

Unifor urges change to EI qualifying hours, after mass Target layoff

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Toronto – In light of the mass layoff announced today at Target, Unifor is urging federal Minister of Employment Jason Kenney to provide emergency access to Employment Insurance benefits for Target workers who won't otherwise qualify.

“Many Target workers who have just lost their jobs won't even qualify for unemployment insurance,” said Unifor National President Jerry Dias.

The qualifying threshold is currently as high as 910 hours over 52 weeks, depending on a worker's experience and where they live, which is a very difficult threshold for part-time and irregular workers in retail to reach.

“Workers have paid into EI, but when they need it most, they are shocked to find they don't qualify. Minister Kenney has authority to modify the EI rules for pilot projects and emergency situations, and I urge him to take immediate action for the Target workers.”

Emergency EI access for Target workers should be followed by legislative changes to allow all workers in Canada to qualify for EI Benefits after a uniform 360 hours of work in the preceding 52 weeks.

This is the single largest private sector layoff in recent memory, said Dias. “More than 17,000 people suddenly losing their jobs is nothing short of a catastrophe. The government must take immediate measures to address this disaster unfolding in communities across the country.”

“Target has wronged thousands of Canadian workers twice in just three years – first by closing down Zellers stores and throwing Zellers workers out of their jobs, and tearing up collective agreements,” said Christine Connor, President of Unifor Local 414, representing 12,000 members in retail and services.

Target was able to do this because of a loophole in successor rules, which allowed Target to buy up Zellers stores, close them down and then claim the creation of a new business in the same location. Target evaded responsibility to Zellers workers because of weak legislation allowing corporations to run roughshod over communities and workers, said Connor. The union formerly represented many Zellers workers.

Connor said retailers have repeatedly used this loophole to close down stores, shirk collective agreements and set up budget retailers, adding that only an improvement in successor rules can address such situations.

Unifor is calling on all provincial governments to establish special adjustment centres to help newly unemployed Target workers. The union has worked with provincial governments and employers in the past to help get thousands of laid off workers into new jobs and training opportunities.

Unifor represents 305,000 workers in every economic sector, right across the country, including more than 20,000 retail workers. Unifor was formed Labour Day weekend 2013 when the Canadian Auto Workers and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers unions merged. Unifor works to protect its members and play a leadership role in building thriving, safe workplaces and a strong economy so all workers in Canada have a good job, a decent standard of living and greater equality.

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