



***Follow the Science.  
Enforce the Law.  
Protect Workers.***



**ONTARIO  
FEDERATION OF  
LABOUR**

# THE SCIENCE IS CLEAR: COVID-19 SPREADS THROUGH THE AIR, AND WORKERS MUST BE PROTECTED FROM EXPOSURE

## Follow the science. Enforce the law. Protect workers.

COVID is airborne – a truth [finally confirmed](#) by the World Health Organization (WHO) and [US Centers for Disease Control](#) (CDC) more than a year after health experts and unions submitted this was the case based on growing evidence.

[A recent review in The Lancet](#) described 10 well-founded ways **COVID-19 can spread via aerosols when an infected person exhales, speaks, shouts, sings, sneezes or coughs.** The evidence was there since day one: the [Washington choir practice](#) in March 2020 where at least half of the singers were infected, and two people died, [the Quebec gym outbreak](#) that led to over 400 cases, and the many outbreaks in meatpacking plants, warehouses and distribution centres like postal facilities.

Many experts urged public health bodies and governments to consider airborne transmission as a major route over the last year. For example, the [letter signed by 239 experts worldwide](#) in July 2020, and the Canadian [expert letter](#), signed by a coalition of occupational health specialists, scientists, engineers and others.

**But it's not about, 'We told you so'. It's about, we told you to protect workers from potential airborne transmission of COVID-19. Why haven't you listened to so many voices, including the labour movement for over a year?**

The precautionary principle – planning for the worst, and preparing for it – is not a novel one. In the wake of SARS, Justice Archie Campbell said, “We cannot wait for scientific certainty before we take reasonable steps to reduce risk.” Campbell even gave the example “like the use of a fitted N95 respirator” – personal protective equipment frontline workers are still denied.

**Campbell made clear that if we do not learn the lessons from SARS, we will pay a terrible price in the next pandemic. That pandemic is here, and workers – and their families and communities – continue to pay that price with their lives and their health.**

In a [recent op ed](#), University of Toronto epidemiologist David Fisman writes, “Would publicly declaring COVID-19 airborne and implementing strategies to prevent airborne transmission reduce the spread of the virus and the resulting devastating impacts on essential workers and their families? The answer quite clearly is yes.” Fisman, who initially denied airborne spread, shows the importance of following the science. As [Dr. Anthony Fauci said](#) to policymakers in September 2020, and again recently: be humble, flexible, and unafraid to pivot.

**The labour movement is demanding the government, public health bodies, and employers: follow the science, and enforce the law.** Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act includes the precautionary principle in its general duty clause: "to take every precaution reasonable to protect workers." We demand:

- hazard assessments that account for all forms of transmission, including airborne and variants
- minimum standards that reflect airborne transmission and are strongly enforced
- direct, appropriate respiratory protection for any worker who must go into work outside the home (e.g. respirators and not surgical masks)
- a review of transmission infection and control measures, before and after outbreaks
- proper, immediate exposure investigations, including contact tracing
- genuine consultation with joint committee worker representatives.

Employers must follow the Occupational Health and Safety Act and provide workers with safe and healthy workplaces, adequate protection and training. The Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) must enforce the law based on airborne precautions for a communicable respiratory illness, and penalize employers who fail to comply. **And our public health bodies must accept the science. Until that happens, we are a global embarrassment.**

**Follow the science, enforce the law, and protect workers. No more sick or dead workers as cost-cutting collateral damage.**

# WHAT WORKERS NEED NOW: ACCORDING TO SCIENCE AND THE LAW

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## **Strong enforcement and cooperation within the health and safety system**

- Government updated COVID-19 “rules” that accepts and protects against aerosol transmission, using the hierarchy of controls
- Inspectors to thoroughly inspect workplaces in hot spots, and enforce the law with a focus on potential aerosol exposure, including employers’ general duty to protect workers, provide PPE and hygiene facilities (e.g. proper hand-washing stations)
- Inspectors to ensure joint committees and representatives can continue their usual activities, participate in developing/implementing/evaluating pandemic plans, are provided with information, etc.
- Employer strategies (developed with unions and directed by the MLTSD) to reduce transmission in workplaces through clear messages, education and thorough hazard assessments
- Solutions and guidance using the skills and knowledge of disciplines trained to deal with job-related hazards (e.g., occupational hygienists, ventilation engineers)

## **Enhanced and sufficient ventilation**

- Government-mandated and funded ventilation assessments and upgrades for essential public institutions (e.g., schools, long-term care homes, prisons)
- Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors to detect stale “shared air” where aerosols can build up
- Appropriately sized portable air filtration (HEPA) units, installed under appropriate professional guidance, to filter bioaerosols indoors
- Government/employers engaging engineers and other ventilation specialists to develop clear ventilation standards for indoor workplaces, and integrate these standards into reopening guidelines

## **Adequate and highest-level Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

- Clear enforcement of a direction that no worker is denied access to a fit-tested respirator (N95 or equivalent), and that they are trained on its use and fit
- Employers required to provide proper protective equipment, rather than making workers conduct individual “point of care risk assessments”, often with little time, training, fit-testing or suitable options

## **Fair and swift compensation**

- Paid time to get vaccinated and recover from side effects
- Paid sick leave when symptomatic or when isolating after exposure
- Easy processes for workers’ compensation after infection, including long-term symptoms
- Recognize and compensate mental injury related to working in the pandemic

# THE FIVE C's OF AIRBORNE COVID-19

If two or more of these hazardous working conditions are present, respirator use becomes even more important.

AIRBORNE COVID-19 IS WORSE IN...	BECAUSE...	HOW MUST YOU PROTECT WORKERS?
<b>Crowded Places</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• difficult to distance</li> <li>• contaminant build-up</li> <li>• unknown positive case</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increase distancing</li> <li>• reduce occupancy</li> <li>• ventilation</li> <li>• respirator</li> </ul>
<b>Close Contact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contaminant build-up</li> <li>• more close to virus source</li> <li>• unknown positive case</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increase distancing</li> <li>• respirator</li> </ul>
<b>Continuous or repetitive exposures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• length of time exposed</li> <li>• number of individual exposures</li> <li>• contaminant build-up</li> <li>• unknown positive case</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• maximum of 15 mins total exposure</li> <li>• reduce occupancy</li> <li>• ventilation</li> <li>• respirator</li> </ul>
<b>Closed spaces</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contaminant build-up</li> <li>• unknown positive case</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reduce occupancy</li> <li>• ventilation</li> <li>• respirator</li> </ul>
<b>Cold indoor air temperatures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• prevents evaporation of viral particle</li> <li>• unknown positive case</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increase distancing</li> <li>• reduce occupancy</li> <li>• ventilation</li> <li>• respirator</li> </ul>



**ONTARIO  
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LABOUR**

The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) represents 54 unions  
and one million workers.

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