

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Illinois AFL-CIO Response to COVID-19

In March 2020, Gov. JB Pritzker issued a stay-home executive order for Illinois residents in order to slow the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). Also included in the order was the closing of non-essential businesses and requirements regarding social distancing.

The Illinois AFL-CIO worked closely with the Governor's Administration in the days leading up to the stay-home order to ensure we identified all of the essential workforce across our state. We were also able to ensure our affiliates could continue to access their membership and administer the payroll and benefit operations they depend on.

In order to keep Illinoisans informed concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, Pritzker held daily briefings and created website information with updates on the state's response.



President Tim Drea speaks at a daily briefing of Governor Pritzker regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic caused a record surge in unemployment insurance applications. The Illinois AFL-CIO took swift action to connect union leadership with the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES). In the first week, a conference call with the IDES Director, Thomas Chan, allowed union leaders to ask questions about response to layoffs related to the coronavirus outbreak. Acting quickly as layoffs mounted, Gov. Pritzker issued emergency rules to expedite unemployment benefits to those affected by the COVID-19 crisis. IDES filed an emergency rule, with input from labor, that work search rules are expanded to ensure that workers who cannot seek work outside of the home due to contracting the virus or taking care of a loved one can qualify for unemployment benefits. Prior to this rule, a worker who could not leave home would not have qualified.

The Illinois AFL-CIO Executive Board and officers discussed the impact of the pandemic on working people via conference calls with U. S. Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth.

Both senators backed direct cash payments to Americans, increased access to paid leave and expanded unemployment insurance. From a press release by the senators: "We must put workers and families first in passing legislation to address the coronavirus pandemic. Members of the Illinois AFL-CIO are nervous about what the future holds, and Congress cannot rubber-stamp a historical stimulus bill without strong labor protections and support for workers who may be laid off because of this unprecedented crisis," said Durbin.

"Working people throughout our country are being hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and I appreciated the opportunity to speak with Illinois AFL-CIO leaders and discuss efforts to support their nearly 900,000 members in every corner of our state," said Duckworth.

Members of the Illinois congressional delegation met with leadership of the Illinois AFL-CIO to share information concerning the needs of workers as the federal government hammered out details of an economic stimulus package. The state federation executive board and officers shared information to address those needs – including safety concerns and supplies for frontline workers and economic concerns for all in the workforce. Topics covered included continuation of health care benefits and COBRA subsidy; adequate paid sick leave for all; unemployment insurance benefits for workers affected – including those classified as independent contractors; sufficient funding for state and local governments; and boosts for pensions hit by the crisis' economic fallout. The call was hosted by Rep. Cheri Bustos and Rep. Jan Schakowsky and included Rep. Bobby Rush, Rep. Robin Kelly, Rep. Chuy Garcia, Rep. Mike Quigley, Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, Rep. Brad Schneider, Rep. Bill Foster, Rep. Mike Bost, Rep. Lauren Underwood, Rep. John Shimkus, and Rep. Darrin LaHood.

Labor unions united in solidarity as a national shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) created a call for donations. A multitude of contributions of time, energy and goods were donated by locals and members every day during the crisis. Unions in the construction industry evaluated their inventory of respirators and masks and donated to bolster medical workers' rapidly depleting stock. Many union members volunteered to sew face masks. Central labor councils urged donations to local United Ways and Community Foundation funds to help workers affected by COVID-19. Additionally, they assisted healthcare workers by providing snacks and meals while others provided food baskets to unemployed members.

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On April 28th, at the height of the pandemic, central labor councils planned virtual events for Workers Memorial Day. The annual day of remembrance for those who have suffered and died on the job brought on new meaning this year as essential workers continued to work while the majority of people stayed at home. The day called for action on hazards that may cause unnecessary injury, illness and death. Labor unions across the state renewed their pledge to stand united against the ongoing attacks on workers' rights and protections, and demand that elected officials put working people's well-being above corporate interests.

The Illinois AFL-CIO and its union affiliates fiercely advocated for more protection for workers since the beginning of the pandemic. Many members continued to go to work, on the frontlines of the pandemic, without the necessary personal protective equipment and other adequate safety measures. The Illinois Workers' Compensation Commissions (IWCC), with the support of Gov. Pritzker, approved an emergency rule amendment that expanded workers' compensation coverage to first responders and frontline workers who contracted COVID-19 and created a rebuttable presumption that their injury, disease or period of incapacity is causally connected to their employment. This rule essentially presumes workers contracted the disease at work and forces employers to prove otherwise in order to deny benefits to this specific group of high-risk workers. The Illinois AFL-CIO worked in conjunction with the IWCC and the Governor's Office to ensure the protections were extended to all essential workers as defined in the Governor's "Stay-at-Home" Executive Order 2020-10.

Although the business community harshly criticized the IWCC's swift action to provide coverage for COVID-19 first responders and frontline workers, the Illinois AFL-CIO agreed with Gov. Pritzker that our focus should be on protecting workers.

On April 22, the Illinois Manufacturers Association and Illinois Retail Merchants Association, backed by the insurance industry, filed a lawsuit against the IWCC arguing that the IWCC exceeded its authority to implement the rule. This caused the IWCC to rescind the emergency rule.

Following the withdrawal of the emergency rule, the Illinois AFL-CIO worked with State Representative Jay Hoffman, Senator Bill Cunningham and Senator Ann Gillespie to legislatively create a rebuttable presumption to ensure all essential workers who contract the COVID 19 virus are eligible for benefits. worked

The Illinois AFL-CIO has worked closely with the General Assembly leadership since the start of the pandemic to figure

out a path moving forward and to advocate for the rights of workers. The House and Senate leadership formed working groups to tackle COVID-19 related issues and pending legislation and the Illinois AFL-CIO has been in regular communication with them to ensure that issues important to labor are a part of their discussions.

The Illinois AFL-CIO also provided testimony to the Senate Unemployment Insurance Group, the Senate Energy Working Group, the Senate Capital Working Group, and the House Labor & Unemployment Insurance Working Group. In these meetings we advocated for:

- Additional personal protective equipment and proper sanitation for frontline and emergency workers;
- Hundreds of thousands of workers who are waiting for unemployment benefits;
- An extension of the workers' compensation rebuttable presumption for all frontline workers;
- Increased investment in jobs as part of the economic recovery effort;
- Empowering Illinois workers through legislation like the IL Hazardous Material Workforce Training Act;
- Guaranteed paid sick leave for all workers and
- Many other issues important to working families

U. S. Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth continued to meet with Illinois AFL-CIO Officers and Executive Board via conference calls to discuss federal efforts concerning the pandemic. These discussions were to discuss the second CARES Act stimulus program to provide relief to working families and provide an economic boost to business.

Workers scored huge legislative wins during the Illinois General Assembly's four day special session. The Illinois AFL-CIO was able to pass critical legislation that will provide workers with greater access to the resources they need to sustain themselves and their families during these challenging times. The legislative wins include:

- Unemployment Insurance Expansion Bill – HB 2455
- Workers Compensation Bill – HB 2455
- Vote by Mail Bill – SB 1863
- Fair Tax Resolution – SJR0001
- Labor Protection Bill – SB 471

The Illinois AFL-CIO continues to advocate for the safety and well-being of all workers as we work with the Governor's Administration to safely re-open the state's economy and get Illinoisans back to work.

