

OUR UNION VOICE



Public Service Alliance of Canada
Alliance de la Fonction publique du Canada



Reimagining the future of work

INSIDE

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Our Union Voice is a publication of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. Representing 200,000 members, PSAC is one of Canada's largest unions and is affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress and internationally to Public Services International.

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EDITORIAL

With vaccinations against COVID-19 ramping up across the country, we can finally see a light at the end of the tunnel. After more than a year of doing everything we can to cope with the global pandemic, it's time to turn our minds to what comes next.

In the coming months, we will need to start rebuilding differently and better.

For many PSAC members, that will start with changes in your everyday work lives. Employers everywhere have signalled their intention to shift towards a permanent increase in remote work. For some, the greater flexibility will be welcome, but it will come with its own set of challenges.

We'll have to redefine how we create and maintain a separation between our work and home life. Working from home can't mean that employers have access to their staff around the clock. They also can't shirk their responsibility to ensure the safety and support that employees need just because work is happening away from the traditional workplace.

Our union has the power to ensure that the changes coming out of the pandemic will be to the benefit our members and their communities. That work starts at the bargaining table where we'll raise standards for all, but it doesn't end there.

We're going to join with others to push governments to put in place the building blocks for a better, fairer, safer and healthier future: Canada-wide universal



Photo: MIV Photography

child care; national pharmacare so everyone can get medication; an end to profiteering in long-term care so that we never again experience the tragedies of the last year; and an overhaul of social programs to fill the big gaps in supports. We're also demanding governments tear down our country's colonial structures, laws and systems, and eradicate racism in all its forms.

PSAC will also need to reimagine how we engage and support members who won't necessarily be 'onsite' in the way they once were. It's going to take new ideas and a lot of hard work but having adapted everything we do to our new COVID-19 reality has shown that we're up for the challenge.

In solidarity,

Chris Aylward, National President

Sign up for PSAC's new online education program

PSAC is thrilled to offer members a new high-quality, user-friendly online education program. This new platform gives members the opportunity to build on their skills during the pandemic and offers an alternative to members who normally find it difficult to attend in-person sessions. Our online education program will offer self-paced, fully accessible, courses available at your convenience on PC, Mac and mobile devices.

Our courses will invite you to expand your knowledge of the union and your rights in the workplace while problem solving and reflecting on new ideas. Once you have completed a course, you will be able to download a certificate. Courses completed online can fulfill prerequisites for future in-person and online courses.

Sign up now at education.psac-afpc.com



Education



The dawn of a new work era

For Nielene Chand, the sudden shift to remote work at the onset of the pandemic was challenging. Like much of government, her agency was scrambling to roll out platforms and computer equipment to allow for remote work. Nielene, who is president of her local at Canada Revenue Agency, also worried about staying in touch with members who needed her help.

A year later, things have changed. “We’ve adapted to new tools and we’re working as efficiently at home as when we were in the office,” she explained. “Everyone is motivated by a deep sense of service to the public.”



Nielene Chand

The shift to virtual meetings also made it easier for Nielene to respond quickly to members requiring assistance while allowing her to participate in regional union activities more easily.

Remote work has perks and pitfalls

For many workers, remote work can reduce the stress of commuting, eliminate the need for relocating, and create more flexibility to meet family needs. The ability to work from home has also opened up opportunities that were often dismissed before the pandemic.

“The pandemic has proven that we can change the status quo in what a typical workday can look like and has set a precedent for

work-from-home accommodation requests that have been denied in the past,” said Krysty Thomas, who works at Agriculture Canada in Lethbridge.

Despite the advantages of remote work, it is not without its drawbacks.

Working remotely can lead to social isolation, as well as making it harder to “turn off” at the end of the workday, factors that can increase stress.

Remote work is also not always readily accessible. Some technology used for remote work might not be compatible with screen readers or voice recognition software for people with disabilities.

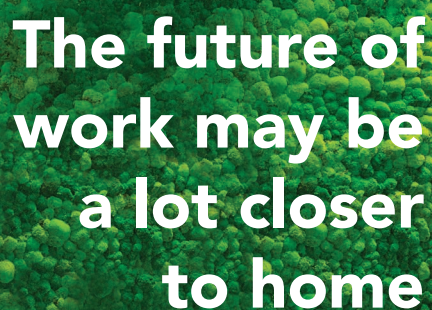
As well, in online meetings, adequate interpretation is not always provided, which often makes it difficult for Francophones to fully participate.

Workers want flexibility

Many PSAC members say they would like to see a hybrid model in the post-pandemic era, where workers come into the office as needed. A recent poll of public and private sector workers in the National Capital Region found that nine out of 10 of those currently working from home would prefer to keep doing so — permanently or at least some of the time — once the pandemic ends. A hybrid model would give those with family or other caregiving obligations much-needed flexibility.

PSAC will advocate for the continued use of remote work that is accessible, safe, and flexible and with strong mental health supports. Our union is listening to members’ feedback, and we will bring demands to the next round of negotiations to address members’ concerns.

Contributors: Alroy Fonseca and Allison Pilon



The future of work may be a lot closer to home

When the GCcoworking project was first introduced, it seemed completely at odds with traditional office life.

Replacing classic public service office buildings with a smattering of satellite offices did not seem like a winning formula to many. Sure, if you could work closer to home it could save a lot of commuting time, but would it be worth the drawbacks of working away from many of your colleagues?

Yet the pandemic ushered in a new era of remote work, setting up these work hubs as a potential solution for federal workers looking for more flexibility once it’s safe to return to the office.

“There’s a GCcowork office just a few minutes from my house, which means I could commute by bike rather than public transit or car,” said Julie Lovitt, who works for Natural Resources Canada. “It would greatly improve my mental and physical health.”

The remote work hubs allow employees from different offices to come together to work or find a quiet spot away from the hustle and bustle of home life. It dovetails neatly with the growing desire of employees for more opportunities to work remotely after the pandemic.

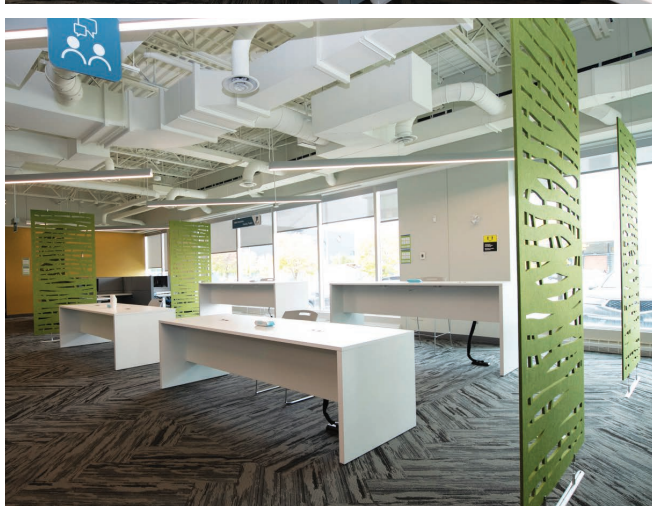
So far, there are five fully accessible coworking sites in the National Capital Region as part of the pilot project running until 2022, with four others in Toronto, Laval, Dartmouth, and Vancouver. Many have been retrofitted with automatic doors and elevators, partitions, and an online seat-booking system to prep for a post-pandemic reopening.

“We still have concerns that need to be addressed, particularly around ergonomics, harassment, discrimination, accommodations, and the health and safety rights of workers when employees from several departments are in the same space,” said Andrea Peart, PSAC National Health and Safety Officer. “PSAC is providing ongoing recommendations to improve the program.”

“We created these offices to be touchdown points for employees who want an alternative to working from home,” explained Sophie Savard, Director of Accommodation and Innovative Projects at Public Services and Procurement Canada. “We’re exploring the potential to expand the program across other regions of Canada.”

As Canada’s largest employer, the outcome of the federal government’s GCcoworking project will have a ripple effect on the way both governments and corporations approach remote work.

Contributor: Michael Aubry



Building an anti-racist union



Sharon DeSousa
National Executive Vice-President

Systemic racial inequities persist in our society and there is no question that many of our institutions, including the Public Service Alliance of Canada, are built on systems that are inherently racist. PSAC has long been a leader in the Canadian labour movement in protecting the rights of its members and creating spaces for equity groups.

Uprooting and dismantling racist structures should be everyone's fight and so we will be continuing to work hard over the next coming months to implement a PSAC Anti-Racism Action Plan (The Plan). The Plan will review how the union serves, mobilizes, engages and represents our Black, Indigenous, Asian and racialized members. It will be crucial in our fight against systemic and institutionalized racism.

The pandemic has exacerbated the inequities that have existed in our society for centuries. However, it has also provided an opportunity for us to look internally and be accountable to you, our members.

Over the coming months we will roll out this plan, which will include opportunities for you to participate through education sessions/workshops, a dedicated membership survey, focus groups, telephone townhalls, discussions and more. Together, we will dismantle systemic oppression, and build an inclusive, anti-racist union where all our members thrive.

Long overdue staffing changes coming for public service

To build truly diverse and inclusive workplaces, we need to rethink how we hire and promote workers to create a staffing process that's inherently free of biases and systemic barriers.

"But we're still far away from that goal," says Djimy Theodore, a Canada Revenue Agency employee who has been passed over multiple times for promotions while white colleagues were appointed to management positions without a competition at his workplace. Indigenous workers, racialized workers, and workers with disabilities have had similar experiences where their knowledge and experience were overlooked for promotional opportunities.

"It's clear there's whitewashing taking place at the management level in the public service," adds Theodore, who serves as Equity Director for PSAC-Québec.

The federal government has committed to review the *Public Service Employment Act* to make it more inclusive. The government is also creating a task force to modernize the *Employment Equity Act*, which hasn't been reviewed in almost 20 years. PSAC will ensure



Mamadou Ndaye, PSAC Quebec REVP Yvon Barrière, Djimy Théodore and Kenza El Azzouzi march at an anti-racism rally in Quebec.

that the union is part of these reviews to address the unfair and opaque staffing practices in the federal public service.

PSAC and activists like Theodore are fighting to overhaul the legislation to better collect disaggregated data with an intersectional lens, and introduce mechanisms to stop discriminatory practices in the hiring process — like more diverse hiring boards, unconscious bias training, and accountability for hiring managers.

Contributor: Michael Aubry



Anti-Black racism in the public service

The class action lawsuit against the Canadian federal government alleging systemic discrimination in its hiring and promotional practices continues to gain momentum as more current and former employees add their names to the historic legal action.

The lawsuit reaches back 50 years, accusing the federal government of Black employee exclusion: the systemic practice of limiting skilled Black workers from career advancement opportunities and being disproportionately underrepresented in management and high-ranking positions in the federal public service.

Black public service workers are disproportionately underrepresented at the highest levels of the federal public service. According to 2019 Treasury Board statistics, Black workers represent the largest group of racialized workers in the federal government at 3.2 per cent yet represent only 1.6 per cent of those at the executive level. Black workers also tend to be clustered in lower-level administrative categories.

PSAC is supporting the pending class action suit and is seeking intervener status in the legal case that has 600 plaintiffs thus far. Many of the plaintiffs are qualified, highly-educated workers with decades of experience, yet have been repeatedly passed over for positions or advancement opportunities.

Nicholas Thompson, PSAC member and UTE (Union of Taxation Employees) local president, has worked in the federal public service for six years and is one of the lead plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit. “We are fighting for a public service that is representative of Black workers — at all levels,” says Nicholas.



“We know that when victories are won for Black workers, all other underrepresented or marginalized groups also win. That is why this fight is so important — it will open the door not only for Black workers but for all other racialized and underrepresented groups.”

— Nicholas Thompson

The lawsuit demands justice in the form of improved representation, accountability measures, compensation, and policy changes such as improving the language in the *Employment Equity Act*. “One of the most important changes the government can make right now is to amend the *Employment Equity Act* and create a separate category for Black workers — apart from the ‘visible minority’ category,” said Nicholas. “This would allow federal employers, and employers regulated by the federal government, to directly address underrepresentation issues for Black workers.”

Many complainants have not just been held back in their careers, but also have troubling stories of harassment and discrimination. This is especially true for Black women in the public service who are further marginalized for their gender, and further still if they are a member of the LGBTQ2+ community, a parent, or living with a disability.

Carol Sip, a plaintiff and former Canada Border Services Agency worker and member of PSAC, said her supervisor regularly made derogatory remarks towards her, yet her employer was unwilling to help. “I brought it to management’s attention, and they did nothing about it,” said Carol. The harassment took a toll on her mental health until she reached out to the CBSA national office, leading to an internal investigation that proved she was the target of sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Despite never receiving a promotion, Carol delivered 26 years of public service in a toxic work environment.

Many of the complainants are hurt after decades of mistreatment but are hopeful that taking legal action can force the federal government to tear down systemic barriers and increase diversity in its ranks to create a better public service for future workers.

“I would like things to change for the young people that would like to join the public service.”

— Carol Sip

Taking up this fight now, especially after the pandemic, is crucial to creating an inclusive public service, said Nicholas. “The public service should be a place where you can work hard and climb as high as you want. That’s the public service we are dreaming of, that’s the public service that we are fighting for, for generations of Black workers to come.”

Contributor: Tasia Brown

For more information visit psacunion.ca/anti-racism



Organizing during a pandemic

During a typical organizing campaign, you might find Alex Bailey walking through a university campus to meet with workers or to sit down for a chat over coffee with potential members about the benefits of joining a union. That was before March 2020, when Covid-19 suddenly put an end to public gatherings.

PSAC organizers, like Alex in the Atlantic region, had to quickly adapt once the pandemic hit. Their work didn't simply disappear. In fact, organizers got more calls from workers who were facing worse conditions during the pandemic and wanted the help of a union.

"I'm busier than ever," said Bailey.

It's been a trend across the country; the unionization rate in Canada has [jumped during the pandemic](#) as workers look to unions for better protections in the face of layoffs and workplace safety concerns. During the first half of 2020, the unionization rate grew to almost 32 per cent — its highest in 15 years.

Organizing front-line workers

Roxane Futia and her colleagues at The Stop Community Food Centre — a food security non-profit organization in Toronto that provides services and advocacy to low-income communities — turned to PSAC last summer to help improve their workplace. Many of the workers at The Stop provide front line services to community members.

The workers experienced unequal treatment at work — different rules applied to different people — and a general lack of transparency from management, along with restructuring and layoffs.

"Our work is very emotionally challenging. We care about our community, and we will go above and beyond all the time, but when working conditions aren't good, it makes things difficult," said Futia. "The way we were working was not sustainable."

They also wanted to address issues of systemic racism in their workplace. The Stop's workers chose PSAC because of the union's longstanding commitment to fighting against discrimination in all its forms.

"We decided to come together to form a union because we firmly believe that promoting equity in the workplace will help us to better serve the communities we work with," explained Christina Rousseau, who also helped organize their workplace.



"Unionizing felt like such a great victory to me. To be able to work with my colleagues from other parts of the organization, that I wouldn't normally speak to, has been really cool."

— Christina Rousseau, PSAC Local 903

Most organizing campaigns depend on a lot of face-to-face conversations, but organizers and workers at The Stop adapted by moving their work online and ultimately succeeded, becoming some of PSAC's newest members.

'It's about relationships'

"Organizing is about relationships," said Adrian Dumitru, PSAC's national organizing officer. But creating those connections isn't easy when you can't meet people in the same ways.

Throughout the pandemic, much of the work has been done by videoconference, by phone, email, or text, and it takes longer. "It's definitely more of a marathon than a sprint," Bailey explained.

"At its core, organizing doesn't change," said Tanya Ferguson, PSAC's regional organizer in Ontario. "We still want to talk to every worker, have live conversations."

And organizers still have to get union cards signed, which is tricky when you can't meet face-to-face. Fortunately, PSAC was a pioneer in adopting electronic organizing cards in 2013, and they've proven invaluable for organizing during the pandemic.

Organizing makes us stronger

Despite the challenges of organizing during the pandemic, many new members have joined PSAC in the past year. PSAC has successfully organized new members in both small and large workplaces across the country. It took real courage and dedication for these members to make their workplace better by joining a union during the pandemic.

"In the labour movement, what we want for ourselves, we want for everyone," said Bailey. "Organizing is about helping workers to build the strength they need to win the things they want in their workplace."

Contributor: Allison Pilon

Stronger TOGETHER

PSAC's organizing successes during the pandemic

- Offshore Recruiting Services Inc, Northwest Territories and Churchill
- Canadian Corps of Commissionaires, Local 2500, Victoria, the Islands and Yukon: Two workplaces added to existing bargaining unit.
- Pro-Tec Fire Services, Calgary International Airport
- Stop Community Food Centre, Toronto
- University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon
- École de technologie supérieure, Montreal
- NewFound Recruiting, Ottawa
- Community Housing Transformation Centre, Ottawa

PSAC also has 16 currently active organizing campaigns.

PSAC members hard-hit by the pandemic

Daniela Aubichon never thought of herself as a precarious worker until the pandemic completely upended her life. She worked at Casino Regina for 21 years before suddenly getting laid off when lockdowns shut down businesses across Canada in March of 2020.



“It was a stable job,” she said. “Now I’m playing roulette with bills.”

Aubichon is trying to make ends meet on Employment Insurance, but it hasn’t been easy. She now must cover the costs of her own prescription medication, as her health benefits have expired.

Daniela’s plight is similar to that of thousands of other Canadians who lost their jobs because of COVID-19, and underscores the urgent need for a stronger safety net to protect workers, including universal [pharmacare](#), and [Employment Insurance](#) reforms to address long-standing concerns about equitable access and inadequate levels of support.

Her co-worker Gerrard Dillman was fortunate enough to briefly return to work for four months. “Then we were all laid off again,” he recalls. “It takes a toll on your psyche — it makes you question your self-worth.”

“It’s a rollercoaster ride,” said Jason Redquest, an airfield operations worker at Sydney airport. “Laid off, then back again, then working at 60 per cent, now off for months.”

Members at airports were hit hard when air travel plummeted across the country. PSAC has been working with all locals affected by the pandemic to ensure that workers are fully supported while out of work.

Eric Vanstone, an airfield operator at Windsor International Airport, has been without work since April 2020.

He credits the union for making his first weeks without work easier. His collective agreement provided for a temporary top-up to his CERB payment. But with the top-up long expired, Eric is considering his options.

“Finding work is tough,” he said. “Really, I want to go back. We all do.”

It is well-recognized that women, Black and racialized workers, including immigrant Canadians, are [overrepresented among precarious workers](#). The pandemic’s devastating effect on workers has reinforced PSAC’s demands for the federal government to develop a national strategy that ensures decent work is available for all Canadians. We also [continue to insist](#) that universal sick leave is a necessity in this country so that workers aren’t forced to decide between staying home when sick or earning a day’s wages.

Contributor: Michele Girash

Lessons in teaching remotely

When he agreed to teach a course on social movements at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) in fall 2020, Luc Chicoine had a feeling he would be doing it from home.

“When I teach, I try to be close to my students, to create a conversation. My biggest fear was ending up just talking to myself.”

The lecturer and PSAC member had to adapt to make sure both he and his students enjoyed the experience. He decided to film his lessons in a classroom at the university. “It gave me a routine and technological support. It took a lot of pressure off.”

But even remotely, he could see his students were struggling.

They faced challenges like balancing work, family and school, dealing with dependence on technology and following instructions. As a young father and PhD student in sociology, Luc understood their reality all too well.

He had to learn to let go. Sometimes, only a handful of students had their cameras on during his classes. “You have to learn

to let go. I learned how to build the best possible connection with those who actually participated.”

Remote classes deprived students of the social dimension of learning. “I don’t think someone sitting at home watching a video is a student. That’s only part of what being a student is about.” He tried to make space for discussion, which wasn’t always easy to do through a computer screen.

He also gave them space for difficult conversations, for instance when Quebec was swept by a wave of sexual assault and misconduct reports. “I would turn off my audio and leave to let the students talk among themselves. They were thankful for that.”



Despite the hurdles, Luc thinks his remote classes went well, largely thanks to the hard work of the lecturers and teaching assistants. Now, he’s looking toward the future as UQAM prepares for a possible return to in-person teaching in the coming months.

From the start of the pandemic, PSAC has made sure that university sector members’ employment contracts were upheld and that the transition to remote teaching was carried out smoothly.

Contributor: Rosane Doré Lefebvre

LOOKING AHEAD



We checked in with PSAC members in workplaces all across Canada.

What is one major change you hope to see in the way you work after the pandemic?

“I’m hoping that employers will offer greater flexibility to those who wish to work from home or require an accommodation that is outside the traditional workplace.”



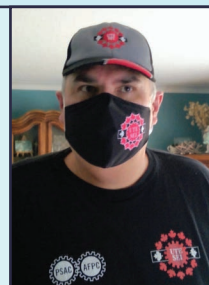
Krysty Thomas, Agriculture Canada, Alberta

“I would like to see more respect for physical health and mental health for myself and my colleagues. A worker should never be put in the position of having to decide between taking time off for health or getting paid.”



Neha Channan, Canada Border Services Agency, Alberta

“I would like to work as much from home as possible to make it easier for me to deal with health issues (accommodations) as I have all I need at home.”



Alan Craig, Canada Revenue Agency, NCR

“I want the health and safety protocols to involve consultation and make sense. I want the respect from my employer that I and my coworkers have earned, in the workplace and at the bargaining table. I want them to remember when we start the process again that we carried them, and we deserve to have the things we’ve been demanding for several rounds.”



Jennifer Horsley, Purolator, British Columbia

“I hope remote work will remain an option after the pandemic. It would be nice to have some flexibility, for example, three days at home and two days in the office. That way, we could still interact with our colleagues.”



Valérie Laliberté, Service Canada, Quebec

“Before the pandemic, working at home was kind of a privilege given to few people, but now I expect my employer to be more flexible. I also expect a cleaner space to work since we will have to share the same space. I also want to be judged by my results and not be followed and scrutinized for the time used to do my job.”



Djimy Théodore, Canada Revenue Agency, Quebec

“Remote work has been an excellent opportunity for me to balance my work with my physical limitations. At home, I have everything I need to relieve my pains and get back to work quickly. After the pandemic, I hope that my employer will be flexible and open to the prospect of remote work.”



Chantal Chartrand, Correctional Service of Canada, Québec

“I would like to see tools that do not keep us tied to our computer all day. We need to have more physical breaks during the day where meetings are not scheduled, to allow people walk or step away from their computer.”



Les Maiczan, Service Canada, NCR