

## **Ebola Statement**

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) stands in solidarity with the people of West Africa and the front line health care workers who have been providing care for those affected by the Ebola virus (EBOV) at great risk to their own health. We would have liked to support the work of public sector health care workers and public health departments, but the lack of such infrastructure in places such as Liberia and Sierra Leone makes it very difficult. It is therefore out of a desire to act now that we are proud to support the request from our global union, Public Services International (PSI), and on behalf of CUPE members, we are making donations of \$10,000 to the Public Services International Aid Fund and \$10,000 to Médecins Sans Frontières.

The Ebola epidemic centred in West Africa prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare on August 8<sup>th</sup> a "public health emergency of international concern."<sup>1</sup> Ebola has infected thousands of people, roughly half of whom have died. The epidemic continues to spread in Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.

The WHO reports that since the beginning of this crisis hundreds of health care workers have contracted the Ebola virus, with virtually half succumbing to the illness. Health care workers are facing multiple challenges in this epidemic, including understaffing, lack of or shortages of protective equipment, heat-stroke from long hours in protective equipment, and 16 hour work days.

CUPE members have experience dealing with an emergency infectious disease epidemic. From February 23, 2003, to June 7, 2003, 387 people in Toronto were infected with SARS and 44 of them died. Nurse Nelia Laroza, a CUPE Local 79 member, contracted SARS while caring for patients at North York General Hospital and died. Nelia, like her sisters and brothers who attended to patients during this epidemic in West Africa, continued to provide care to Torontonians despite knowing the health risks, and paid the ultimate price.

The response of world leaders has been inadequate to deal with the scale and severity of this epidemic. When coupled with non-existent or patchwork public health capacities in West Africa, we have an emergency that should concern people in every country. CUPE supports calls from organizations such as Public Services International and the Consortium of Universities for Global Health for the urgent deployment of bio-disaster response teams from states with this capacity. It is time for the UN to convene a special debate on the global response to Ebola and to address the necessity for mitigation measures. Canada should take a leadership role and call for UN action now.

The Ebola epidemic highlights the global need for public medicare and a robust public health infrastructure. An epidemic is no time to profit from the sale of medicines and medical equipment. Canadians can be proud that a publicly-owned laboratory in Winnipeg developed the experimental vaccine (VSV-EBOV). As Canadians, we own the intellectual property associated with the vaccine, and this allowed our government to donate around 1,000 doses of the experimental vaccine to West Africa. In the long term, CUPE would like to see Canada offer affected governments help in setting up effective public health departments that are focused on prevention, education and, when the need arises, can take the lead in on the ground crises. Until such time, we call on the Government of Canada to increase our financial contributions so that front line workers have access to the equipment they need to facilitate the service of additional medical personnel and to start the logistical planning necessary for the deployment of DART and our field hospitals, especially those that have teams of personnel trained to staff and operate isolation units.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2014/ebola-20140808/en/>

CUPE members understand the sacrifices being made by thousands of front line health care workers. We are keeping those workers in our thoughts. We know that the needs in this crisis remain much greater than our small donation, but we hope it will make some difference in helping front line health care workers remain healthy while caring for those struck by the virus. We encourage CUPE locals and CUPE members to consider making donations too. You can find more information about the PSI Aid fund [here](#) and the MSF fund [here](#).