



Strengthening Disability Inclusive Workplaces Through a Union Approach

**Results from the 2022 UFCW Canada
union membership questionnaire on
Disability Inclusion**

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We acknowledge that UFCW Canada headquarters are situated on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, traditional land of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee and many other first peoples who stewarded this land since time immemorial. Indigenous peoples are the first and rightful land holders of Turtle Island and the first to embrace the sustainable relationship to the food system we contribute to and benefit from today. Canada's history of colonialism and ongoing attempts to sever the connection between Indigenous peoples and the land has had profound and long-lasting impacts on Indigenous communities. We affirm that worker justice is synonymous with Indigenous justice.

This report outlines UFCW Canada's ongoing commitment to achieve workplace disability justice through worker protections and worker advocacy. We affirm that true disability justice encompasses an anti-oppressive and intersectional lens which is worker-centered and includes how workers' lived identity interacts with the experience of disability, health impairment, condition, or work-related injury on the job.

We remain committed to using this lens in UFCW Canada's continued disability justice work and in union member representation at large.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Workers with disabilities are systemically underserved within Canada. Although, 6.2 million Canadians aged 15 years and older identify as having at least one disability, statistics show that in 2017 only 59% of workers with disabilities were employed in comparison to 80% of workers without disabilities ([source](#)).

Through this questionnaire we gained valuable insight into UFCW Canada member work experiences as they relate to disability rights. The highest response rate came from workers employed in service-focused private sector industries, and not surprisingly, the most experienced type of disability was related to physical disabilities including pain, flexibility, mobility, along with mental health conditions.

We learned that in general, many workplaces are not seen as disability inclusive by workers, especially by those who identify as a person with a disability, health impairment, health condition or work-related injury. These workers also continue to face barriers with respect to accessibility and accommodation measures and benefits.

UFCW Canada workers with disabilities experienced compounded inequities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the workplace this amounted to an increase in missed work shifts and a decrease in scheduled hours and earned income because of their disability, health impairment, health condition or work-related injury. It was also clear that for at least one third of workers who accessed some form of disability benefits, these did not cover their medically necessary time off work. The findings from this questionnaire support that this is the case for workers with disabilities, particularly through the experience of economic loss during periods of work instability.

This is a critical finding in this questionnaire, as it points to the fact that even when employers hire with the intent to support equity, diversity and inclusion measures, existing inequities can become further pronounced in the workplace when a health crisis arises.

When it came to union support, there was a correlation between worker disclosure and union assistance for health and safety concerns, grievance processes, and assistance with accessing benefits. Findings showed that allyship and employee engagement is an important part of achieving workplace inclusion. Co-workers who were aware of their colleagues' disability were also likely to identify workplace barriers in achieving disability inclusive workspaces.

Lastly, a section of the questionnaire was dedicated to asking union members about their felt priorities in strengthening workplace disability inclusion. Recommendations follow this section and include prioritizing collective bargaining language, strengthening workplace policies and engaging in advocacy strategies to improve disability supports in society at large.

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

Some Sobering Statistics:

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over one billion people live with some form of disability and this number is rising ([source](#)). Today, one in five Canadians aged 15 years or older live with a disability. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CAMH), in any given year, one in five persons will experience a mental health issue or illness ([source](#)).

In 2021, the Canadian Human Rights Commission received 849 complaints, of which 63% were employment related. That year, disability was the highest rated type of discrimination complaint (38%), a figure which has remained constant within a five-year span (37%). Furthermore, 52% of disability-related claims dealt with mental health and 35% of all discriminations in 2021 cited more than one ground of discrimination ([source](#)).

About UFCW Canada's Efforts to Advance Disability Rights in Canada:

Throughout the past two years we've seen critical shortfalls in the provision of government supports, employment and income for persons with disabilities. Ableism has remained a pervasive form of oppression, continuing to silence the voices of workers with disabilities by omission in critical employment-related supports and unsustainable eligibility requirements. This became particularly pronounced during the pandemic when it came to accessing critical benefits like CERB. As we continue to centre worker voices throughout this pandemic, we are mindful of the diverse ways oppression is experienced in society across identities and across disabilities through the intersections of race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, etc. Furthermore, our union supports a social model of disability, which calls for much needed scrutiny into the impact of environmental and attitudinal barriers on a person's experience with disability.

Many UFCW members work in service-focused industries and are the frontline workers that kept the economy running throughout this time. Despite having good union jobs, this report shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, UFCW members across Canada missed work shifts and experienced a reduction in income.

At the 2017 UFCW Canada convention, UFCW Canada members unanimously supported a national focus on worker disability rights and disability advocacy. We've continued to work with community partners since that time to advance these efforts. On the UFCW Canada website we have a national campaign dedicated to achieving strengthened Employment Insurance sickness benefits and

employer-paid sick days. We have also lobbied on this issue with the federal and provincial governments. We're also involved in creating the first historic employment standard, following the passing of the Accessible Canada Act, and we are represented in the Accessible Standards Canada Employment technical committee.

We have undertaken training on disability confidence and worked with our organizational partners at the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and The Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work to support this work. Furthermore, we continue to profile disability issues through our National Council Human Rights, Equity and Diversity Committee. We also support UFCW local unions across the country which have innovative work integration programs that centre the hiring and retention of workers with disabilities in good union jobs. We've featured some of these findings in national conversations on disability inclusion and continue to work with the broader Canadian labour movement to address disability rights.

ABOUT THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

The UFCW Canada Disability Justice Priorities questionnaire was developed to gain insight into union member experiences with accessing disability rights and inclusion at work. It was developed by UFCW Canada disability justice advocates, both persons with disabilities and allies, including supportive community advocates. For a three-month period from April to June 2022, the questionnaire was made available to union members through the UFCW Canada website and social media platforms and made available to UFCW members in English and French.

All survey responses were collected anonymously. To be eligible to submit responses, each respondent had to self-identify as a UFCW union member and either a person with a disability, an injured worker, a caregiver of someone with a disability, or a disability justice ally.

The highest percentage of workers who took the questionnaire were employed in the packing and processing sector and in the grocery sector (approximately 27%). Workers were also employed in the following industries (shown in descending order): restaurant; health care; other; distillery; chemical; retail; hotel; and cannabis.

Nationally, 165 respondents provided their consent and completed the questionnaire throughout this period.

Almost half of all respondents had between 1 and 5 years of membership in the union. 21% of members had 21+ years or more in the union and 19% of members had between 6 and 10 years in the union. Over half of respondents did not hold any position in their local union. 39% of members who completed the questionnaire identified as union stewards and/or held elected or appointed positions in their local union. Furthermore, approximately half of all respondents identified as disability justice advocates in the workplace or community they live in.

SECTION TWO

QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

Finding #1 – Most questionnaire participants identified as a worker with a disability, health impairment or health condition. Physical disabilities and mental health issues are commonly experienced health conditions in the workplace.

Notable findings:

- 70% of participants identified as a person with a disability, health impairment or health condition.
- 38% of participants had two or more disabilities and for 24% of participants, mental health was identified as one of two or more disabilities experienced at the time of questionnaire completion.
- Approximately two-thirds of all respondents said their disability had to do with physical mobility, flexibility, dexterity, or pain. Additionally, 35% of respondents cited mental health as their main disability, impairment, or health condition.

Furthermore, the experience of disability in the workplace is a reality in many service sector jobs. Statistics Canada data shows that disabilities related to pain, flexibility, mobility, and mental health are the most common types of disability. Demographic data across the country shows that one in five Canadians fifteen years or older have at least one disability ([source](#)). Furthermore, the economic burden of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) across Canada are estimated to near \$22 billion dollars on a yearly basis, with a significant number of which are attributed to workplace hazards ([source](#)). The UFCW Canada questionnaire findings further affirm these statistics and show that many workers are carrying out their shifts with pain, both visible and invisible.

Finding #2 – Representation Matters! Union protections are valuable in assisting union members with health and safety provisions, collective bargaining rights, and in eliminating workplace barriers.

Notable findings:

- 90% of workers disclosed their disability, impairment or health condition to their employer, and two-thirds of respondents received union assistance in navigating barriers related to their disabilities.
- Union assistance was also sought out for support with the grievance process, compensation claims and arbitration proceedings.

- Workers sought out union assistance with health and safety provisions and the elimination of barriers related to health and safety.
- Barriers that prevented a worker's disclosure of their disability were (ranked from highest to lowest): Fear of being passed up for a promotion; fear of stigma; lack of knowledge regarding process; fear of job loss; feeling unsafe; and fear of losing connection with colleagues. For remaining respondents, they either didn't feel that having a conversation was possible or they couldn't be bothered with taking these steps.
- For 79% of respondents their job performance was affected by their disability, work-related injury, impairment, or health condition. Close to half of these respondents felt that their disability affected 50% of their job. For 40% of respondents, their disability affected 25% of their job.
- When it came to accommodations, 70% of respondents said they were accommodated at work due to their disability or work-related injury. 41% cited modifications to their existing job and 38% said they were switched to another job in the same department. 30% said they received modifications to components of diverse work and 22% of responses included having the experience of being switched to another job in a different department.

These worker quotes further illustrate how workplace accommodations are often carried out:

"I am not working on a desk packing bags. I don't pick up heavy mats & other heavy items. I have to pace myself for energy. However, I am always asked for updated notes from my doctor, even though I have a long-term illness."

"The accommodation was changed to one room, with some auxiliary tools added to make it easier for me to live on my own"

"I am a full timer at one of the grocery chains. My doctor put me on permanent modifications in order to keep me off my feet for 80% of the time. I was put into a role where I am still on my feet a good amount of time, however, I'm not walking around, I'm more stationary."

"I am able to sit when my pain is unbearable or my leg is swollen."

"I was accommodated to have two constant days together almost every week, update some duties, extra time and explanation on the various sorts of information."

"Don't have to do anything that I can't. Temporary modification to work pants allowed me to switch to elastic pants."

Unions are globally recognized for equipping workers with increased protections on the job including specific protections for workers with disabilities. According to a 2019 US study on disability and the unionized workplace, workers with disabilities who join a union are not the first fired, (as is often the case in non-unionized workplaces). The data

also shows that unionization and disability status increase the worker's likelihood of requesting accommodations on the job ([source](#)). Disability work done by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) also reiterates that in Canada, the hiring and retention of workers with disabilities correlates with higher rates of unionization in specific sectors ([source](#)). The questionnaire also shows that workplace barriers preventing a worker's disclosure of their disability extend beyond environmental barriers and into attitudinal barriers. These often accompany a stigma for the person identifying as a worker with a disability, health impairment, health condition or work-related injury.

The UFCW Canada questionnaire findings show that many workers with disabilities, health impairments, health conditions or work-related injuries did disclose their conditions to their employer, two-thirds of which received union assistance with accessing their workplace rights.

Finding #3 – Union or not, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted workers with disabilities at work.

Notable Findings:

- Close to two-thirds of workers with a disability, health condition, or work-related injury experienced a reduction in work hours due to employment decisions made following the COVID-19 pandemic. Over three-quarters of these workers felt it was due to their disability, health condition, impairment, or work-related injury. Workers with disabilities, health conditions, impairment or work-related injuries were also more likely to miss work shifts because of their conditions during the pandemic.
- When it came to accessing benefits and income supports, almost 70% of these workers stated that they had received Employment Insurance (EI) sickness benefits at some point in their lives. However, for over one-third of these workers, EI sickness benefits did not cover the full medically necessary time needed off work. This gap narrowed slightly to 24% when it came to employee assistance benefits, and which are often a negotiated benefit in unionized workplaces.

Approximately one-third of workers who accessed short or long-term disability benefits, and workers who accessed worker's compensation benefits, did not receive enough benefits to cover their full medically necessary time off work.

According to Statistics Canada, persons with disabilities experienced greater inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported that over one-third of Canadians with long-term conditions or disabilities experienced a temporary or permanent job loss or reduction in work hours during the pandemic ([source](#)). The UFCW Canada questionnaire shows that a majority of UFCW members who worked during the pandemic experienced a reduction in work hours and income, which they attributed to their disability, health

condition, or work-related injury. Additionally, the questionnaire shows that worker needs are underserved by existing government benefits, which when accessed by many workers, failed to cover their full medically necessary time off work. These findings echo the systemic inequalities that persons with disabilities have continued to experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the substandard federal government response of a one-time \$600 lump sum payment which was made available to persons who registered with a disability tax credit in Canada ([source](#)) ([source](#)).

Finding #4 – Co-workers hold valuable information in strengthening disability inclusion at work.

The questions in this section of the survey were answered by UFCW union members with disabilities, health conditions, impairment, work-related injuries, those who identified as caregivers and members who identified as disability justice allies within UFCW workplaces.

Notable Findings:

- About half of those surveyed had knowledge of their co-worker's disability, health condition, impairment, or work-related injury. These co-workers also had knowledge about their colleague's accommodations or lack of accommodations at work. Just over half of co-workers who knew of these disability issues, also assisted their colleagues in accessing disability benefits and/or workplace supports. They were also more likely to know when barriers to accommodation and disability inclusion were present in the workplace.
- The top three workplace barriers, as noted by co-workers, were the physical demands of the job, followed by accommodation problems and workplace benefits. Additionally, many respondents experienced more than one of these barriers simultaneously at any given time. For many respondents, those who noted accommodation problems also experienced problems with accessing workplace benefits.
- The most cited disability workplace issues had to do with accessing appropriate accommodations and dealt with a lack of education and awareness on disability-related workplace rights and benefits.

Research done by the Harvard Business Review in 2019 found that when enterprise-wide training was done on accessible diversity, inclusion, and disability rights, more than one-third of employees were more likely to disclose their disability in these organizations versus other organizations where this training was non-existent ([source](#)). This section of the UFCW Canada questionnaire focused on the importance of worker engagement when it comes

Results showed that workers with knowledge of their co-worker's disabilities were also more likely to know where workplace barriers existed at work.

to disability inclusion. Questionnaire responses also show that issues relating to physical demands of the job, accommodation and workplace benefits were ranked as top concerns by both persons with disabilities, health conditions, impairment and work-related injuries, and their allies.

Finding #5 – Improving Disability Inclusion at work needs a multi-targeted approach

Notable Findings:

- Approximately 50% of workers said their workplace is somewhat accepting of persons with disabilities. This figure dropped to just over one-quarter for workers who said their workplace is very accepting of persons with disabilities. Seven per cent of workers said their workplace is not very accepting of persons with disabilities.
- For more than half of all respondents, the top four priorities include the need to strengthen access to disability benefits, strengthen collective bargaining provisions on disability rights, strengthen workplace policies for persons with disabilities and strengthen accommodation supports.
- Close to half of respondents pointed to the need to strengthen education and awareness on disability rights. There was support for the development of a training program to support stewards in providing members with assistance when it comes to dealing with workplace disability-related issues. Additionally, the need to counter stigma and bias in the workplace along with strengthening worker awareness on mental health concerns were important priorities cited by respondents.

Given these respondent-provided recommendations, it is not surprising that only about half of all respondents were aware of collective bargaining protections with respect to disability rights and were aware of provincially funded and federally funded supports for persons with disabilities in society.

The following are respondent quotes that illustrate the frustrations union members experienced when it came to accessing appropriate workplace accommodations:

"I was told by my manager that I would receive training in other areas (besides the area I was put in to accommodate) however these training hours were "not guaranteed". I was quickly trained in one different area, got a few scattered shifts then was not given any hours in that role again even after asking for them."

"I had approached my manager numerous times to ask for training elsewhere and was repeatedly told "we don't have the hours to train you". I had filed a grievance but after months and months I decided to settle because every time I had a meeting with labour relations and my manager I was made to feel like I was completely worthless and left every meeting crying. My mental health couldn't take it anymore which is why I ended up settling. There are many different roles I could take on at my store, however, no training was given to me. Labour

relations came in one day and observed me in my “accommodated” role and saw that I was still on my feet a lot yet nothing was ever done to help me train elsewhere. I had applied for a higher position that would have seen me sitting down a lot more only to be told that it didn’t fit my modifications (which I knew was a bold-faced lie because the company wouldn’t provide me with a proper job description). I had no training for the position which is likely why they didn’t want me to have it. It all goes back to not being trained in other areas and basically being “swept under the rug” because where I ended up is where they always put people who are on modified.”

“Just seeing the parking entrance discriminates people with disability. Entering the doors are the same. Even supervisors lack knowledge and discretion about issues regarding disability and mental stress. Firing staff without knowing what’s going on and they don’t bother investigating. An incident means paperwork to them and if you hit an offence you get suspension without proper investigation.”

“Often I’ve wondered if the reason for less hours is because of my physical disability (walking), but afraid to ask.”

Union members also cited a lack of education and awareness and/or a lack of workplace advocacy when it came to creating a disability inclusive workplace culture. The following comments support this as follows:

“Because you can’t “see” diabetes, until I’m actually too sugar high then I seem intoxicated and I fall asleep, or when I’m a sugar low, cause then I’m anxious and confused...most ppl are not trained to understand the disease, and think it’s what grandparents get and that if I manifested the idea of sugar just leaving my body and just think of a working pancreas I’d be fine.”

“That because I look fine, I have to be fine, meanwhile, inside my sugars have changed 10 pts, my stomach hurts and I’m so thirsty, hungry, tired, swollen feet, sore finger tips from blood testing, feeling like I’m a burden or spoiled because “why do I get to have food or an extra break” when they don’t or the opposite - not being able to get food particularly no sugar or carb options and not being able to get my insulin shot or sugar test and worried about how I’m going to cover the \$600 I need for my supplies because I have no benefits...trouble can happen unknownly and really fast...I have been taken from work in an ambulance - twice - because of falling over or passing out because of sugars rising too fast. Ppl get frightened, and call medical help - I appreciate the concern, however, if the person knew how to check my sugars, then they would know either fast sugar, or water and rest. Then test again. And repeat. Ambulance costs me \$500 and half the time the medical assistants don’t really know what to do with a diabetic either, so I have a nap and they send me home. Education, training and options would alleviate much of the unknown, stigma and create more options.”

“We need to have more people advocating for people with special needs/disabilities.”

“Work as a security guard. Depending on your site and site requirements is how employer can accommodate. If you are hurt on site the client mostly are very understanding and allow you to recover and all the staffs will assist in what you can’t. This is not the case for someone who has disability that didn’t happen at work. I have been lucky.”

Additionally, some participants identified as a caregiver of someone with a disability. Some of these perspectives on disability inclusive workplaces were relayed as follows:

“As a caregiver for someone with a disability, I have seen first-hand how extremely behind most workplaces are in providing accommodations for those with disabilities.”

“It has been my experience that, because my family member’s disability is invisible, its existence is completely disregarded; basic accommodations in training and tailoring job duties to meet the skill set that neurodivergent individuals have to offer seem like incredibly simple fixes, and yet are entirely lacking in every employment arena my relative has been engaged in.”

“My daughter is nonverbal autistic child.”

“My Grandson has Autism and a lot of Autism programs funding were cut. And my daughter needs a better place to live with my Grandson.”

Achieving disability inclusion at work requires a multi-faceted approach. It requires an intersectional framework which encompasses cross-identity and cross-disability worker perspectives. It involves worker representation at every step of the process and the freedom for workers to voice concerns without reproach or negative consequences. It requires leadership commitment and the accessible sharing of communication for all workplace parties. In addition to this, training and education are critical to increase disability awareness and decrease prejudice and bias, which often perpetuates stigma-ridden work environments. For this reason, the UFCW Canada questionnaire asked union members about their felt sense of acceptance at work. The response indicates why the existence of unions are critical to the establishment of strong worker protections. It also indicates that there is much room for improvement.

SECTION THREE

RECOMMENDATIONS

For union advocates and representatives, communication with the worker experiencing the work-related discrimination, health and safety injustice or other barrier is a first step to working through a solution alongside the worker. A solution that is worker centered.

Workers carry firsthand knowledge on the effectiveness of accessibility and accommodation policies, processes, and procedures in the workplace.

The recommendations below are created from participant responses throughout different sections of this questionnaire. They include recommendations which, if implemented, can lead to strengthened disability inclusive work environments. Recommendations are focused on impact instead of intent and on forging sustainable change at the individual, institutional and systemic levels within society.

On Education and Awareness:

- Strengthen workplace education through training and resources on:
 - General disability awareness, anti-ableism, and intersectionality
 - Stigma, bias, prejudice, and discrimination
 - Ergonomic risks arising out of physical demands of assigned work
 - Disclosure, accessibility, and accommodation procedures

On Workplace Collective Bargaining:

- Strengthen anti-discrimination clauses to include specific disability rights protections which counter ableism, attitudinal and environmental barriers, prejudice, and stigma
- Strengthen grievance procedure language as it relates to disability issues
- Add or strengthen contract language on accessibility measures to ensure comprehensive worker protections at work
- Add or strengthen contract language on accommodation measures to ensure workers are engaged in each step of an accommodation process
- Eliminate any timelines which would otherwise potentially disadvantage workers with disabilities from disclosing their disability to the employer
- Push for increased mental health supports in Employee Assistance Benefits and supports

- Negotiate workplace initiatives aimed to strengthen the hiring and retention of persons with disabilities

On Workplace Policies:

- Review all workplace policies to ensure that a disability inclusive lens is applied in every company policy
- Push to standardize policies and procedures in relation to disclosures, accessibility, and accommodation
- Push for the development of strong disability inclusive commitments by company leadership, and make these available in writing to all workers on the job
- Ensure ergonomic or health and safety reviews are regularly undertaken for each job description in the workplace

On Advocacy:

- Advocate for strengthened government income supports at every government level for persons with disabilities
- Advocate for government legislation, standards and regulations which work to support the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Accessible Canada Act.
- Push for government standards and procedures which put in place employer requirements in the creation of a disability inclusive workplace culture

CONCLUSION

First and foremost, we thank all the activists who took time to complete the questionnaire. We take this opportunity to extend our gratitude to the UFCW Canada disability justice working group, which was struck to guide the creation of this questionnaire and who provided of their time, input, and invaluable perspectives on disability justice. They are Carlos Sosa (UFCW 832), Erin Selby (UFCW 832), Leo Lavoie (TUAC 500), Martha Villeda (UFCW 1006A), Joe Pereira (UFCW Canada), Zenee Maceda (UFCW Canada) and Emmanuelle Lopez-Bastos (UFCW Canada). Gratitude is also extended to disability rights experts within the disability justice community who took time to provide valuable input on the questions outlined in this questionnaire.

This report provides a framework through which we continue our disability justice work as a national organization in support of workers with disabilities and in the creation of disability inclusive workplaces. It has provided firsthand accounts from UFCW union

members regarding the experience of working with a disability, health condition, impairment, or work-related injury. It has also provided a path forward in outlining additional measures to advance worker protections on the job, through the collective bargaining process and alongside disability rights defenders in the workplace and in society at large.

UFCW Canada commits to continue working diligently with UFCW disability activists across Canada to achieve disability justice, disability rights and protections. We also commit to engaging in the ongoing work of supporting disability justice organizations leading this work across the country. We thank them for the ongoing work they undertake, as we affirm that an injury to one IS an injury to all!

Through this report, we know that many unionized workers are working with pain and that union assistance does have a positive impact in addressing worker protections. Furthermore, we affirm that disability justice solutions must be multi-faceted and must engage an intersectional lens to truly be effective in centering worker voices.

RESOURCES

For a list of UFCW Canada resources on disability inclusion and union social justice initiatives check out:

www.ufcw.ca/socialjustice

