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SEIU Local 2 Launches Nationwide Effort to Unionize Essential Workers

SEIU Local 2 launches massive unionization campaign during the pandemic, and is already celebrating two successful drives in Vancouver

TORONTO, May 12, 2020 — The COVID-19 crisis has had disastrous effects on workers without unions, many of whom have little or nothing in the way of job protection and sick days. Thousands of essential workers across the country have been laid off with no guaranteed callback, losing their seniority and benefits. As governments across Canada dragged their feet mandating adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) regulations, essential workers fell sick and died.

While the pandemic has generated plenty of confusion, one thing has been made crystal clear: essential workers need unions. In response, the Service Employees International Union Local 2 is launching a nationwide “Unions are Essential” campaign to help non-unionized essential workers form a union and be heard.

The campaign already has achieved two victories. Essential workers at two sites in North Vancouver, Lonsdale and Tsawwassen Quay Markets, are celebrating after completing a successful union organizing drive and certification vote, all amidst the outbreak of COVID-19. The workers are now negotiating their first contracts with their employer, Dexterra.

Unions are needed so that essential workers can effectively advocate for their needs. John Vogel, a Driver/Operator at McRae’s Environmental in British Columbia, puts it this way: “Given what is happening with the pandemic, workers absolutely need to win paid sick day flexibility from their bosses. We can’t wait on the government to legislate this stuff. We won six paid sick days at the bargaining table from our company, which we can bank, or take as a cash pay-out at the end of the year. We’d never get that non-union.”



Despite keeping our society running during the pandemic, the majority of essential workers do not have a union. The “Unions are Essential” campaign aims to bring these workers into the fold of the labour movement, empowering them to defend themselves effectively against employers and politicians who often regard workers’ rights as a low priority.

Kathy Sanford is a Personal Support Worker working for the Dykeland Lodge Nursing Home based in Nova Scotia. The pandemic made the union advantage apparent to her. Sandford says: “Being part of a union means that our voices and concerns get heard by Management. Without a union, Management usually has the final say in everything. As a long-term caregiver working during a global health pandemic, this is very important to me. All of us here work extremely hard to take care of the residents, and we need to make sure we are also taken care of and have a real voice at work.”

The campaign has also launched unionsareessential.ca, a website that will connect workers with on-the-ground SEIU organizers in their region.

SEIU Local 2 represents essential workers in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, New Brunswick and British Columbia. Local 2 is affiliated with other SEIU locals and councils across the country, and will be collaborating with them in this unionization effort.



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