

Can't Stand the Heat? Get Out of the Kitchen!

The impact of extreme weather events on
food service workers in British Columbia



SPRING 2023

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WORKER SOLIDARITY NETWORK

The Worker Solidarity Network (WSN), formerly known as the Retail Action Network, consists of non-unionized and precarious workers across BC who advocate for our rights and interests while taking collective action to improve labour standards for all.

In 2015, a small group of retail and restaurant workers in Victoria, BC, joined together to discuss the common trends and experiences they endured in their sectors of work. Upon further research and conversation, and by recognizing the historical power of labour organizing, they began to act together in the spirit of mutual aid, solidarity, and direct action. The WSN now consists of workers throughout the province that share an invested interest in the well-being of precarious employees that struggle under capitalism.

The WSN effectively organizes to:

- Distribute accessible know-your-rights education.
- Close the gap in effective labour rights enforcement.
- Support and empower individuals with complaints.
- Campaign for long-term labour improvements.

Through collective action, we are excited and confident about the future of the worker solidarity movement in BC.

CONTACT

For more information, please contact info@workersolidarity.ca.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was conducted on unceded and unsurrendered Coast Salish Territories, specifically of the Lək'wəḡən (Songhees), Xwsepsum (Esquimalt), xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. The Worker Solidarity Network is committed to acting in support of Indigenous sovereignty and resistance.

Thank you to all the food service workers who participated in this project. Your insights were invaluable.

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The Vancity logo, featuring the word "Vancity" in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

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Project background

Exploring the link between extreme weather events and the precarity of food service work is vital.

THIS PROJECT FOCUSES ON THE IMPACTS OF EXTREME WEATHER events on food service workers in BC. The workers involved in this project include baristas, servers, cooks, hosts, dishwashers, and those in fast food drive-thru positions. Given the precarious nature of this sector and to ensure anonymity, demographic information beyond their job title and place of residence was not collected.

We chose to examine the food service sector because it is poorly paid, highly gendered, and racialized (Retail Action Network, 2016). Exploring the link between extreme weather events and the precarity of food service work is vital. Much of the engagement with this intersection explores the environmentally damaging impacts of food service, such as concerns about high carbon emissions, food waste, and interrupted supply chains. While these studies are integral to informing fairer working conditions, our project elevates the voices of workers that are sometimes overlooked in climate change dialogue.

Environmental disasters, such as rising temperatures, extreme flooding, and active wildfires, disproportionately impact precarious workers in low-wage positions. The project's goal is to foster connections among those who are otherwise isolated and unprotected with the long-term goal of building worker power.

First, the research process is outlined—this details our methodological approach and explains how we collected data. Next, we briefly discuss the implications of precarious work. We then outline the major findings that emerged in this study:

Section 1: Precarious Employment

Section 2: Employment Conditions

Section 3: Working Conditions

Section 4: Recommendations

The themes above include numerous sub-themes within each section, including information on minimum standards, lack of employment contracts, hours and scheduling, wages, lack of enforced protective measures, refusing unsafe work, physical and mental health implications, eco-anxiety, and dress codes. We conclude by providing recommendations.

Summary of findings

FOR THIS STUDY, WE GATHERED DATA through a survey, a focus group, and ongoing one-on-one interviews with food service workers. This report shares the findings gathered from 31 food service workers in BC.

- 87% of workers **are not/do not know if they are unionized**
- 87% of workers reported **that heatwaves impact workers the most** out of all extreme weather events
- 80% of workers experience **changes to their position** when natural disasters hit (e.g., reduced hours, working overtime, enduring additional labour beyond the positions they were hired for)
- 77% of workers reported that their **workplace does not have adequate protective measures** implemented when it comes to environmental disasters
- 68% of workers reported that **additional breaks for hydration are not accommodated** during extreme weather events
- 97% of workers identified **specific protective measures that are needed** to ensure worker health and safety during climate change
- Most workers take it upon themselves to **protect one another during extreme weather events** (e.g., bringing fans to work, wearing cold towels around their necks, standing in the walk-in freezer, etc.)
- 88% of workers from the focus group and one-on-ones reported that they **do not feel comfortable refusing unsafe work**
- 72% of workers **reported that being understaffed plays a role in the quantity of additional labour** they end up taking on
- 77% of workers **experience amplified physical health concerns** at work during extreme weather events
- 84% of workers **experience compromised mental well-being** during extreme weather events
- 97% of workers identified what **concerns them the most about climate change's impact on food service workers** (e.g., no compensation for unsafe work, transportation problems, unreliable hours, business closures, etc.)

84% of workers experience compromised mental well-being during extreme weather events

Research process

METHODOLOGY

An intersectional and community-engaged research approach guided this qualitative project. This methodology allows for meaningful connections with participants and ensures that the project is worker-led. Through community outreach, we connected with a total of 31 food service workers in BC who participated in this project.

To ensure an ongoing relationship beyond the research interview process, we hosted virtual social events for food service workers to congregate. In these digital spaces, we discussed the intersection between climate justice and labour justice more broadly.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected in a mixed-method way through a survey, a focus group, and a series of one-on-one interviews. We first launched an online survey on World Earth Day, and 15 food service workers across BC completed it. The goal of the survey was to gain a general sense of what concerns workers the most about climate change. The focus group was hosted in June 2022, and 5 food service workers participated. The goal of the focus group was to allow workers to expand on some of the survey questions. Lastly, because food service workers often work in multiple jobs with unpredictable schedules, we expanded data collection to include one-on-one interviews to meet workers where they are at. In this stage, we conducted conversational interviews with a total of 11 food service workers.

The focus group and one-on-one interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. We then analyzed the data thematically. As researchers with firsthand experience in food service roles, we developed questions we considered relevant to industry experiences. The guide for the survey, focus group, and one-on-one interviews asked questions in the following areas:

- Is your workplace unionized?
- What climate issues have impacted you the most at work?
- Have you experienced changes to your position at work during extreme weather events?
- Does your workplace have health and safety measures for extreme weather events?
- Have additional breaks for hydration at work been accommodated?
- Have you experienced physical health challenges at work during a climate crisis?
- Have you experienced mental health challenges at work during a climate crisis?

We discussed the intersection between climate justice and labour justice more broadly.

Precarious employment

PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT REFERS TO LARGELY UNPROTECTED JOBS where workers experience low bargaining power and mistreatment (Benach et al., 2010; Retail Action Network, 2016). These precarious positions can be experienced in retail, hospitality, and food service sectors. The food service industry is highly gendered and racialized (Retail Action Network, 2016), with almost one-quarter of workers being immigrants, and women being disproportionately represented in part-time roles (Charlebois, 2016; Government of Canada, 2022). We asked participants to describe their experience working in the food service industry during extreme weather events, and descriptors included “purgatory”, “alienating”, and “absolute hell”. Workers in this project described experiences of job insecurity through low unionization rates, pay disparity, and part-time labour.

JOB INSECURITY

The lack of job security refers to instances of lost income, experiences of reduction in scheduled hours, and the reality that workers are disposable in their roles. To support this point, one food service worker shared, “The cost of living is so high that you don’t want to say no [to a shift] in case you lose your job...I feel like I’m caught in a stranglehold...everyone’s dispensable”. Food service employment is precarious in nature as a result of the lack of employment protections. Many non-unionized workers are at risk of facing retaliation and termination without just cause, especially when addressing issues in the workplace.

The cost of living is so high that you don’t want to say no to a shift in case you lose your job

LOW UNIONIZATION RATES

Workers are in a better position to negotiate fairer conditions if they are unionized. For example, three food service workers from the one-on-one interviews reported that they work in unionized establishments. Because of this, these workers shared that they do feel comfortable negotiating, speaking up against workplace issues, and refusing unsafe work during extreme weather events. However, this is not the case for all food service workers, as most are non-unionized (Kulkarni, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022). Data from our study indicates that 87% of workers are not/do not know if they are unionized.

The food service sector is within the top five sectors in Canada that employ temporary foreign workers (Lu, 2020). Low unionization rates impact this community in unique ways. Temporary foreign workers often arrive with closed work permits, confining them to precarious employment. Importantly, for those attempting to secure permanent residency, negotiating wages or speaking up against workplace mistreatment is complicated.

PAY DISPARITY

Many food service workers earn a minimum wage. This is not nearly enough to make ends meet in BC. Workers facing income instability may be required to work shorter shifts when it is less busy or work



longer hours during busier times of the year. This reality makes hours of work precarious and income erratic and unpredictable. As one newcomer to Canada working as a fast-food cook explained:

"The payment—it's not that good. They pay me a minimum salary, and you know, the paycheck is always small, and Vancouver is really expensive."

Women make up a majority of the food service workforce and are more likely to disproportionately work part-time hours.

In addition, it is particularly important to note the gender pay disparity in Canada. Indeed, women make up a majority of the food service workforce and are more likely to disproportionately work part-time hours (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018).

PART-TIME WORK

Part-time work is precarious because of scheduling practices, often being excluded from health benefits, and a lack of entitlements to statutory holiday pay.

Food service labour already entails inconsistent scheduling, which, in turn, means that many workers in part-time positions experience deeper precarity when their paychecks are unreliable due to an involuntary low number of hours. According to Work BC (2021), part-time employment is common for those in the food service sector. While one job should be enough, part-time workers who face inconsistent hours and low wages often have to search for additional employment. In addition, inconsistent scheduling makes it challenging to secure additional employment.

Food service work is precarious. The higher the degree of employment precarity, the more likely a worker will tolerate unfair employment conditions and be exposed to hazardous working conditions without adequate protections (Benach et al., 2010). Food service workers experience deeper precarity during extreme weather events, as one restaurant server in the project mentioned:

“During a climate catastrophe, people are already feeling isolated and high stress and anxiety, feeling like there’s a lot of unknowns. And then, in your workplace, which is where you spend so much of your time, there’s no concrete solutions to support you, which further exacerbates those feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.”

The combination of precarity and extreme weather events worsens employment and working conditions for workers with limited job security, including those who are non-unionized, low-wage, and part-time.



SECTION 2

Employment conditions during extreme weather events

Food service workers continue to face numerous workplace violations that often cannot be remedied, given their limited ability to address their rights with employers.

EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS REFER TO THE CONTRACTUAL COMMITMENTS that must be fulfilled in the workplace. Despite the minimum employment conditions outlined in the Employment Standards Act (ESA), food service workers continue to face numerous workplace violations that often cannot be remedied, given their limited ability to address their rights with employers. Most workers in the industry do not receive pensions, extended benefits, paid sick leave, medical leave, or parental leave. In this section, we outline the minimum standards that worsen during extreme weather events, including breaks, paid sick days, lack of employment contracts, hours and scheduling, and wages.

LACK OF ENFORCED BREAKS

Under the ESA, employers must ensure that workers do not exceed working 5 consecutive hours without a half-hour meal break. In our project, there was a general consensus that breaks for respite are not routinely enforced. In fact, during extreme weather events, 68% of workers reported that additional breaks for necessary hydration were not accommodated.

One of the unionized restaurant cooks in the project shared:

"I take regular breaks. I'm lucky enough to have them now."

This response was the exception compared to most food service workers that we engaged with. Others reflected:

"Enforced breaks would be nice. There are absolutely no enforced breaks." (Barista)

"Managers have all the authority...you know, you have the right to a break, you have the right to this, you have the right to that. But you won't exercise it if you don't feel like you're allowed to. Or if you don't feel like they'll approve of you doing it." (Bartender)

"Enforced breaks, especially in food service, they're just non-existent." (Restaurant Server)

These quotes provide context into the employment conditions that sustain such a culture where workers feel as if they are not "allowed" to take breaks at work. This is especially concerning with the increase in extreme weather events and goes hand-in-hand with the fear of workplace retaliation.



LACK OF EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS

Written employment contracts provide workers with information about their basic employment rights, which should include details about benefits, health and safety measures, termination provisions, vacation policies, and compensation for hours of work. For food service workers, receiving employment contracts is uncommon.

“I don’t think I’ve ever signed a contract going into the food industry. So we don’t even know what the conditions of our employment are. Other than if you don’t show up, you’ll get fired. It’s very black and white. You either have a job, and you perform it at the most productive level, or you will be made to feel guilty. It’s the perfect storm of corporations and people making a profit on people’s lack of knowledge and rights.”

It’s the perfect storm of corporations and people making a profit on people’s lack of knowledge and rights.

During discussions on recent provincial employment standards victories, like BC’s five paid sick days, some workers expressed that they were left in the dark about this mandate. Responses such as, “I didn’t know about it”, “I don’t even know how they work”, “I wasn’t made aware that was a thing”, and “he [my employer] was like ‘don’t tell anybody about the 5 paid sick days’”, exemplify how the lack of employment contracts can be detrimental to workers’ well-being. We argue that by design, food service workers are unaware of their fundamental rights at work.

PAID SICK DAYS

Despite the Government of BC’s mandated entitlement of five paid sick days per year, some workers are hesitant to access these paid sick days owing to fear of employer retaliation. The fear of retaliation can affect workers in terms of being removed from the schedule (resulting in a large loss of income), being ostracized from other employment opportunities, or full termination without just cause. Given the fear

of retaliation, it is understandable, then, that when extreme weather events occur, workers will persevere rather than jeopardize their income.

Workers in the project shared that oftentimes (despite living through the COVID-19 pandemic), they will continue to work when sick because they cannot afford to lose out on the pay, or they do not know how to spend these five days. As a restaurant server explained:

“There’s 365 days in a year, and you get 5 off, so how do you choose which days are the most important?”

Non-unionized workers are frequently forced to risk their employment security as a trade-off for needed sick days, a risk that is significantly amplified while facing workplace discrimination. Workers in low-wage positions might experience an increased risk to their job security when requesting time off to take care of themselves.

Other workers in the project expressed they were not aware of their paid sick day entitlements, were misinformed, or did not know how to access them. Distinctly, migrant workers that face language barriers may not be made aware of paid sick leave policies at work, contributing to the many barriers migrant workers face.

Yet, there is no guarantee that employers will provide paid sick leave if a worker falls sick due to extreme weather events, such as wildfire smoke sickness or heat illness. A worker may call in sick but not request to be paid for the day due to an additional fear of retaliation and would rather lose out on pay.

HOURS/SCHEDULING

In the context of hours and scheduling, some food service workers reported that they believe their schedules will be negatively impacted during extreme weather events if they speak up against workplace health and safety violations, and 80% of workers reported that they experience changes to their position during extreme weather events. These changes include instances of reduced scheduled hours owing to business closures, enduring additional labour beyond the position they were hired for, and working overtime due to staff shortages. The reality is that wages are low, and the cost of living is high. Therefore, many workers disclosed that they could not afford to miss out on their scheduled hours.

WAGES

In 2021, WorkBC reported that wages for workers in accommodation and food services are below the provincial average. Food service work is already low-paying, and BC remains one of the most unaffordable provinces to reside in. In November 2022, the living wage for Metro Vancouver and Victoria was calculated to be \$24.02 and \$24.29, respectively (Living Wage Campaign, 2022). These calculations reflect the wages necessary to secure basic survival needs for a family. When climate-fuelled business closures put workers out of income, it leads to deeper precarity. As one food service worker shared:

“It’s very hard to even want to get up in the morning, let alone to go to a job that you have to do to pay your rent, you know, to live as a human. It’s very traumatic on a large scale.”

The unpredictable wages during extreme weather events, coupled with the reality of inflation and high living costs, contribute to the inability of workers to take time off when they might need it. As one cook from the study rhetorically asked:

“Why would we justify taking a day off work when it means we don’t have as much money to survive?”

It’s very hard to even want to get up in the morning, let alone to go to a job that you have to do to pay your rent, you know, to live as a human. It’s very traumatic on a large scale.

Working conditions during extreme weather events

WORKING CONDITIONS REFER TO THE SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL environment of the workplace. For workers, these conditions should ensure health and safety measures are met. Our study reveals that for food service labourers, working conditions are worsened during extreme weather events. In this section, we outline five concerns to support this point and exemplify the ways workers experience exacerbated workers' rights violations during extreme weather events. These concerns include a lack of enforcement of protective measures, experiences of amplified physical health concerns, compromising of their mental well-being, the impact of dress codes in relation to workplace discomfort, and the fear of consequences for refusing unsafe work.

LACK OF PROTECTIVE HEALTH AND SAFETY MEASURES

Under the Workers Compensation Act, it is an employer's responsibility to enforce health and safety policies. Despite this expectation, 77% of food service workers reported that their workplaces do not have adequate protective measures when it comes to ensuring worker safety during environmental crises. When asking workers if there are any protective measures in place for them, both in general and during extreme weather events, we were met with responses of "no, there is nothing", "not at all", and "absolutely not".

The lack of resources, lack of training, and lack of education on best practices during an extreme weather event are detrimental to workers' overall health and safety. Workers expressed concern over inadequate infrastructure, such as no cooling systems during high temperatures, no heating systems for cold temperatures, no provision of personal protective equipment, and minimal ventilation systems.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

The lack of well-enforced regulations for food service labour is dangerous, especially during changing climate. Workers expressed the realities of having no provision of personal protective equipment, no evacuation training, and limited knowledge of standard health and safety protections. In general, food service workers are susceptible to injuries, including oil burns, cuts, slips, sprains, falls, and strains (WorkSafeBC, 2022). In this study, 77% of workers experience amplified physical health concerns at work when climate disasters hit. The following section will detail some of the increased risks facing food service workers during droughts, floods, and heatwaves. Some workers described the realities of physical health impacts ranging from general fatigue to fainting on shift.

The lack of resources, lack of training, and lack of education on best practices during an extreme weather event are detrimental to workers' overall health and safety.

Experiencing smoke exposure on the job adds another layer of unsafe working conditions for food service workers, especially those working outdoors. A restaurant server and a cook in the study explained a shared reality of working during the wildfire season. They explained:

“Over the past couple of summers, when the smoke becomes really bad, a lot of us servers have questioned why our patio remains open for the safety of staff walking around and breathing in the smoke.”

“It’s absurd to make people work when they can’t breathe.”

It’s absurd to make people work when they can’t breathe.

One participant who works in a fast-food drive-thru window explained that she has asthma and worked during the wildfire season, sharing the importance of “monitoring my symptoms”. For workers with existing physical health concerns, the situation is particularly challenging when extreme weather events hit.

The impact of atmospheric rivers was another issue raised by workers. The flooding in November 2021 brought an “unprecedented amount of rain to the province” (Government of British Columbia, 2022), and food service workers were impacted in unique ways. One food service worker reported that they had to work in two inches of water for a week during this time period.

In this study, 87% of food service workers reported that, overall, heatwaves are the most common extreme weather event that affects them the most. Notably, during the heat dome in 2021, WorkSafeBC received a 180% increase in worker claims for heat stress in positions that are indoors (WorkSafeBC, 2022). As a restaurant patio server shared:

“After a round of hot double shift days at both jobs, I fainted at my evening shift due to heat stroke. That day, throughout the 2 restaurants I worked at, 3 servers threw up multiple times due to heat stroke, another 2 blacked out, a line cook fainted... It was miserable.”



On the note of heat stress, a barista in the study explained:

"My coworker had to put their head on the fridge every 10 minutes or sit down, and I would give them some ice and some water. And thank goodness it wasn't that busy during this time. But if it were to be busy, I know that we would be expected to push ourselves absolutely beyond our limits. The productivity comes at an expense of our health."

Similarly, a fast-food cashier explained that the employer did not allow workers to have water bottles visible at the front-of-house. She shared:

"You don't really have time to cool down per se... we should be allowed to have water near our workstation."

Given the lack of enforced protective measures and accommodations in place for food service workers, some resort to standing in walk-in freezers, bringing fans to work, and drinking water when they can to mitigate heat discomfort. Some of these strategies can result in an escalated risk to workers' physical health. For example, where the temperature of the surrounding air is above 35°Celsius, using fans may actually increase workers' risk of heat stress (WorkSafeBC, 2007).

MENTAL HEALTH

The high expectations of emotional labour and stressful environments of food service work are worsened during extreme weather events. As a restaurant cook explained,

"They expect you to work harder and faster in the heat because it still needs to get done". In addition to the detriment this has on one's physical health, it also takes a toll on workers' mental well-being.

The BC Human Rights Tribunal denotes the fact that discrimination based on mental health disabilities is illegal. As one restaurant cook in the study shared, food service labour is "rough on people's bodies and spirits". Compounded with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is understandable that 83% of workers from the project reported that they experience worsened mental health impacts at work during extreme weather events.

"I have this very specific story of this one day where it was just so hot. I couldn't rationalize why I was still at work. It was so insanely busy, and so much was going around, like the forest fires, the heat itself, and feeling like there's nothing that I could do. While I was working, all I could think of was climbing over the counter and pushing my way out of the restaurant and getting the hell out of there. But I couldn't because it's like, how am I going to pay rent? Or what am I going to do? And if I just go to another kitchen, it's going to be the same thing. So just this feeling of 'get me the heck out of here' but being stuck. It felt so detrimental and like I was there against my will." (Restaurant Cook)

Alongside discussion of general mental health implications in food service labour, some workers in the project spoke to the real, personal, and growing presence of eco-anxiety.

"The emotional toll of climate anxiety is so much more difficult to bear because instead of being able to say 'it'll be okay' it's like, 'well, it might actually not be'." (Barista)

"It can be very traumatic and anxiety-inducing to know that we're going toward something we may never be able to come back from." (Restaurant Cook)

"I don't live my every day with this anxiety, but it does come to mind every so often, and it's pretty scary stuff...this isn't some mass paranoia, it's facts." (Restaurant Cook)

One restaurant cook shared that her coworker's mental health was impacted by the floods. She mentioned her coworker was stressed, overworked, and exhausted after supporting with flood relief.

It can be very traumatic and anxiety-inducing to know that we're going toward something we may never be able to come back from.

DRESS CODE

Wearing loose and breathable clothing is a well-known safety measure to mitigate risk and discomfort during rising temperatures. WorkSafeBC (2021) underscores the value of wearing light-coloured and loose-fitting clothing as a key way to prevent heat stress. For some workers in the study, their mandatory uniforms were thick or dark in colour, which made working during the heat dome difficult.

As one event server explained:

“We had to wear long black pants, and it was awful. We’d also have to wear a white button-up long sleeve tucked in, and then we also have to wear a thick cotton apron on top of that.”

There’s definitely a degree of shame when sweating as a food service worker.

To contextualize further, one restaurant cook mentioned that employers did not want to see staff sweating in front of customers. He shared:

“You shouldn’t be showing the customer that you are sweating. That’s the worst part in the heat-wave, you have to work in the required clothing... Sweating is not something I do purposefully.”

In a similar vein, another restaurant bartender explained:

“There’s definitely a degree of shame when sweating as a food service worker.”

Conversely, some employers have become flexible with dress code regulations during the heatwaves. One worker explained that between both of her food service jobs, staff were allowed to “wear whatever we wanted to survive a shift”. The idea of surviving a shift played a critical role in the responses of other food service workers.

REFUSING UNSAFE WORK

Workers have the right to refuse unsafe work, and it is the responsibility of employers to investigate the concern, remedy the unsafe conditions without delay, and inform workers of the conclusion (WorkSafeBC, 2023). For those in low-wage, precarious jobs, refusing unsafe work is not an easy task.

When inquiring about the comfortability of refusing unsafe work, participants responded with “absolutely not”, “no way”, and “no because, in my case, I need the money”. In total, 88% of food service workers in the focus group and one-on-one interviews reported that they do not feel comfortable refusing unsafe work.

Recommendations

EMPLOYMENT LAW WAS NOT WRITTEN TO ANTICIPATE a rise in extreme environmental disasters. There are no laws in place to protect workers' employment if they do not report to work during an extreme weather event. Moreover, health and safety measures in the workplace are dated, rarely enforced, and ineffective. Workers need better labour rights protections and enforced health and safety regulations. How the Government of BC decides to safeguard those most vulnerable during extreme weather events will demonstrate the fundamental priorities of this government. Immediate policy changes need to take place to put an end to the experiences workers have endured as a result of changing climate. The following is our list of recommendations.

Open Work Permits for All Workers Immediately

Migrant workers, including undocumented workers and workers with pending permanent residency applications, deserve decent work and protection from bad employers. Rising temperatures that lead to worsened working conditions and compromised health and safety add another layer of precarity for undocumented workers in BC. The Migrant Rights Network (2022) has proposed a comprehensive and inclusive regularization program calling for first-stage processing of work permits with automatic renewal, clear and simple application processes, and no exclusions, detentions, or deportations.

Climate Paid Leave

The exposure to high temperatures, floods, and wildfires may cause workers to refuse unsafe working conditions and face financial impacts from such refusal and from business closures. The provincial government should require the provision of up to 5 days of paid climate leave in a calendar year due to extreme weather, and an additional 5 paid days when there is a declared state of extended emergency, as determined by local officials.

Additional Breaks

Given that workers are not entitled to breaks if they work less than five consecutive hours, we recommend an amendment to the ESA in which workers receive two additional 15-minute paid breaks for respite during extreme heat and time for proper hydration, exclusive of a meal break during a 7-hour shift and a 30-minute break during a 5-hour shift.

Free and Reliable Public Transportation

Walking during extreme heatwaves, smoky wildfires, and torrential downpours is dangerous. Public transportation is a low-carbon option and essential for many workers to commute to and from work, especially for those who rely on transit for mobility reasons. Low-wage workers deserve free and reliable public transportation as we move toward more energy-efficient options.

Rising temperatures that lead to worsened working conditions and compromised health and safety add another layer of precarity for undocumented workers in BC.



Maximum Temperature Policy

There needs to be a legal maximum working temperature in the same way we have a legal minimum working temperature. Current occupational health and safety measures are related to body temperature at 38 degrees Celsius, however, this doesn't proactively limit workers' exposure to heat stress and allow them to perform their jobs safely. We recommend the government review other jurisdictions' heat exposure measures and establish a "too hot to work" legislation within the Compensation Act for workers working indoors and for outdoor workers at high risk of heat stress, such as in the agricultural and construction sector.

Minimum Wage Increase

The provincial government must establish a minimum wage that is greater than inflation-indexed to "consumer price" since workers have been falling behind as a result of inflation. To protect workers against inflation, the provincial government should establish a living wage in BC to appropriately increase wages when the cost of living goes up.

15 Paid Sick Days

The ESA entitlement of 5 paid sick days is not enough. As climate-related health concerns rise, workers must be compensated when faced with extreme weather-related illnesses. Coverage should include personal sickness, injury, or emergency, as well as family emergencies and responsibilities.

Enforced Health and Safety Regulations

In this project, 87% of workers reported that heatwaves impact them the most out of all extreme weather events. Extreme rising temperatures can increase new hazards, and it is employers' responsibility and

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obligation to reduce and remove the risk by conducting heat stress assessments and implementing heat stress exposure plans. In this study, 97% of workers (all but one) identified specific protective measures that are needed to ensure worker health and safety during extreme weather events. The following list outlines existing measures under the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation that must be enforced to mitigate worker health and safety risks during extreme weather:

- Flexible and breathable dress code
- Accommodation for hydration
- Sustainable cooling systems in the workplace
- Training on evacuation procedures
- Well-coordinated emergency communication channels
- Workers should not work alone
- Appropriate work-rest cycles
- Schedule working hours to minimize heat exposure
- Enforce employer workplace safety inspections

Improving Access to Unionization for Precarious Workers

Unionization rates in the food service sector remains low. Bargaining power can improve employment and working conditions for many workers especially during a crisis like extreme weather events. Improvements are needed to the Labour Relations Code to make it easier for workers in small workplaces and franchises to form a union, and successorship protections need to be strengthened so workers who have a union don't lose their collective agreement during contract change overs.



Conclusion

The majority of workers in this project expressed immense gratitude to their coworkers, describing the value of “teamwork”, “solidarity”, and “camaraderie” during extreme weather events.

BC FOOD SERVICE WORKERS ARE GREATLY IMPACTED by climate change. In addition to low unionization rates, poor wages, part-time positions, and mistreatment, a lack of protection from extreme weather events cannot be deemed a “normal” part of the industry’s culture. This report finds that an array of issues facing food service workers arise, including a lack of enforced breaks for hydration while on shift, lack of employment contracts to keep workers informed of their rights, lack of encouragement for workers to take their paid sick days, and disrupted incomes based on scheduling issues.

The following quote from a participant concisely details the need for structural change and shifting of food service industry norms:

“Kitchens are a tough place to work, and food service is really hard, hot, and busy. So as we enter, you know, longer stretches of heatwaves and smokier summers, it’s concerning...the concern of having to deal with those difficult environments is part of the job, and it feels like a non-negotiable. You need to be able to handle the heat in the kitchen.”

The majority of workers in this project expressed immense gratitude to their coworkers, describing the value of “teamwork”, “solidarity”, and “camaraderie” during extreme weather events. This was exemplified through stories of looking out for one another through hydration check-ins, picking up shifts for those experiencing heat exhaustion, and in one particular case, bringing a fan to work. This demonstrates how workers enforce protective measures amongst themselves during vulnerable situations—though workers should not shoulder this responsibility alone.

Building worker power is necessary to ensure a safer and equitable planet for all, which includes gender, sexuality, disability, racial, immigrant, migrant, climate, and labour justice for all. When precarious workers have the tools to secure better employment conditions and safer working environments, this power can lead to structural and systemic changes to precarity beyond the workplace. Cultivating the power of workers can also lead to food procurement models that centre on long-term sustainable practices, like demanding a commitment to the elimination of food waste and energy reduction initiatives. Climate and labour action needs to elevate the voices of the precarious, low-wage communities at the core of their efforts to ensure no one is left behind.

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