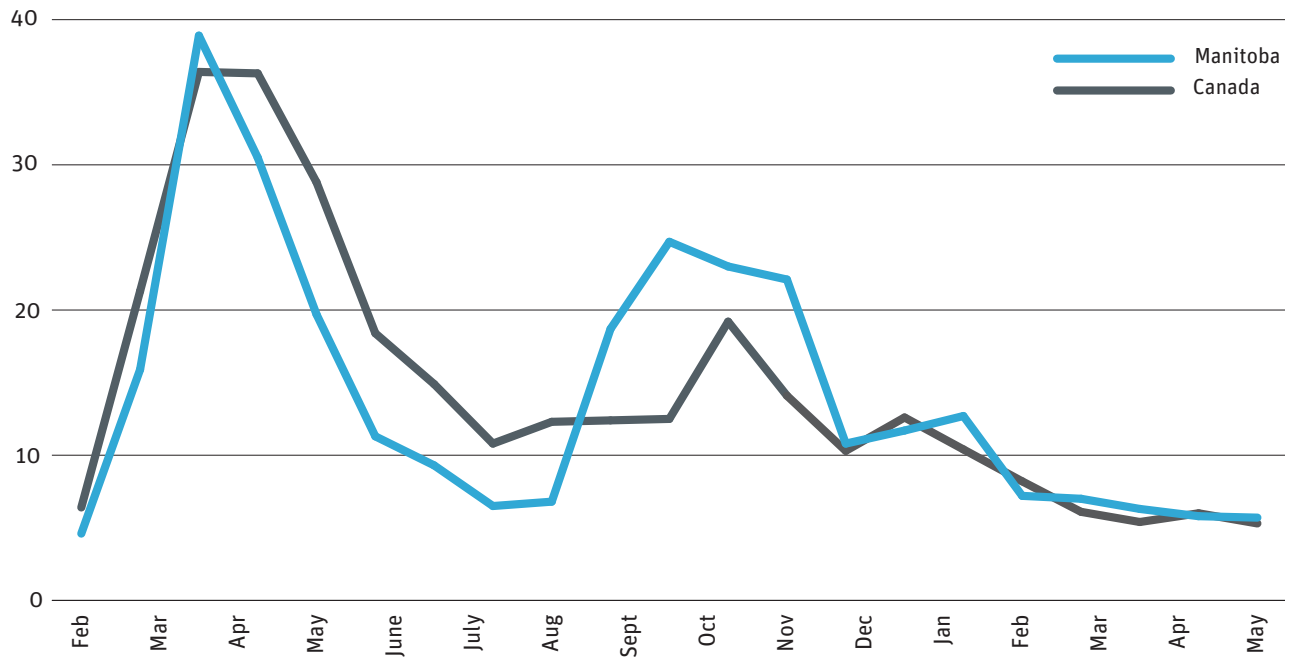
Source Canada Revenue Agency: Table 2: Number of Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) unique applicants, by province and territory, and age group, April 11, 2021.

representing 65% of all unique applicants. Yet nationally, unique applicants under age 44 have declined by 3.5%, from 61.5% of total CERB applications to 58% under the CRB. This suggests that the economic recovery has been slower among a substantial portion of the labour force in Manitoba — above all with younger workers — compared to the rest of the country. This trend is especially apparent in the accommodation and food services industry, a sector devastated by the COVID recession, and one that employs large numbers of young workers and women ages 15 to 24.

Indeed, the massive impact of the COVID recession on women specifically in Manitoba has led some to label the virus-driven economic downturn as a “she-cession”, with calls for a feminist-inspired recovery.³²

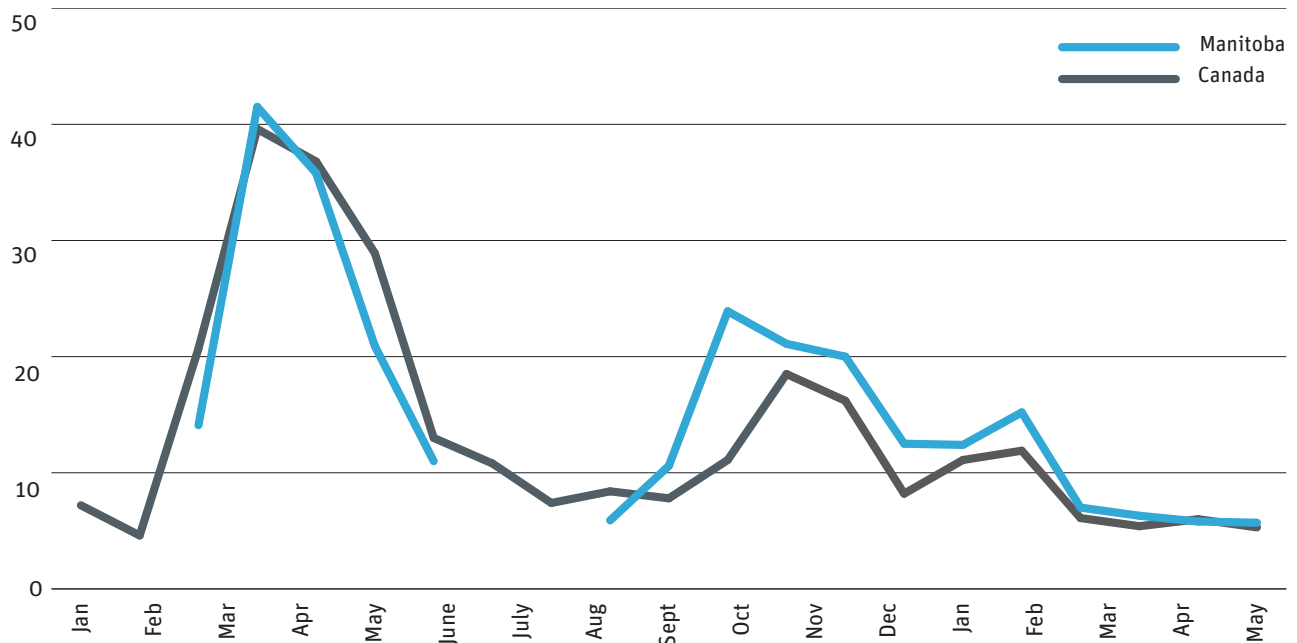
Female unemployment spiked in Manitoba in May 2020 at 12.5% — or 2.5% higher than the unemployment rate for men — and perhaps of more concern is the fact that it has remained substantially higher than male unemployment since December 2020. A study published in March 2021 by CCPA national senior economist Katherine Scott showed that Manitoba had the single largest drop in women’s total hours worked in Canada, and the province continues to lag behind national benchmarks.³³ Women are overrepresented in many of the service-sector segments of the economy hit hardest by the pandemic

FIGURE 4 Accommodation and Food Industry Unemployment, Feb. 2020 to May 2021, Ages 15 to 24



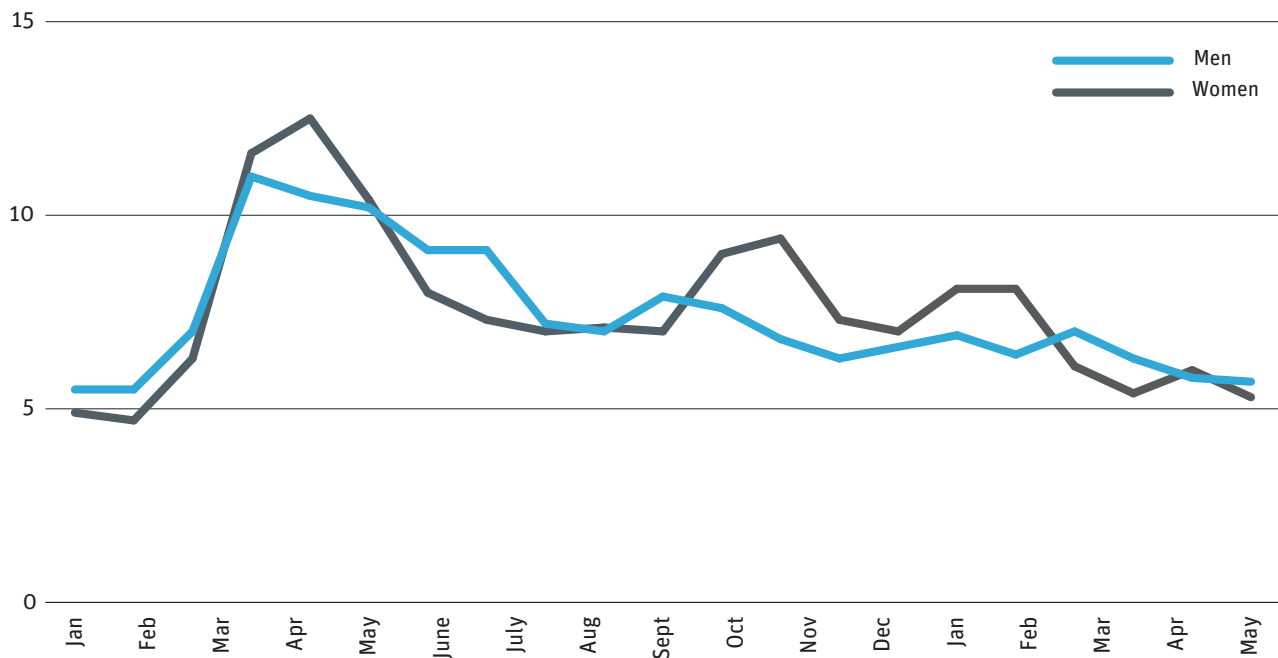
Source: Statistics Canada Labour force characteristics by industry, Table: 14-10-0022-01 (formerly CANSIM 282-0007)

FIGURE 5 Accommodation and Food Industry Female Unemployment, January 2020 to May 2021, Ages 15 to 24



Source: Statistics Canada Labour force characteristics by industry, Table: 14-10-0022-01 (formerly CANSIM 282-0007)—note that data for some months in Manitoba has been suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*.

FIGURE 6 Unemployment Rate by Sex in Manitoba, January 2020 to May 2021



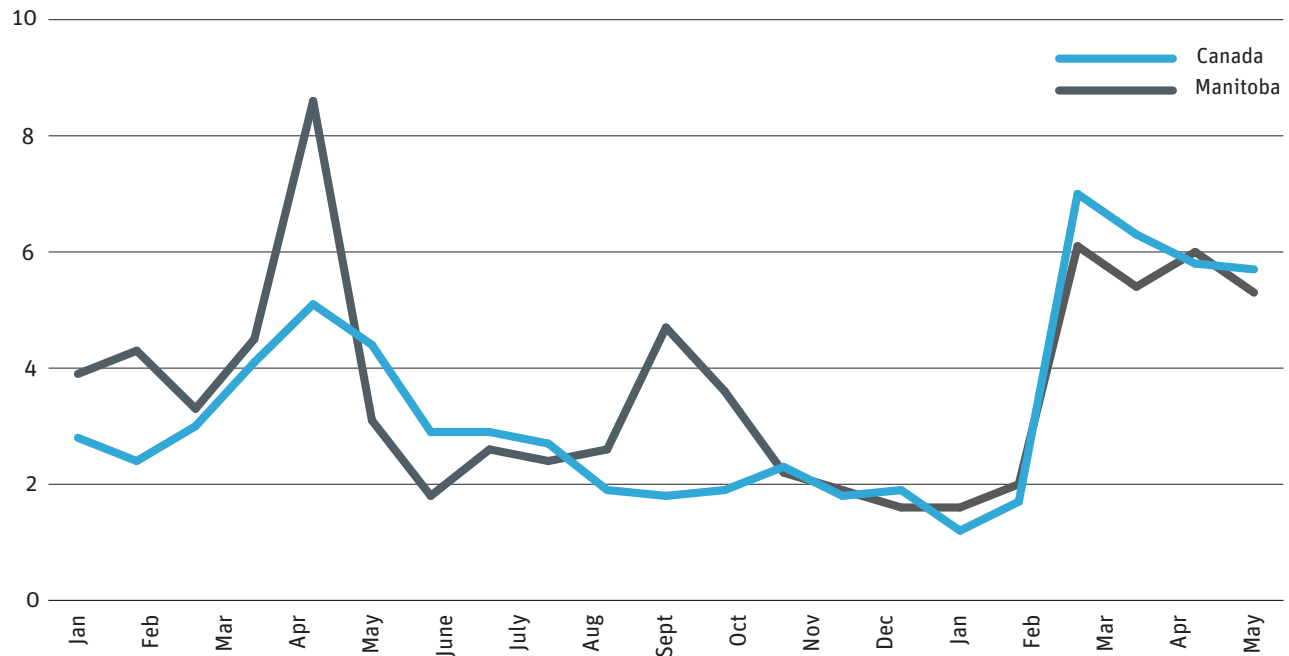
Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey, tables 14-10-0287-01 and 14-10-0355-01 (formerly CANSIM 282-0087 and 282-0088)

as well as in non-standard or precarious employment arrangements that feature low-wages and minimal benefits or protections. Women are also over-represented in the health care sector. “In Manitoba, approximately 90 percent of registered nurses, nurse practitioners, licensed practical nurses, and registered psychiatric nurses are women,” which as we shall see below, has presented its own unique challenges.³⁴

The employment issues faced by young workers and women in the private sector during the COVID-19 pandemic are national in scale. However, one area in which Manitoba has truly been an outlier is in the public sector. In May 2020, public sector unemployment increased dramatically relative to national rates, following a controversial series of work reductions and layoffs (see *Figure 7*).³⁵

The Manitoba government provided two justifications for the cuts, neither of which withstand closer scrutiny. First, it was argued that public sector cuts would allow the government to redirect funds to front-line services directly involved in the fight against COVID-19.³⁶ However, the personal protective equipment (PPE) and additional resources promised to health care workers did not materialize until mid-July, following lengthy negotiations between the Manitoba Nurses Union (MNU) and the Manitoba government.³⁷ As one

FIGURE 7 Public Administration Unemployment Rate, Manitoba and Canada Jan. 2021 to May 2021



Source: Statistics Canada Labour force characteristics by industry, Table: 14-10-0022-01 (formerly CANSIM 282-0007)

indication of the difficulty of these negotiations, it is noteworthy that the MNU underscored the fact that they would have the ability to refer matters to arbitration in instances where consensus on PPE could not be reached, and thus had a mechanism to hold employers to account.³⁸ Second, then Premier Pallister justified the cuts on the grounds that the private sector had been hit much harder by the COVID recession and that the public sector would have to “share the pain.”³⁹ The Province provided no explanation as to how the shared pain of reciprocal job losses would help as a matter of public policy. Neither did it provide a definition of what constituted “non-essential work” in the public sector.⁴⁰ In contrast, as Julie Guard observes, “Policy in other provinces and at the federal level reflected those governments’ recognition that paying people to work creates economic stimulus essential to economic stability and recovery.”⁴¹

COVID-19 and Occupational Health and Safety

BEYOND THE FINANCIAL hardships that many workers have endured over the pandemic, many workplaces are environments where the risk of exposure to COVID-19 is enhanced. This applies to teachers and education support workers, critical front-line healthcare workers as well as essential workers in areas such as food processing, transportation, and the service sector, among others: in short, what geographer Phil Neel refers to as the “essential proletariat” which is “composed of all those workers who are necessary to run the most basic, skeletal infrastructure of society.”⁴²

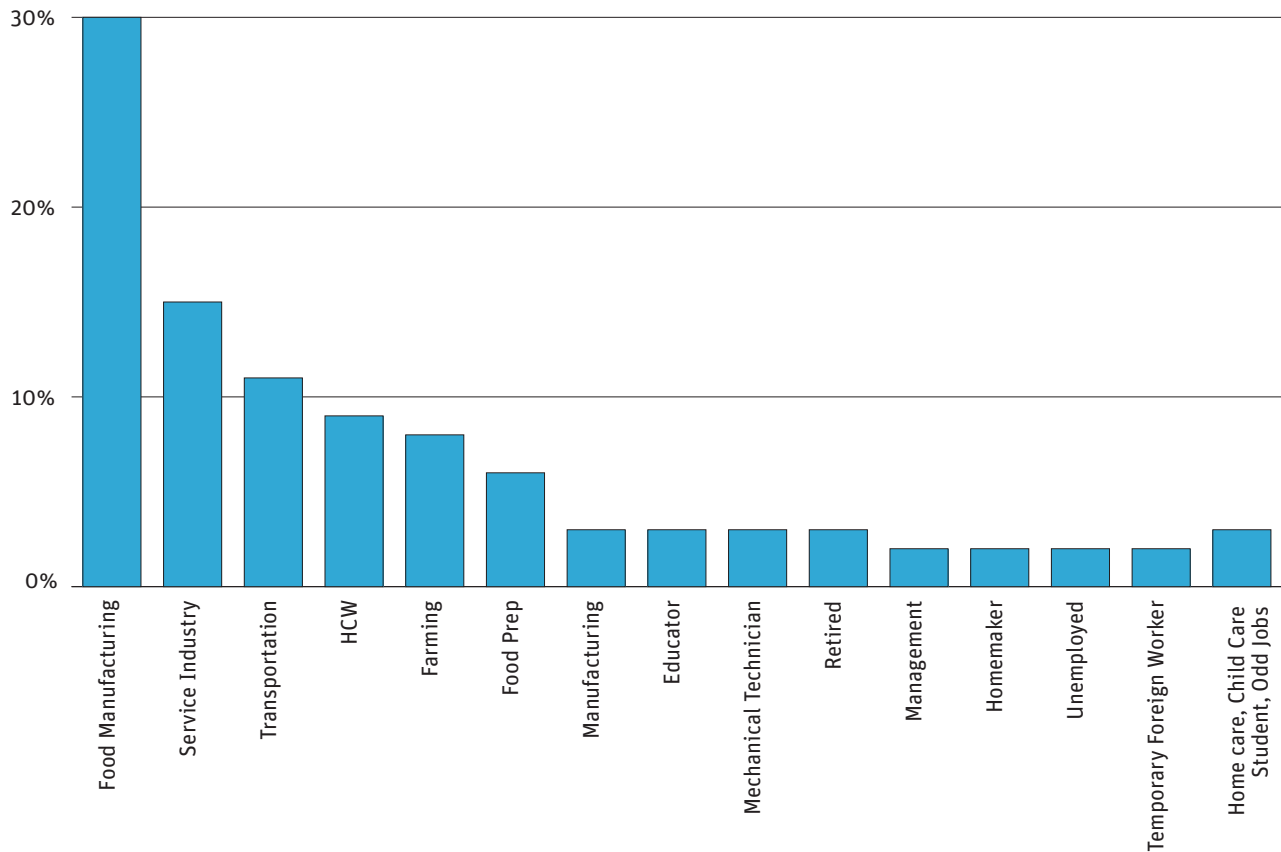
According to data compiled by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 20–30% of COVID-19 cases worldwide may be attributed to exposure at work.⁴³ Those global numbers are consistent with data in Manitoba during the second wave of the pandemic. This is evidenced by the fact that during the six-week period between November 1 and December 15, 2020, workplaces were the source of 25% of COVID-19 infections in the province.⁴⁴ Furthermore, according to internal Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) data obtained by the Manitoba Federation of Labour, over the course of the first year of the pandemic there were over 1,200 confirmed COVID-19 transmissions at workplaces. However, it is important to note that these numbers are only reflective of the number of

accepted WCB claims and do not include, for example, eligible workers who did not file a claim, were denied, or worked in an occupation which is not covered by the WCB, such as teachers.⁴⁵ This all raises questions as to why non-essential businesses were allowed to remain open despite the knowledge of workplace transmission, a fact that has been further compounded by the failure of the Manitoba government to accept the emerging evidence of airborne COVID transmission and to integrate that knowledge into public and occupational health policy.⁴⁶ Manitoba was also delayed in developing a strategy for tracking workplace transmission, waiting until June 2021 to finalize its workplace cluster guidelines for employers.⁴⁷

Nowhere was this risk of workplace exposure more apparent than among healthcare workers. Approximately 14% of all global COVID-19 infections have occurred among healthcare workers, which has further contributed to other health problems, as evidenced by the fact that 20% of workers in this field have also reported anxiety and depression symptoms during the pandemic.⁴⁸ Indeed, the stress, burnout, economic anxiety, and effects of prolonged isolation, among other factors, have had a massive impact on mental health well-being for large segments of Canadian society, and will likely continue to linger on after the pandemic.⁴⁹ Recent studies suggest that the adequacy of infection control programs and personal protective equipment are strongly associated with mental health outcomes.⁵⁰

In the first full year of the pandemic, a total of 1,995 healthcare workers in Manitoba tested positive for COVID-19, which tragically led to two deaths. While it is reasonable to assume that most of these healthcare workers contracted COVID-19 on the job, the official data specifies the source rather than the site of transmission. Close contact with a known case is identified in the data as the single largest source of exposure at 59.9% of all cases among healthcare workers, followed by “unknown” at 30.1%.⁵¹ Reflecting on the grim anniversary of the pandemic, the Manitoba Nurses Union maintained that the rate of infection among healthcare workers was preventable, but budget cuts, short staffing, and higher workloads made the health care system ill-prepared to effectively deal with the pandemic.⁵² The negative impact of austerity is echoed by others who point to the reductions in healthcare spending in 2017 which led to the closure of three Winnipeg emergency rooms, an urgent care centre, and rural emergency medical service stations along with the partial privatization of home care services.⁵³ “A bias towards austerity,” according to research published by Hajer and Fernandez, “both past and present, ultimately left the healthcare system, including personal care homes, underprepared and overwhelmed by the second wave.”⁵⁴

FIGURE 8 Manitoba Occupational and COVID Cases, 15 Years and Over, May 1 to Sept. 30, 2020



Source https://www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/surveillance/docs/rei_external.pdf

Other essential workers have similarly risked exposure to the COVID-19 virus at the workplace. As one report has shown, COVID-19 cases in Manitoba are overrepresented in specific occupations such as food manufacturing, the service industry, and transportation, while management occupations are statistically as likely to become infected with coronavirus as the unemployed. However, one of the most striking elements of the data is that the risk of workplace exposure merges with racialized people. 59% of all COVID-19 cases in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) communities reported employment in manufacturing, more than three times more than in non-BIPOC community cases. While the report does not distinguish between the manufacturing and food manufacturing, it is reasonable to assume that BIPOC workers in meatpacking plants account for the vast majority of these cases as will be discussed below. Although the report acknowledges incomplete data, it nonetheless shows a strong correlation between BIPOC, COVID infections, and specific occupations.⁵⁵ BIPOC workers in Manitoba

are disproportionately concentrated in blue-collar manufacturing occupations which require close contact. As such, BIPOC communities face higher workplace risks than other populations.

Meatpacking plant workers at the Maple Leaf Foods pork facility in Brandon provide a demonstration of this correlation. The 700,000 square foot facility is one of the largest pork processing plants in Canada, with a 90,000 hog per week capacity.⁵⁶ Physically demanding labour in meatpacking plants — carried out in close proximity to other workers, where conditions conducive to airborne transmission are complemented by a cold environment where COVID-19 droplets are able to survive longer on surfaces — have led to large outbreaks in other facilities in North America. The Cargill meatpacking plant in High River, Alberta — which held the distinction of having the largest single-site COVID-19 outbreak in Canada — served as an early warning as to the increased hazard of infection in this industry.⁵⁷ Workers at the Maple Leaf plant in Brandon had voiced concerns over their increased risk of exposure as early as April 2020.⁵⁸

Despite a COVID-19 outbreak among over 70 workers at the Maple Leaf plant at the end of August 2020, both the company and the Manitoba government denied that there was any evidence of workplace transmission at the plant.⁵⁹ Both the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 832 — the union that represents the Maple Leaf workers — as well as the leader of the Official Opposition in Manitoba had called for a two-week plant shutdown earlier in the month as cases began to rise, but this was ignored by government officials.⁶⁰

Like the workers at the Cargill facility in High River, most of the over 2,000 workers at Brandon's Maple Leaf Foods meatpacking plant are immigrants who come to work in Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Despite the fact that these workers have union representation, many nonetheless often fear the consequences of speaking out or refusing unsafe work.⁶¹

Changes to Work Life: Working from Home and the Growth of the Gig Economy

FOR SOME WORKERS, the shift to working remotely from home was the biggest change in their day-to-day work routines. 32% of Canadian workers aged 15 to 69 worked most of their hours from home after nearly one year into the pandemic.⁶² If worker preferences are any indication, the prevalence of working from home arrangements may become a permanent feature of work life for many Canadians.

While many enjoy the flexibility and comfort that telework can provide, longer term consequences of such arrangements remain unknown. The International Labour Organization has pointed to potential problems like the increasingly blurred distinction between work life and home life, and the possibility that working hours can expand gradually through asynchronous work arrangements. Privacy concerns have also been voiced, given the increased use of tracking software.⁶³ Finally, the desirability of remote working is also largely dependent on the domestic environment – women, in particular, who frequently carry the burden of homeworking often face the challenge of balancing childcare with work in the home, something that became a widespread issue in Manitoba following school closures.⁶⁴

The double-edged sword of flexibility with working hours is also a well-known component of employment arrangements in the gig economy. As one study published by Statistics Canada observed, while the gig economy has grown steadily since the 2010s, assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gig workers is a difficult task.⁶⁵ This is largely due to the fact that unlike workers in traditional workplaces, gig workers enter non-standard employment relationships to complete specific tasks or to work for a specific period of time. Because of the task or temporary nature of their gig work, work loss is not captured by standard employment or wage indicator data.⁶⁶ Anecdotally, app-based food delivery services like Uber Eats and Skip the Dishes were popular choices following lockdown restrictions on the food service industry. However, a recent report commissioned by human resources firm Ceridian also states that over 70% of Canadian employers expect to hire more freelance or contract workers in the next two years. This suggests not only an anticipated expansion of the gig economy but an expectation on behalf of some employers that gig work will begin replacing full-time employment.⁶⁷ Many of the workers in the gig economy are considered to be independent contractors, and thus are excluded from Employment Standards protections, workers compensation coverage, and the right to unionize. Although a recent Supreme Court of Canada ruling determined that the food delivery service Uber was in violation of Employment Standards in Ontario — paving the way for a similar class action lawsuit against Skip the Dishes to go forward in Manitoba — the industry is lobbying for new legislation in Ontario as well as other jurisdictions for app-based workers that will maintain the independent contractor status in exchange for some benefits and protections, decisions that will set the precedent for other provinces.⁶⁸

Anti-labour Legislation and Its Impact on Manitoba's COVID-19 Response

MANITOBA'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 took place in the context of an environment that had been hostile to workers in the years leading up to the pandemic. A number of pieces of legislation since the election of the current Manitoba government in 2016 that limited the ability of workers to organize to protect themselves and their rights. As a result, workers were more precarious and had fewer supports for protection when COVID-19 struck.

The public sector cuts demonstrate a persistent pattern of hostility to public sector unions on the part of the current Manitoba government. This dates back to 2017 and the passing of Bill 28 (Public Services Sustainability Act), legislation directed at freezing public sector wages for a period of two years. The legislation further limited wage increases to a maximum of 0.75% and 1% in years three and four of any settlement. The legislation was deemed unconstitutional by the Manitoba Court of Queen's Bench, but subsequently upheld by the Manitoba Court of Appeal in October 2021.⁶⁹ Although Bill 28 never became law, public sector employers negotiated with public sector unions as though it had. In June 2021 – more than four years after Bill 28 passed – the ratification of an agreement by the Evergreen School Division

support staff became the first freely negotiated public sector contract, in other words settled without arbitration, to break the wage freeze mandate.⁷⁰ Since then, several agreements have been reached that have featured wage increases. While the fight against Bill 28 may go to the Supreme Court of Canada, it is clear that the solidarity of the labour movement has been an effective force in the push back against the anti-union agenda of the current Manitoba government.

During the pandemic, the current Manitoba government continued and extended this anti-union approach and attack on collective bargaining beyond public sector unions. Bill 16 the Labour Relations Amendment Act, legislation that has apparently been put on hold, proposes to eliminate the 90 day notice that employers are required to provide when introducing technological changes that can alter or even eliminate jobs. Bill 16 would also make it easier for employers to fire striking workers; removes the right to arbitrated settlements after strikes/lockouts have lasted for 60 days; lowers the threshold of the number of workers required to trigger a union decertification vote from 50% to 40%; and continues the assault on public sector unions with the addition of bureaucratic red tape financial reporting requirements.⁷¹

Bill 16 also targets unions in the construction industry, where the number of workers can fluctuate greatly depending on labour requirements during different phases of construction. This is important in the context of proposed changes on the determination on whether or not the number of workers in a bargaining unit is representative of the “regular or anticipated” number of employees in a bargaining unit at the time of a union certification vote. Bill 16 complements a host of other anti-union legislation directed at increasing labour market flexibility in the construction industry. This includes Bill 13, the Public Sector Construction Projects (Tendering) Act, which has eliminated Project Labour Agreements (PLAs) that set common wages and working conditions for all contractors on a project — under a common labour agreement — ensuring that the entire workforce is compensated and treated fairly. PLAs also required that contractors pay an appropriate share of training costs. As a result, after a project had been completed the province benefited from the skilled workforce that has been fostered through apprenticeships and cutting-edge training opportunities, often delivered at facilities created by partnerships between trade unions and contractors.⁷²

Conclusions and Recommendations

ONE YEAR OF the COVID-19 pandemic has given glimpses of a post-pandemic future that will almost certainly be different from the pre-pandemic era for working people in a variety of ways. At time of writing, it is unknown to what extent COVID variants might mutate into vaccine resistant strains or what the long-term consequences are of the ongoing symptoms experienced by some who were infected with the virus, a phenomenon known as the “long COVID.”⁷³ However, some lingering effects – not of the pandemic itself – but its companions, may be felt for a long time: mental health issues and economic recession. Here too we can see the future in the present in various existing visions and practices aimed at altering the present state of things. These show indications of how we ought to move forward, albeit in different directions.

In recent years Naomi Klein and Rebecca Solnit have been leading voices in discussions about the consequences, lessons, and meanings of crisis. Klein, in her 2007 bestseller *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* argues that crises induce a kind of shock throughout entire populations. This shock serves as a distraction which allows governments to advance controversial and sweeping policy changes including the privatization of public services, deep budget cuts to social spending, and deregulation.⁷⁴ For Klein, the concept of disaster capitalism is best understood as “orchestrated

raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities.”⁷⁵

Along with the elite-driven reforms that Klein examines, there is another impulse in play during moments of disaster. In her award-winning 2009 work *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, Solnit maintains that the best qualities of humanity are often revealed in times of crisis and institutional failure. Crises show that “most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones.”⁷⁶ Solnit describes this phenomenon as mutual aid, “meaning that every participant is a giver and receiver in acts of care that bind them together, as distinct from the one-way street of charity.”⁷⁷ However, there is also a counter-tendency to these widespread acts of altruism that have their basis in the misplaced fear that a crisis will generate chaos. Those that hold those beliefs will in turn ironically generate the violent behaviour that was feared in the first place. “Beliefs matter,” as Solnit observes, and “often the worst behavior in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against savagery.”⁷⁸

Solnit’s work is a powerful refutation of the view that human beings are at their core rugged individualists who seek to maximize their own personal gain at the expense of the broader community. Sociability and co-operation provide an evolutionary advantage to the survival of a species and this impulse to mutual aid, as Solnit reminds us, is amplified in uncertain times.

It is possible to detect elements of both “disaster capitalism” and “mutual aid” in the responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Manitoba. Along with educational reforms, massive tax cuts, and cuts to public services, and continuing along the path of anti-union labour policy reforms shows that the current government’s visions for a post-COVID economic recovery is based on a model that will increase precarious working conditions and erode worker protections and wages. This, combined with cuts to public services, will only serve to deepen inequality and increase vulnerability to future crises — like climate change — just as past austerity measures left Manitobans more vulnerable to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed another response to the crisis, more in line with Solnit’s description of mutual aid. Even the simple act of wearing a mask became a gesture of solidarity with those who are immunocompromised or otherwise more vulnerable to the virus. But on a larger, and more coordinated scale, Manitoba like other parts of the world witnessed

the rapid expansion of mutual aid networks. Winnipeg's own Mutual Aid Society, with over 9,000 members on Facebook, helped to coordinate various kinds of material support to those in need.

Mutual aid groups often serve to make up for inadequate or disrupted services during periods of crisis and massive government failure. But the impulse to mutual aid is the same impulse that informs the need for universal health care, quality public services, and solidaristic association through labour unions. It is more than the community potluck, it is part of the glue that holds society together. If mutual aid is the crisis response from below, the disaster capitalism impulse is its opposite: an individualistic creed and response from above that threatens the very bonds of sociality on which human communities are sustained.

With this in mind, mutuality must form the basis of the post-pandemic recovery, casting the detached indifference and self-destructiveness of neoliberal austerity into the dumpster of history. It is necessary that the public sector play a leading role in the recovery in Manitoba, both in terms of stimulus through strategic investments in social and physical infrastructure as well as the provision of critical public services, above all in the area of mental health. The regressive approach to the post-pandemic recovery by the Manitoba government comes into sharp relief when considering that even other persistently neoliberal jurisdictions and organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Union have moved away from austerity by accepting the need to rejuvenate public services and physical infrastructure as key economic drivers in the economic recovery. Aided by low interest rates globally, the IMF has stated that public investment in physical and social infrastructure, including investments that address climate change, can pay back two to one in economic growth within a period of two years. The IMF estimates that increasing public investment by 1% of GDP in advanced and developing economies will grow their GDP by 2.7%, creating seven million direct jobs and between 20 to 33 million indirect jobs.⁷⁹ The IMF prescription for economic recovery is likely informed by the fact that the organization had already warned of a possible global recession in 2019 before the pandemic — similar to warnings sounded by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad) — precipitated by slowing economic growth, high levels of consumer and business debt, and trade wars.⁸⁰ Yet unlike the Unctad, the IMF was slower to accept the notion that a more interventionist state and massive public investment would be the solution required to save capitalism from itself. The European Union has adopted this tried and true method to economic recovery, launching

an enormous recovery package in December 2020 worth over two trillion Euros that will support member countries in the transition to a green and digital economy.⁸¹

In order for public investments in Manitoba to make the maximum impact, they must ensure that good jobs are created and that education and training is in place to ensure opportunities exist for younger workers and that the legacy of public spending is a skilled workforce. In the area of construction, legislative changes such as the termination of project labour agreements through Bill 13 and the amended 2:1 ratio of journeypersons to apprentices will have the opposite effect, while serving to transfer more public money to contractors rather than to working Manitobans. Similarly, the austerity measures that have been applied to healthcare and other public services must be reversed. Austerity weakened Manitoba's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic and will leave the province vulnerable to future crises such as climate change. Bill 13 and the amended journeypersons ratio must be repealed as part of an effort to revive the Manitoba construction industry, and its economy, through the roll out of a significant green physical and social infrastructure program. Such a program must minimally be directed at the decarbonization of the economy through the construction of energy efficient homes and the retrofit of existing homes and public buildings, the expansion of renewable energy production, and the funding of affordable rural inter-community mass transit and carbon neutral mass transit in the City of Winnipeg. Investments in social infrastructure such as public services, healthcare, and education form a necessary and complementary element in order to ensure that a green transition will address economic, racial, and gender inequality and focus on the health and well-being of all Manitobans. This must include a committed strategy and designated funding streams to address mental health and addictions.

The economic recovery must be based on the provision of good jobs, rather than the expansion of non-standard employment arrangements and the policy of labour market flexibility. Proposed legislative changes to labour relations, such as Bill 16, as well as the heavy-handed assault on public sector collective bargaining through Bill 28 must cease immediately. Such legislation serves to place a downward pressure on wages and will reduce the positive economic impact of aggregate demand through consumer spending. Moreover, the regulation of the gig economy – with the extension of protections and labour standards to those employed in app-based and other atypical freelance or temporary employment relationships – a committed youth employment strategy, along with a policy of increasing minimum

wages to a living wage in Manitoba are required to halt the hyper-exploitation of young, female, and racialized workers.

Occupational health and safety must be a top priority. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the workers who are absolutely essential — including both frontline healthcare workers and those employed in food manufacturing, the service industry, and transportation — have borne the brunt of workplace exposure. Under current arrangements, vulnerable and precarious workers have had to make the unacceptable choice of going to work sick rather than risk the prospect of being unable to pay rent or buy food. A minimum of ten paid sick days for all Manitoba workers, legislated rather than as a voluntary scheme, must be implemented immediately. In Canada, workers have three basic health and safety rights, the right to know about workplace hazards, the right to participate in activities and discussions about workplace health and safety, and the right to refuse unsafe work. In Manitoba, a fourth right has been added to these three basic rights, namely, the right to protection from discrimination for exercising the three aforementioned rights. These workplace health and safety rights must be extended and deepened to enhance worker voice by expanding the scope of joint workplace health and safety committees to areas pertaining to work organization and job design. Such a change would be in line with the intentions of Robert Sass, the architect of these rights, who maintains that:

[W]orking conditions for every job are determined totally by the organization of work and the degree of control (or lack of control) that workers have over the means of work and the process of work. The prevailing ideology describes working conditions as a miscellaneous collection of the ‘physical’ and ‘social’ features of a particular job. The reality of the situation is just the opposite: the social organization of work produces both each job and its environment. What is important is the control over the work process.⁸²

On the federal level, Employment Insurance (EI) must be reformed. EI began as a program designed to benefit lower-wage workers, yet today it fails to adequately support most precarious, low-wage workers.⁸³ The temporary or part-time nature of those kinds of employment make it difficult to meet the eligibility requirements of the program. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, around 80% of unemployed workers received EI.

However, with the dominance of neoliberalism as the guiding economic logic informing labour policy, in the mid-1990s and early 2000s changes in eligibility requirements reduced coverage to around 40% of unemployed workers. With the possibility of an extended economic recession on the

horizon, it is necessary to make features of the former Canada Emergency Response Benefit permanent. Specifically, the qualifying threshold for EI eligibility must be lowered to a uniform entrance requirement of 300 hours and the duration of benefits increased to 50 weeks for all claimants. A minimum benefit amount of \$500 for low-waged workers should be established. Claims with records of employment that include terminations or quitting without cause should not disqualify claimants. Finally, the funding for education must be enhanced, including allowing claimants to enroll in educational programs for reskilling and upskilling. This is especially important in the context of facilitating the shift to a green economy.

An alternative vision for a post-pandemic recovery must recognize the contributions of the countless working-class Manitobans whose labour, as the pandemic again confirmed, is essential to the basic functioning of society. A focus on the well-being of the working class is further premised on the notion that we are stronger and rise together collectively.

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