

PANDEMICS +  
THE WORKING CLASS

The Alberta Labour History Institute

CALENDAR 2021

# WHAT IS THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE?

The Alberta Labour History Institute was founded in 1999 to give working people a chance to preserve their own stories in their own words.

We are a group of trade unionists, community activists, archivists, and historians dedicated to the collection, preservation, and dissemination of the stories of Alberta's working people and their organizations.

Oral history, mainly via videos, has always been the major form of research that ALHI undertakes. Our videos are available in our office as well as at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. We supplement the oral histories with archival and library research. We post full transcripts on our website, along with podcasts of what we view as the best excerpts.

We've used our oral history materials to create films, booklets, annual calendars, and a book, all of which are available directly on our website or via links from the website. We also provide advice to unions re archiving and re educational materials. Most "deliverables" for the Alberta Federation of Labour centennial celebration in 2012—the book, a booklet, six videos, and various posters—were ALHI creations.

We've also sponsored workshops and conferences and film nights that double as educational events and provide us with interviewees. For example, in 2002, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Edmonton Hunger March, participants who were still alive spoke at our commemorative workshop and we recorded their words.

We sponsored a conference on Alberta labour history in 2012 as part of the AFL centennial events. It included a combination of activists telling their stories plus academic sessions. We had a similar conference in 2014 and then in 2016, we marked the 30-year anniversary of the Gainers Strike and other major strikes that made up the "Alberta hot summer of '86" with an Edmonton workshop that included the showing of a video ballad by Maria Dunn and our videographer Don Bouzek on the Gainers workers. The video ballad was also performed in Calgary and Red Deer.

In 2019 we hosted workshops and concerts across Alberta on "The Centennial of the Great Labour Revolt of 1919" and produced an accompanying video, display panels, and a booklet.

A recent ALHI project is our "Indigenous Labour History Project," which involves a major effort to gather the stories of First Nations and Métis people. We've already produced a video on the Métis ironworkers who did the most dangerous construction work on the skyscrapers of downtown Edmonton. It's entitled "Waltzing with the Angels" and can be viewed on our website.

If you would like to join with ALHI in carrying out our mission to tell the history of Alberta's working people, please e-mail us at [office@albertalabourhistory.org](mailto:office@albertalabourhistory.org)

Or perhaps just tell us a story or send us pictures or artifacts you think should be on our website. If you are interested in learning more about ALHI, starting a Chapter in your community, or making a financial contribution to support our work, please email us at [office@albertalabourhistory.org](mailto:office@albertalabourhistory.org)

Please check out our website at [albertalabourhistory.org/about-alhi/](http://albertalabourhistory.org/about-alhi/)

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# PANDEMICS + THE WORKING CLASS

We will all remember 2020 as the year when we first experienced a pandemic that forced full societal lockdowns.

While it seemed to change everything, Covid-19 actually exposed to public view social inequalities that long pre-dated the pandemic. Though Covid-19 occasioned many tragedies, it also strengthened ongoing social justice campaigns of working-class activists and their allies.

There were lessons in earlier plagues. The Black Death that traversed Asia and Europe from 1347-52 reduced Europe's population by half. In its aftermath, feudal landlords and town employers persuaded governments to resist worker efforts to benefit from labour shortages to earn better wages. In England, the 1351 Statute of Labourers fixed wages at pre-plague levels, forbidding workers and peasants from leaving their landlord or employer as long as they offered employment. Such anti-worker legislation proved unenforceable, and employers bid for workers' services. Centuries-old feudal norms enforced by tradition and by arms evaporated.

Government efforts across Europe to tax back those wage gains to pay for wars produced peasants' and workers' rebellions that were militarily suppressed but forced concessions.

The Spanish flu of 1918, which killed as many as 100 million people, provoked wealthier nations to expand their public health bureaucracies. It also contributed to postwar radicalism as workers observed the far greater death rates in their overcrowded neighbourhoods where recommended social distancing was impossible even if their lack of savings had not forced them to risk their lives by going out to work. The trade union movement added political pressures for social programs to its agenda of prying more funds from individual employers. The post-war "welfare state" as well as occupational health and safety rules are products of those campaigns.

But Covid-19 demonstrated how far we still have to go. Understaffing and minimal regard for worker health and safety characterized meat-packing plants, long-term care homes, hospitals, food service establishments, municipal services, and farms. Transitions to accommodate pandemic conditions, including social distancing, fully protective masks, sanitary equipment, and adequate levels of staffing came slowly and sometimes only after tragedies. Unionized workers demanded employer adjustments but many non-unionized workers, including low-paid immigrant workers, temporary foreign workers, and undocumented workers faced difficult choices between their health and their ability to survive economically.

The pandemic also showed the immorality of leaving long-term care homes, childcare, pharmaceuticals provision, dental care, and much else in the for-profit sector. The trade union movement attempted to treat the crisis as a teachable moment that demonstrated the need for the implementation of new public programs and expansion of existing programs for which the movement had fought for years.



## WORKING DURING EARLIER PANDEMICS + EPIDEMICS

Nurses at Calgary's General Hospital presented polio patients with cash raised by the Certified Nursing Aides Association so they could buy Christmas gifts for their families, *The Albertan*, December 15, 1954. Glenbow Archives, NA 5600-6001A.

Trained nurses, joined by mainly women volunteers, comforted victims of Spanish flu from 1918 to 1920 in makeshift hospitals constructed within schools and university buildings. They wore cheesecloth masks to prevent infection but many caught the virus and died.

Throughout the 1950s, doctors, nurses, and orderlies attended to victims of polio, a disease that peaked in 1953 with 9000 cases and 500 deaths in Canada. The health workers were dressed in gowns, gloves and masks to avoid contamination from the infectious disease. Children were placed in "iron lung" machines to keep them breathing. Nurses wrapped their limbs in hot towels to loosen muscles and avoid paralysis. The nurses stayed in hospital barracks away from their families to avoid spreading the disease to the larger community.

During the HIV/AIDS outbreak of the 1980s, which has now accounted for about 35 million deaths globally, fears forced hospital workers initially to wear protective gear and avoid all contact with suspected sufferers. Gradually, that changed to a focus on human touch as a requirement for providing compassionate care.



# JANUARY 2021

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## FIX LONG-TERM CARE

### LONG-TERM-CARE WORKERS

Eighty percent of Canadian Covid-19 deaths occurred in long-term care homes. The per capita death rate in for-profit homes was four times the rate in government-run homes. Once largely state-run, most long-term care homes were contracted out to private operators from the 1970s onward. The for-profits received the same grant per resident as public operations. The latter, though underfunded, spent about 20 percent more of that grant on patients. Even before Covid-19, early deaths and hospitalizations of for-profit residents, sometimes living 4 to a room, far outdistanced the public homes.

For-profits were marked by under-staffing, under-training, and under-equipping. Their workers, mainly racialized immigrant women, were exhausted by their duties and not enabled to provide necessary services to vulnerable seniors. Many joined AUPE and CUPE which publicized their plight and sometimes struck the employers. Alberta governments turned a blind eye as their unions, the AFL, and Friends of Medicare campaigned for a return to full public operation with adequate budgets for long-term care homes. During the pandemic, the workers were more exhausted than ever and some became infected.

Caring, not warehousing, is what the union movement demands of long-term care. Photo courtesy of CUPE.

# FEBRUARY 2021

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14	15 Family Day	16	17	18	19	20
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## HEALTH CARE WORKERS

Hospital employees were the first line of defence against Covid-19. They had to treat patients with the infectious virus. But pandemic planning was rare before the outbreak despite years of public health warnings that such preparation was necessary. The health care unions, including the United Nurses of Alberta, the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees successfully pressured Alberta Health Services to provide all employees with fully protective masks as well as other protective gear.

Decades of deep cuts of hospital beds and hospital employees per capita in Alberta disallowed devoting some hospitals purely to Covid cases. So onerous work was necessitated to fully separate wards where people with Covid were on ventilators or were recovering. Elective surgeries had to be cancelled.

Working with Covid patients, many hospital employees felt the need to stay away from their families for months at a time. While they were sacrificing their lives to do their duties, the UCP provincial government suspended but refused to withdraw their pre-Covid plan to make drastic employment cuts in the health system.

Health care unions pressured the Alberta government to provide their members, such as the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) member pictured here with top-quality personal protective equipment.

Photo courtesy Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA).



# MARCH 2021

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International Women's Day						
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			St Patrick's Day			
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28	29	30	31			



## MEATPACKING WORKERS

UFCW workers at Cargill picket the plant as they press their demands for a pandemic-proof workplace.

Photo courtesy UFCW, Local 401.

Meatpacking workers, the overwhelming majority of whom were racialized Albertans and temporary foreign workers, epitomized the sacrifices workers made during Covid-19 as profit-driven employers and a right-wing government largely ignored detailed union requests for measures necessary to protect workers. 950 of 2100 workers at Cargill in High River tested positively for the virus and an additional 550 community members were also infected. One worker died and two other community members.

At JBS in Brooks, 22 percent of employees were infected and 7 percent of the entire community. That left one worker and three other community members dead. The virus also hit Harmony Beef north of Calgary. The three plants accounted for about 75 percent of all beef consumed in Canada in an increasingly monopolistic and ultra-exploitative industry.

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 401 spokesperson Michael Hughes said, "If Covid-19 is a fire, they're throwing us in." The union fought hard for protective masks for all workers, for greater sanitation in the plants, and for free transportation of the poorly paid workers who had earlier carpooled to Cargill.

# APRIL 2021

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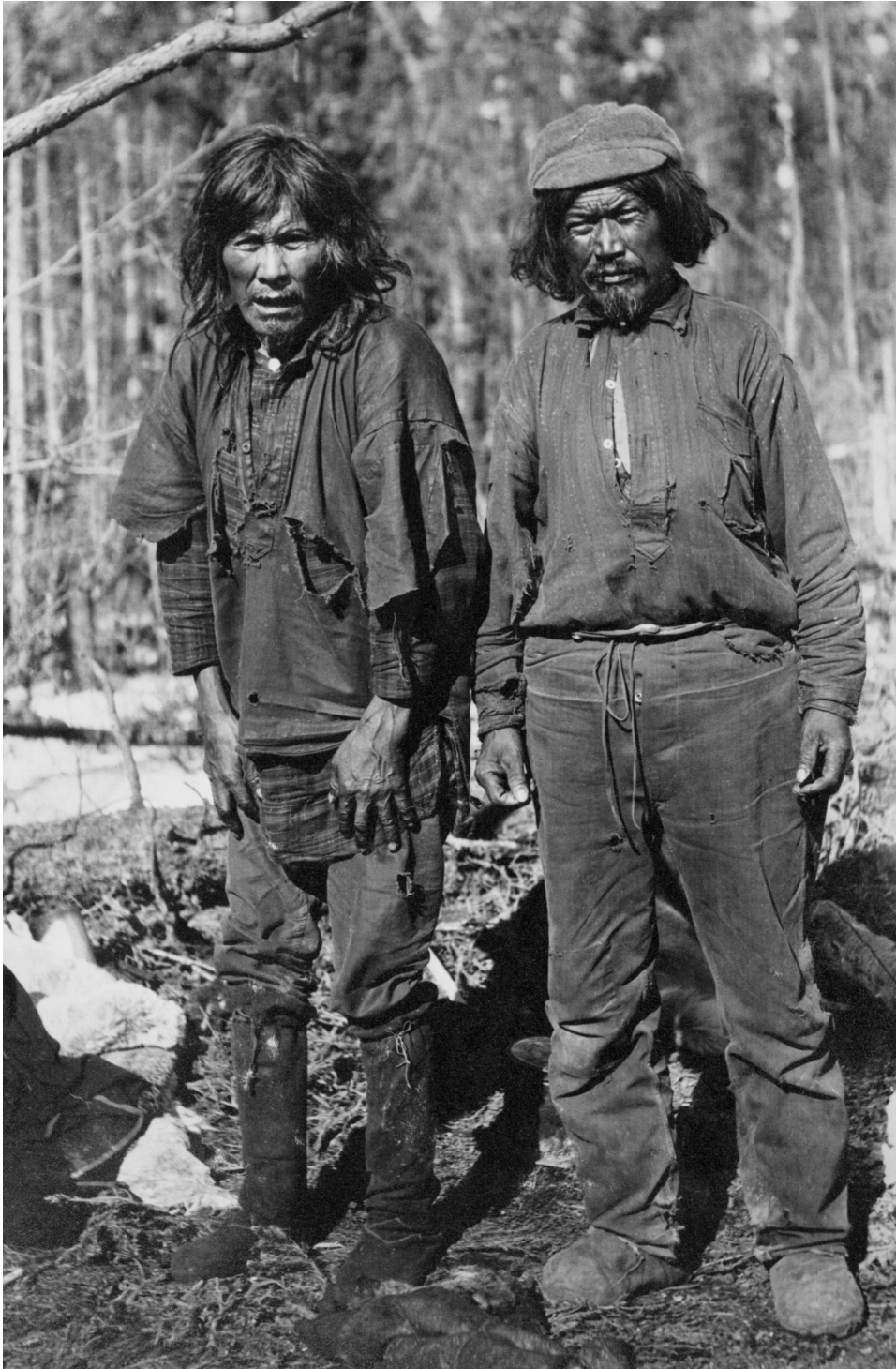
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4 <small>Easter Sunday</small>	5 <small>Easter Monday</small>	6	7	8	9	10
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## RACE + COVID

*“In Alberta, the links between race, immigration, labour, and public health manifested themselves in the food supply chain. Over 1200 COVID-19 cases were linked to the Cargill meat plant. Seventy percent of employees are of Filipino descent, most of whom work as general labourers amongst the lowest-paid employees, and some who have spouses working as health-care aides in Calgary. Public health officials named carpooling and crowded living arrangements as contributing factors to the rapid spread of the virus but overlooked labour practices and socioeconomic conditions that lead to shared living and transportation arrangements in the first place.”*

*Policy Options, 19 May, 2020*

Canada refused to collect racial data regarding Covid-19 deaths. But American and British data demonstrated that racialized residents, particularly those living in poverty, were dying in disproportionately high numbers. Those deaths coincided with increasing police murders and assaults of Blacks and Indigenous people across North America. The result was a huge movement to defund militarized policing in favour of community groups operating social programs meant to reduce disparities based on race and class.

Johnny Jack (left) and his father, Little Salmon people of the Yukon Territory. The Little Salmon First Nation was wiped out in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Glenbow Archives, NA-3452-2.



# MAY 2021

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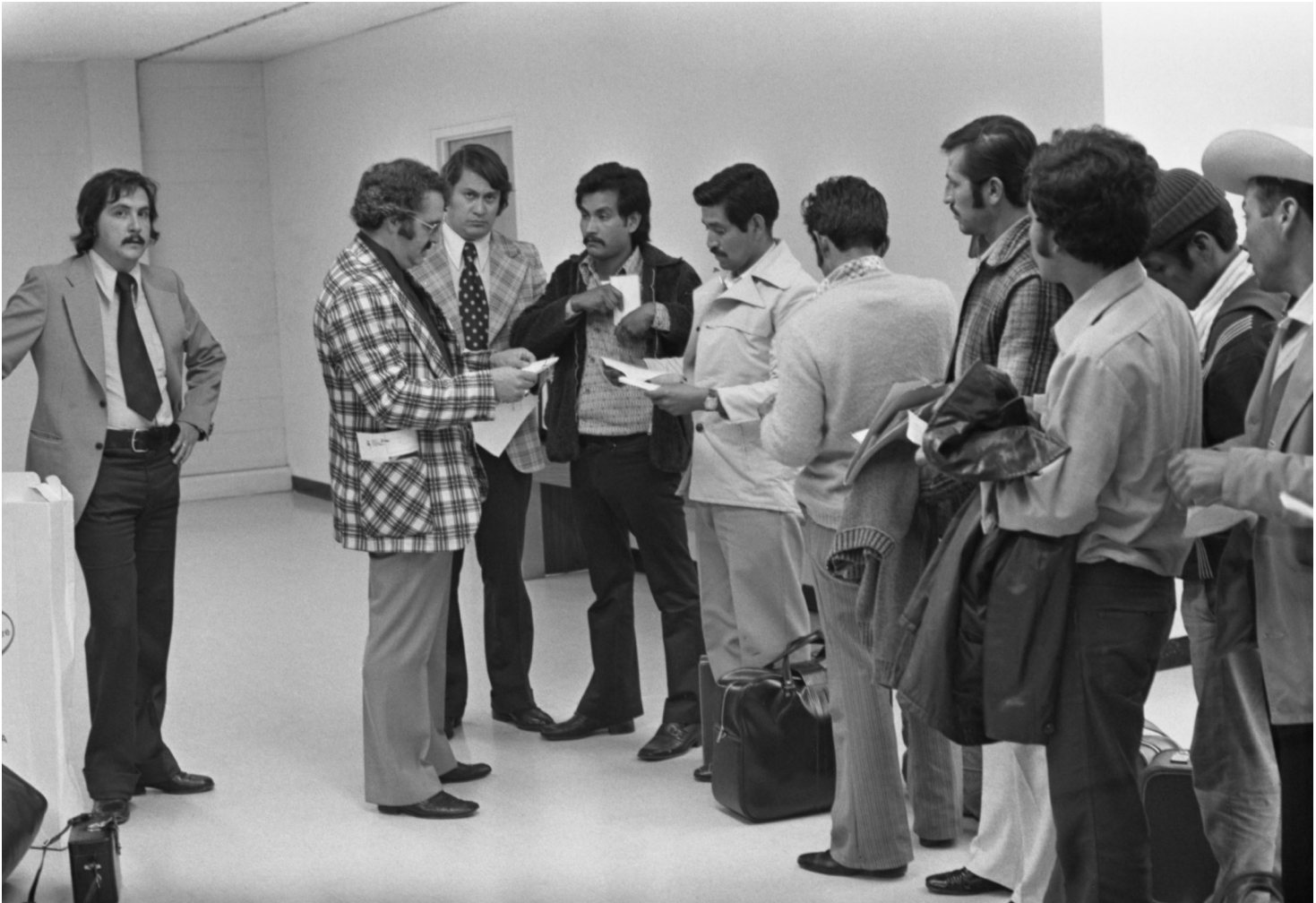
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9 <small>Mother's Day</small>	10	11	12	13	14	15
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30	31					



## MIGRANT WORKERS

In June, The Globe and Mail reported: "Essential but expendable: How Canada failed migrant farm workers." They added: "Lax oversight, poor communication and cramped, dirty conditions have left migrant farm workers across Canada vulnerable to Covid-19." There were 800 confirmed cases of Covid-19 among Ontario migrant farm workers and three Mexican-origin workers had died.

Inhuman living and working conditions had always characterized the migrant farm workers' program. That extended beyond farms to the entire temporary workers program. Sixty percent of TFW employers investigated by the Alberta Federation of Labour in 2007 had violated labour laws; few were penalized. Workers who remained in Canada after their work contract expired were particularly vulnerable to employer exploitation.

Immigrant communities created organizations such as Migrante to lobby for replacing "temporary" foreign work with a path to citizenship for all workers. Tying labour contracts to a single employer meant TFWs could be deported for reporting employers who violated their labour or human rights. No one should work under unsafe conditions or be excluded from receiving government compensation when safe work was unavailable, argued Migrante.

# JUNE 2021

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Father's Day	National Indigenous Peoples Day					
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## FIREFIGHTERS + BUS DRIVERS

Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) member Chris Pothier is masked for protection in his Calgary bus. Photo by Andrew Woolner, Courtesy ATU 583.

Unions of municipal service workers insisted that their members who remained at work during the outbreak must have their safety guaranteed. For the Alberta Fire Fighters Association, that meant temperature checks, social distancing, and high-quality personal protective equipment to ward off the virus. Crews were tightened in cases where it was necessary to go into a building where someone had been exposed to Covid-19.

The Amalgamated Transit Union pressed municipalities to provide more personal protective equipment, especially masks, for drivers. ATU supports fare-free transit so that the poor are not denied mobility. Observing that many homeless people spend their day on buses for lack of an alternative, it has also joined campaigns for government funding to end homelessness. The union persuaded cities to implement rear entrance only of buses and no fares to protect drivers from the virus. Later it fought efforts to restore fares. When bus ridership dropped temporarily in June, and some drivers were laid off, the union persuaded Edmonton Mayor Iveson to employ laid-off drivers as bus cleaners rather than contract out cleaning work.



# JULY 2021

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## WORKERS IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Gwen Hooks, pictured in a classroom in the 1940s, was an African-Canadian teacher in rural Alberta. Glenbow Archives, NA-704-4.

As the pandemic struck, schools and post-secondary institutions closed down. With no government plans in place, principals, teachers, and professors worked feverishly to move in-person instruction on-line often without any knowledge regarding on-line learning. For K-12 teachers, attempting to work with students sitting in their homes sometimes alongside parents whose work had moved into their home, proved challenging. A government decision to lay off 20,000 educational assistants along with school caretakers meant that the students requiring the most individual attention would not get it.

In the summer of 2020 unions of teachers, educational assistants, and support workers all pushed for a reopening of schools in the fall with adequate social distancing and protection for all workers as well as pupils. Universities and colleges elected to offer only on-line courses for the fall semester of 2020. That jeopardized many support jobs at a time when the government of Alberta was massively reducing its support for the post-secondary sector.

# AUGUST 2021

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## DAY-CARE WORKERS

Daycares were forced to shut down in Alberta in mid-March, 2020. Soon however it became necessary to have daycare services for children of essential workers. A limited number of operations opened, and some of the lowest paid workers in the province were at risk of catching a deadly virus. But daycare spaces for most children temporarily disappeared. The loss of daycare places in a province where the services were, in any case, almost all privatized and quite expensive, inhibited the ability of women who had lost jobs to return to work. It also made life impossible for many women who were able to work from home but could not do that and look after young children at the same time. Thousands of daycare workers were suddenly unemployed as well. The pandemic highlighted the need for a universal daycare program with well-paid, well-trained, unionized daycare workers given the means to provide affordable, high quality childcare for working families in ways that guaranteed the safety of both workers and children.

Grande Prairie daycare worker and her munchkins.  
Courtesy Canadian Union of Public Employees



# SEPTEMBER 2021

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## FOOD SERVICE, RETAIL + OTHER SERVICE WORKERS

Supermarket workers were masked early on during the pandemic but for many months faced customers who were mostly unmasked.

Photo courtesy Unsplash

Supermarket workers in Canada have been subjected to corporate attacks on their wages and working conditions since the 1970s. Union struggles to prevent their jobs from deteriorating further received much public support as Covid-19 erupted and the necessity of continuing food supplies turned previously invisible supermarket workers into public heroes. UFCW pushed for plexiglass shields for cashiers, masks for all workers, and staggered entry of customers to allow for social distancing. They were able to extract a \$2 per hour bonus for the workers from March through June, 2020, and fought unsuccessfully for that to be retained afterwards.

Other retail workers and restaurant workers, whose jobs were initially suspended when the virus first struck, eventually returned to work. They faced the same challenges as the food store workers but, virtually all non-unionized, their ability to persuade employers to attend to their safety needs was restricted. The perils of working without union representation were starkly evident in the retail sector during the pandemic.

# OCTOBER 2021

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## COVID, GENDER, + RACE

The pandemic-induced recession drastically reduced employment, but particularly women's employment in an economy where jobs remain gender-stratified. The dismissal of education assistants, cashiers, sales clerks, hairdressers, cleaners and others as the pandemic spread, disproportionately affected women. As the lockdowns ended, jobs in many areas where women predominated were clearly not going to return to previous levels.

Women's organizations and unions increasingly demanded a rethinking of job creation measures to focus on people's needs rather than what people could afford as unequally endowed individuals in the marketplace. Expanded programs and employment in health, education, housing, childcare, care of seniors and the disabled, recreation, and the arts would benefit all of society but especially women and children. There were also calls for more government action to require employers to achieve gender balance and gradually end the entire notion of "women's jobs" versus "men's jobs."

Similar demands were made for greater affirmative action to ensure that administrative positions in government and business reflected the racial composition of society and to compensate for centuries of discrimination against Indigenous people and non-white settlers.

Hospital staff was mostly female, and were screened as they entered for their shifts during the pandemic.

Photo courtesy Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA).



# NOVEMBER 2021

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## NEO-LIBERALISM + PANDEMICS

Paramedic ready for action during Covid-19 times.  
Courtesy Health Sciences Association of Alberta.

Countries and sub-national jurisdictions across the world that had avoided austerity measures in the period before Covid-19 struck proved better able to keep people alive, safe, and fed than jurisdictions that had shrunk their social safety nets. Norway, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, New Zealand, Cuba, and the Indian state of Kerala shone in their ability to escape Covid-19 relatively unscathed for that reason while the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and Russia did poorly. Canadian unions that had opposed the “neo-liberal” (corporate-friendly) policies of reducing state guarantees for education, health, and housing, doubled down during Covid on their campaigns for extended social guarantees. That included pharmacare, denticare, public long-term care, public homecare, public daycare, free public education at all levels, and housing guarantees for all citizens. There was also growing support for guaranteed incomes for all citizens as a means of ending poverty in Canada. Unions emphasized as well the need for legislation to make unionization of workers easier so that all workers could be participants in their workplaces rather than pawns on an employer chessboard.

# DECEMBER 2021

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					Christmas Eve	Christmas Day
26	27	28	29	30	31	
Boxing Day					New Year's Eve	

The Alberta Labour History Institute Calendar 2021

# PANDEMICS + THE WORKING CLASS



Cover Image: Telephone operators wearing masks, High River Alberta, 1918-19.

Glenbow Archives, NA-3452-2.

**THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE WOULD LIKE TO RECOGNIZE  
OUR PARTNERS WHO HELP US MAKE THIS CALENDAR POSSIBLE:**

Blair Chahley, Lawyers | Chivers Carpenter, Lawyers | McGown Cook, Barristers & Solicitors  
Nugent Law Office | McManus & Hubler, Lawyers | Brenda Kuzio, Lawyer | Severyn Scott, Lawyers

To order additional calendars, contact us at 780.732.0320 or [kwerlin@telus.net](mailto:kwerlin@telus.net)