

# Our Lives Are Essential: Chinese Canadian Frontline Workers Pandemic Report



Chinese Canadian National Council  
Toronto Chapter

# Acknowledgements

To all frontline workers, families and friends. We see you. We care about you. We support you.

CCNCTO extends our deepest gratitude to each worker who shared their time, their stories and their thoughts with us. This report is only possible because of the generous sharing of lived experiences from the workers, and the tremendous support from people involved in the creation of this report.

We wish to thank all the workers, members and volunteers who contributed time and energy into supporting frontline workers with CCNCTO during the COVID-19 pandemic. We appreciate your knowledge, your creativity and your time.

We acknowledge the support of the Atkinson Foundation in the creation of this report and the overall project.

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May 27, 2021. The remains of 215 children were found at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. June 24, 2021. 751 unmarked graves were discovered at the Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan. June 30, 2021. 182 unmarked graves were identified at the St. Eugene's Mission School in British Columbia. These findings are a reminder of the dark relationship between Canada and Indigenous communities of past and present. As racialized settlers in Canada, we must resist colonial violence in every form.

We respectfully acknowledge that Chinese Canadian community members and frontline workers in the Greater Toronto Area live, work and organize for community power on Indigenous land of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Huron-Wendat. We wish to honour our responsibilities to this land and our commitment to support the rights and sovereignty of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples on Turtle Island.

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## **Letter from the Executive Director and the Board Co-Chair of the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO):**

This has been an immensely trying time for many communities across the country. Chinese communities faced a parallel pandemic of confronting the virus of COVID-19 and the virus of racism. At the start of the 2020 Lunar New Year, CCNCTO met with officials at the City of Toronto to strategize against the rising incidents of anti-Asian racism across the country. Soon after, CCNCTO spoke to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health about Canada's response to the xenophobic and racist impact of COVID-19 on Chinese across Canada. CCNCTO influenced the public discourse by appearing in over 50 media interviews from 2020 to 2021, co-organizing direct action with a rally of over 5000 attending in Toronto, and producing the 2020 national report "A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada" cited across sectors.

We must contextualize recent experiences of COVID-19 related anti-Asian racism in a long history of systemic anti-Asian racism in Canada, including the Chinese Head Tax, Chinese Exclusion Act, The Komagata Maru Incident, Japanese Internment Camps. The pandemic introduced the concept of "essential" work, deeming some frontline workers as heroes and leaving other frontline essential workers invisible. Many Chinese Canadians faced the brunt of systemic and interpersonal racism during this pandemic working in grocery stores, restaurants, massage work, sex industry and the health sector.

At the same time, CCNCTO secured COVID-19 emergency funding to support vulnerable Chinese Canadian workers during the pandemic. With over 50 volunteers, we delivered food boxes and personal protective equipment to hundreds of Chinese frontline workers. To ensure support and the most updated language accessible information on public health measures and income support reach the workers, we visited neighborhoods and workplaces to build one on one relationships with the workers. Through countless conversations in the community, staff, workers and the volunteers felt the need to document Chinese Canadian frontline workers' realities and voices. More than 50 volunteers, members and staff across multiple generations led, designed, surveyed and interviewed the unmet needs and demands of 295 workers during the pandemic. Here, we present these community-led research findings and recommendations in this report, shedding light on the dangers and precarity faced daily by Chinese Canadian frontline workers, and their demands for better and fairer policies protecting working class family

We must ensure that support for frontline essential workers includes all workers.

Anti-Asian racism is only one aspect of white supremacy. We work in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, Muslim and other communities of colour in our collective fight for liberation. These are commitments we strive to maintain as we work towards a post-COVID-19 recovery that is socially and economically just.

Sincerely,



Jessie Tang  
Co-Executive Director



Kennes Lin, MSW, RSW  
Co-Chair, Board of Directors

**“No matter how grim  
our finances are, I will  
persevere. I want my  
children to be mentally and  
physically healthy; I want  
everyone in our family to  
be healthy.”**

**— Ms. A  
(Resturant Worker)**

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# Executive Summary

Between January and March 2021, the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO) conducted a two-part community-based research project to reflect the experiences of working class frontline workers from the Chinese Canadian immigrant population in the Greater Toronto Area during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study consisted of a survey completed by 295 workers and community members across multiple job sectors, and a community-led storytelling and interview project connecting youth volunteers with other workers and community members in an intergenerational exchange. The focus of the study was to collect qualitative data to assess community issues and areas for possible reform.

The majority of workers surveyed are employed in low-wage and high-risk sectors with workplace health and safety concerns. Many are working in the sectors of health care (personal support workers and nurses in long-term care, homecare and hospitals), retail (frontline workers in grocery stores), restaurant, production (factory workers) and construction.

The study showed that factors such as immigration status, gender, age, low wages, unsafe work conditions, and lack of access to health care and income support impacted frontline workers in a myriad of ways and increased their vulnerability to health risks and socio-economic marginalization. This report reflects demands for more progressive and robust policy changes that prioritize increasing resources and protections for workers.

## Main Findings

The data from this study reveals the following aspects about frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Frontline workers are working long hours for low wages under dangerous conditions.
2. Workplaces feel unsafe for the majority of frontline workers.
3. An overwhelming majority of frontline workers feel powerless to change their circumstances.
4. Frontline workers are suffering from high stress and other negative mental health impacts.
5. Workers are demanding meaningful policy and legislation changes that ensure working class families' equal access to decent and secure opportunities.

# Summary of Recommendations

## 1. Expand employment protection for all workers, in particular essential workers, workers with low income and workers in precarious employment conditions. In addition to living wages, workers deserve safe, fair and dignified work conditions.

- Increase the statutory minimum wage to \$20.00 per hour to more closely align with a living wage in Ontario.
- Ensure all workers have access to guaranteed permanent paid sick days: 10 permanent paid sick days and 14 paid sick days during health emergencies.
- Expand employment protection to all workers regardless of their employment classification.
- Empower workers by amending Ontario's Employment Standards Act, 2000 to include protections against unjust dismissal, similar to the unjust dismissal protections under the Canada Labour Code.
- Ensure strong enforcement of labour law to protect the workers with precarious employment condition and who often facing various barriers exercising their rights under the law.

## 2. Provide permanent free and accessible mental health care that is culturally appropriate and language specific for all workers as part of a COVID-19 just recovery plan.

- Provide free, accessible, emergency and long-term mental health support that is culturally appropriate and language specific for all workers, including racialized and marginalized working class communities.
- Fund community-based education and resources to promote mental health and de-stigmatize mental illness in Chinese and Asian Canadian communities.

## 3. Invest resources into Chinese Canadian working class communities to increase workers' capacities to fight for more just and equitable labour conditions.

- Ongoing funding from all level of governments to support community organizations offering free and accessible migrant and workers' rights training programs, workshops, educational resources and initiatives focused on empowering working class communities.
- Invest resources to increase workers' capacity to unionize, organize and take collective action to win against employers, landlords, and state apparatus that harm them.
- Fund programs that support workers' representation, leadership and participation in directly shaping the conditions of their workplaces through a diversity of means, including: unionization, committee membership and civic participation.

## 4. Status for All!

- Develop immediate and comprehensive program to grant status on arrival and regularization program for permanent residency for all migrants, international students, workers and community members with precarious status.
- Immediately end all deportations and end immigration detention.
- End all legislation and practices that target migrant and racialized workers and implement Access Without Fear policies across the board immediately.
- Expand all income support programs to all workers regardless of their immigration status.

**“ Vaccination would be ineffective if not everyone can access it ... if there is a threat of deportations and arrests, people will not risk taking it. Protecting everyone is a way of protecting Canada as well. Immigrants and refugees arrive in Canada from all over the world. They are not only Chinese. They need to be cared for too.”**

**— Anna  
(Injured Worker)**

# Introduction

By the time he finishes for the day, it's almost 11 p.m. 6 days a week, he gives 12 hours each day to his job and loses over 4 more hours a day commuting to and from work.

Mr. Xie — Grocery Store Worker (see pg. 38)

Chinese working class immigrant communities in Canada have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown by various community research studies, the pandemic has dramatically worsened economic and health inequalities which have already been on the rise in Canada for over three decades.<sup>1</sup> Disproportionate health risks, language barriers, exposures to racism, economic disparity and precarious immigration status are all vulnerabilities that have intensified during the pandemic. The refrain of “who is essential?” and “whose lives are valued?” reveals troubling fractures in the landscape of pandemic experiences across Canada. “Essential work” is sometimes depicted as “heroic”, but this obscures the reality that workers have few options and often have no choice but to put the health and the lives of themselves and their families at risk. Instead, workers need tangible, robust, direct and immediate support.

This report aims to highlight the experiences of work and life during the COVID-19 pandemic for Chinese Canadian frontline workers and discusses some social and policy changes that are necessary to adequately support Chinese Canadian immigrant working class communities. We focus on how Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers have been impacted by COVID-19.

Using findings from community research, outreach, storytelling and frontline support work, we have collected key findings that represent the demands



CCNCTO community members attending Stop Anti-Asian Hate rally in Toronto, March 2021.

and the needs of Chinese Canadian working class immigrant communities loud and clear. To move towards a just recovery, we must ensure immigrant working class communities in Canada have the tangible supports and protections they need. These include a legislated permanent 10 days of paid sick leave, a living wage for all workers, permanent resident status, access to healthcare and free, accessible mental health support for all workers.

This report should serve as a resource for governments, city councillors, policy makers, social service providers and community groups to better understand the lived experiences of Chinese Canadian and immigrant working class communities to implement progressive policies that protect all workers.

1. Barakat, Grace. (2021) One Year Later: Unmasking COVID-19.

[www.issuu.com/islamicreliefcanada/docs/irc\\_report\\_unmasking\\_covid-19-update-v2?fr=sZjhmNTIINzZmMDg](http://www.issuu.com/islamicreliefcanada/docs/irc_report_unmasking_covid-19-update-v2?fr=sZjhmNTIINzZmMDg)

## Important to read alongside the Fight Covid Racism Report

Recognizing that underlying structural inequities make racialized immigrant workers more likely to work in the frontlines, this report on the experiences of frontline Chinese Canadian immigrant workers is a continuation of the work carried out in CCNCTO's 2020 COVID-Racism report titled "A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic."<sup>2</sup> We suggest these two reports be read together, as one supplements the other. The COVID-Racism report showed that racist attacks are especially prevalent in restaurants, food and grocery establishments, where Chinese and Asian-Canadian frontline workers make up a significant part of the essential workforce. Attacks in these workplaces account for almost 1/5th of all incidents reported on covidracism.ca at the time of the report's publication.

The vulnerabilities frontline workers experience today are shaped by decades of systemic racism, policies rooted in structural inequality, border violence and exclusion in a political economy built off of settler-colonial extraction and labour exploitation. These experiences of Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers are reflective of a structural dimension of anti-Asian racism, an inherent part of the many interrelated facets of broader systemic racism in Canada. The model minority myth is a white supremacist labour-disciplining tool, which fragments workers across racialized communities, keeps Chinese and Asian immigrant workers silent and coerces us to keep our heads down.

2. Chinese Canadian National Council. (2020). "A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada One Year into the Covid-19 Pandemic." [www.covidracism.ca](http://www.covidracism.ca)



## Overview of Community-Led Approach

This report is primarily based on lessons learned through CCNCTO's frontline worker support program, and presents a preliminary picture of various challenges faced by frontline workers. In the past year, we worked with more than 50 volunteers, members and staff to conduct outreach and develop supportive relationships with frontline workers in their workplaces, neighbourhoods and through community networks. Some have precarious immigration status, while some have citizenship but remain marginalized by race, class, and gender oppression. Many are low-income, employed in low-wage work and experience some degree of language barrier. Many are personal support workers (PSWs) and nurses in long-term care homes, hospitals, household and community settings, often through temporary help agencies.

Most work in grocery stores, restaurants, construction sites and production sites, as well as, in health care, child-care, domestic work, community work, retail and other service industries.

In this report, the term "Chinese Canadian" encompasses anyone who self-identified as Chinese and located in Canada, regardless of their immigration status. The term "frontline workers" refers to workers who perform work at the public facing or congregated workplaces and do not have the privileges working from home.



*A CCNCTO outreach worker holding care packages speaking with a frontline grocery store worker.*

## Community-Led Survey

From our outreach work, we conducted a community-led survey to assess the current conditions and experiences of working class Chinese Canadian communities in the Greater Toronto Area. A Community-led approach centres workers' voices, lived experiences and their leadership in shaping narratives and policy directions. From January to March 2021, CCNCTO collected a total of 295 surveys from workers and community members. We asked 41 survey questions, which were designed together with CCNCTO members, frontline workers and staff through a collective process of meetings, consultations and feedback sessions.

The questions focused primarily on workers' experiences in the workplace, their income, homelife, feelings and opinions on current government measures, and the policies they would wish to support. The survey was then distributed through CCNCTO's member networks and to frontline workers we connected with during our COVID-19 frontline worker support program. We utilized both an online and printed paper survey to include workers and community members who do not use digital technologies and those with limited digital literacy and low access to internet and digital devices.

Out of the total number of 295 surveys, 204 surveys were filled out by frontline workers. 40% were healthcare workers, 16% were workers in the retail sector (largely from grocery stores), 21% were restaurant workers, and 9% were factory and production workers. Out of the 204 self-identified frontline workers, 135 are women, 65 are men and 4 did not disclose their gender.

## Community-Led Storytelling Interviews

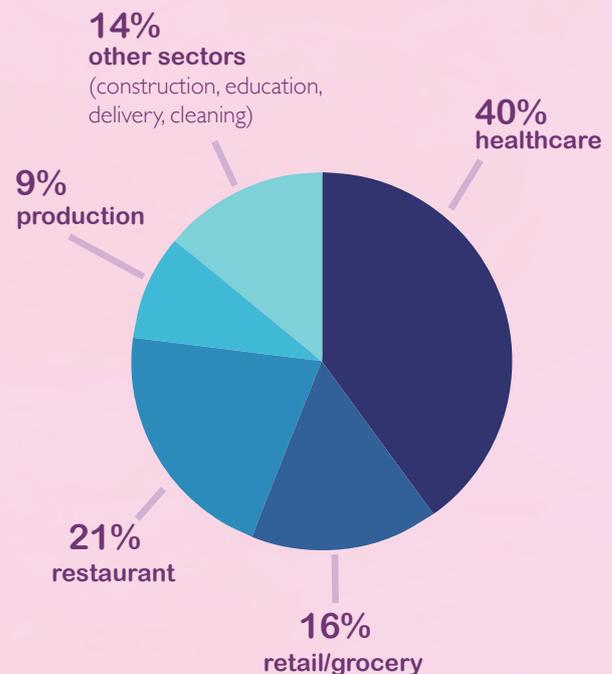
The stories of frontline workers told in collaboration with workers and youth members are also important to our study. Through over a year of worker organizing, we developed strong relationships of trust with a number of different workers, whose stories are included in this report. Storytelling serves as a way to engage workers in having their own voices represented in their own narratives and to share with readers the gift of hearing from workers themselves. Storytelling also helps to provide intersectional perspectives and diverse accounts on the struggles and experiences of workers in our community, and sheds light on how various issues affect frontline workers.

The process, content and format of the storytelling and interview project were led by youth members who were part of CCNCTO's frontline support program. Over the course of 2 months, they worked to solicit, converse, listen, interview, collect and write the included stories with workers in the community. Through collaborative storytelling between workers and our youth members, we were able to expand and deepen intergenerational relationships and produce a series of stories that document the lives and personalities of 11 valued members of our community in this difficult time. In total, we interviewed 13 workers in total and collected 11 stories.

Among the persons interviewed, one is a delivery courier, four are grocery store workers, one is a domestic worker, one is a cleaner, two are restaurant workers, one is a restaurant owner, one is a personal support worker, one is a renovation contractor, and one is an injured worker. These stories show the resilience, charm and daily lives of diverse individuals in the Chinese Canadian immigrant working class community. The collected stories also show how immigration status, class, age and gender play a role in shaping frontline workers' working conditions.

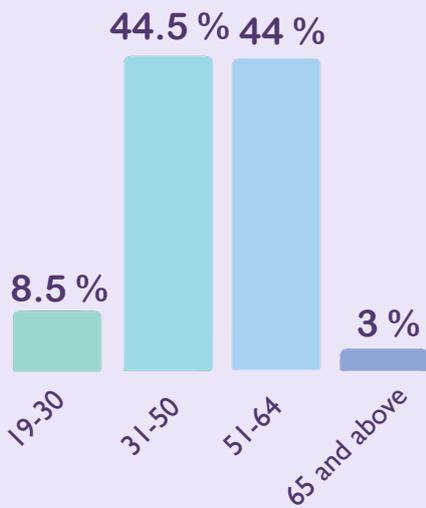
Of 295 community members who filled out the survey, 204 were frontline workers.

Percentages of frontline workers surveyed shown by sector

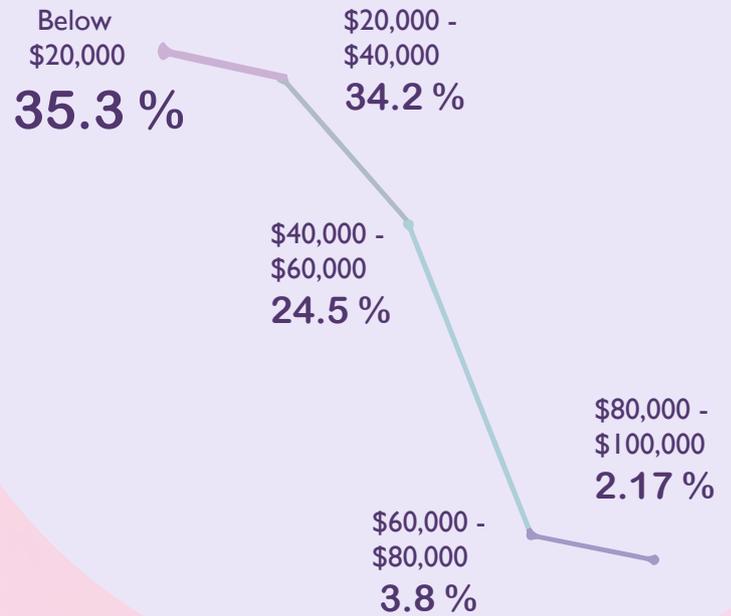


## Demographics of Frontline Workers Surveyed

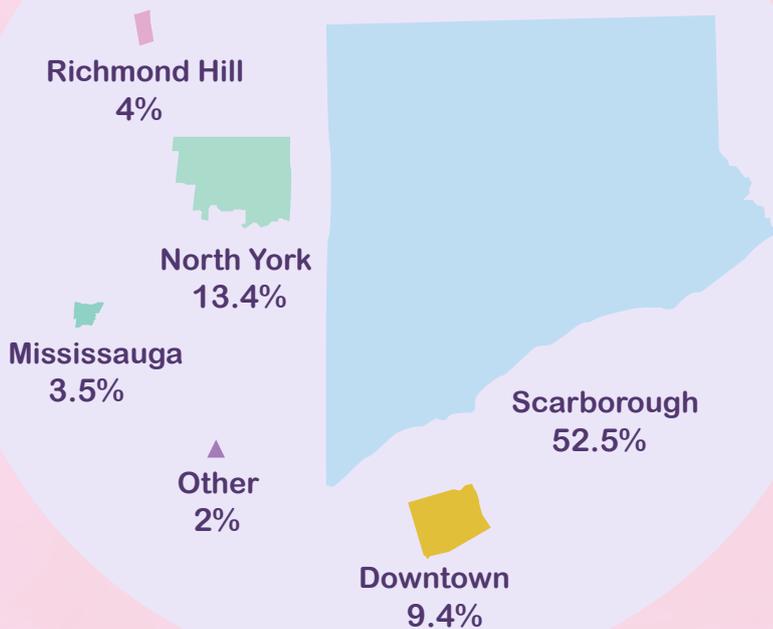
### Age



### Income per Year

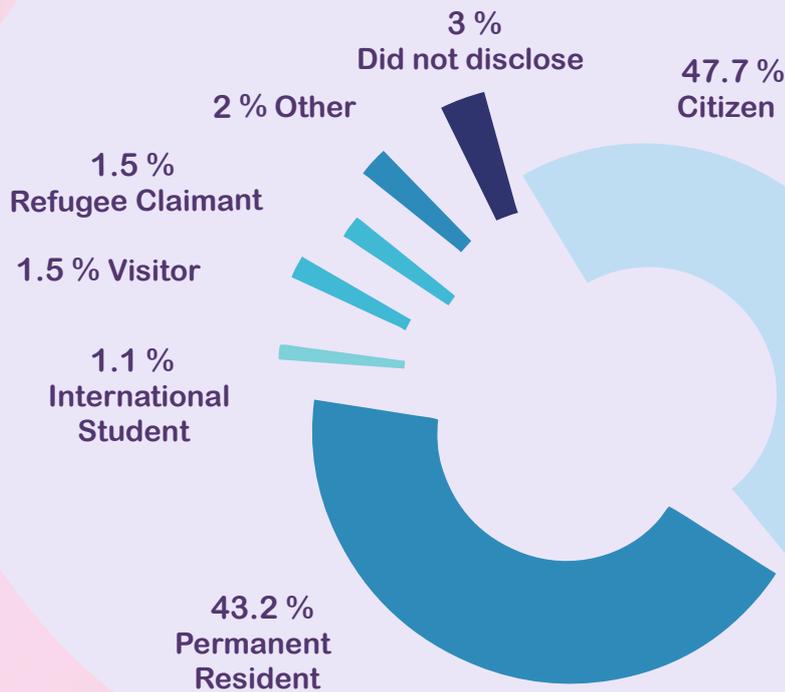


### Neighbourhood



Percentage of workers surveyed shown by...

## Immigration Status



## Limitations

We recognize the limitations of this report. First, this report is community-led and is not a product of formal scientific systematic investigation, so the findings are not generalizable. The aim of this report is to center the lived experiences of Chinese workers by believing in the community's power in leading and shaping the narrative to build up the community power in the long run. By trusting the community's knowledge and capacity, this report has reached many marginalized workers who are usually being neglected from most of the academic and policy research. Second, the report can be strengthened by collecting more demographic data information and objective measurements. Specifically, it would be more informative to include basic demographics such as hourly wages, hours worked, sick leave eligibility, and change in wages during the pandemic. More objective information could better substantiate our subjective findings of workers' lived experiences presented in this report. Similarly, other demographic information such as immigration status, length of residency in Canada and countries of origin can help inform the wage gap between those with and those without status. These limitations are mostly resulted from the concerns of damaging our organization's relationships with the marginalized community. As we build up more trust with the community and have more resources to ensure the data collected could be owned and utilized by the community, we will strive to have a more comprehensive report in the future.

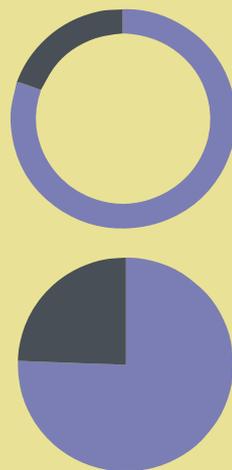
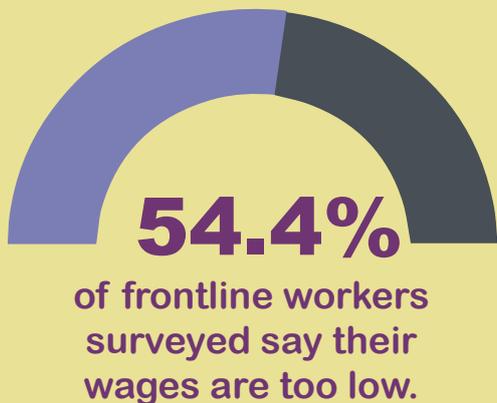
“The pandemic immensely impacted my work. Before the pandemic, many of my part-time colleagues and I worked in different long-term care homes to ensure that we earn the same income as full-time workers since many long-term care homes only provided part-time positions. With COVID-19 restrictions in place, we are only allowed to work at one fixed home, which is financially brutal for us. Take my situation for instance, I can only work two days a week. Just looking at numbers, my income has reduced by a lot”

— David  
(Personal Support Worker)

# Findings

1.

**Chinese Canadian frontline workers are working long hours for low wages in dangerous conditions.**



Low wage work had already been a significant issue for many Chinese Canadian and immigrant workers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which made workers vulnerable to both increased health and economic risks. It is well documented that racialized workers are overrepresented in low-pay and dangerous work.<sup>3</sup> In the sectors where the majority of Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers are employed (i.e. grocery, retail, health care, food, production, and domestic), COVID-19 has exacerbated problems workers already face. Some of the problems include wage theft, low-wages, long hours, dangerous conditions, precarious terms of employment, lack of collective bargaining power and little access to worker protections and income security.

Low wages mean workers must work for longer hours, take on more shifts and work a greater

number of jobs. They are more likely to have longer commutes, take public transit, and have customer-facing service jobs where close contact with the public is required, and conditions are crowded and prone to COVID-19 outbreaks.

Low wages also create conditions of disposability where workers face greater risks of retaliation and other repercussions when they speak out. All of this results in an economic system where low wage workers are more likely to be forced into unsafe and dangerous work that disproportionately increase their exposure to COVID-19 and other health risks.

**69.4% of  
frontline workers  
surveyed were not  
unionized**

3. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2021). "COVID-19: It's time to Protect Frontline Workers." *The Monitor*. [www.monitormag.ca/index.php?p=articles/covid-19-its-time-to-protect-frontline-workers](http://www.monitormag.ca/index.php?p=articles/covid-19-its-time-to-protect-frontline-workers)

**58% of frontline workers report feeling financial stress during the pandemic.** Low wages are one of the main causes of stress. An alarming majority of frontline workers (54.4%) expressed that the wages they are receiving are too low. 63.3% of food industry workers, 57.3% of healthcare workers, 58.5% of retail (grocery) workers and 26.3% of production workers who completed the survey felt their wages are not enough. Further, Ontario's mandatory pandemic pay increase only applies to certain essential workers. Independent care workers, restaurant workers, production workers and retail/grocery store workers are excluded from the mandatory pay increase while being labeled as "essential workers". **80.4% of frontline workers surveyed reported receiving no wage increases during the pandemic, with 95% of restaurant workers reporting no pay increase.**

To make matters worse, **a large majority of frontline workers (75.6%) who completed the survey reported they experienced some form of income loss during the pandemic.** More than 1 in 2 workers (56.8%) experienced income loss between 1-50% of their regular earnings, and a significant number of workers (18.8%) reported 50-100% income loss.

Although unionization did not seem to be a significant factor in determining how low-wage frontline workers in the various sectors experienced the pandemic, we note that **a large majority (69.4%) of frontline workers did not have collective bargaining power through unions.** Healthcare workers were the group with the highest percentage of union membership, making up 67.9% of the overall 30.6% of unionized workers. Only 16.7% of workers in the production sector belonged to a union and 0% of retail (grocery) workers were unionized.

Grocery workers also made up a substantial portion of frontline workers who felt the stress of low-wage work. **56% shared that they felt financial stress and 50% said they experienced psychological stress.** Nearly 1 in 10 grocery workers responded "yes" to being forced to work, and over 1 in 5 stated they were overworked. Reflecting these conditions, 78% of grocery and retail workers supported a minimum wage increase.

## Statistics from Grocery Sector Workers Surveyed



Over half of grocery workers surveyed reported experiencing financial and psychological stress



1 in 5 grocery workers surveyed feel overworked

0% of grocery workers surveyed are unionized

Michael believes that most of these workplace issues existed before the pandemic. Low pay and long hours are widespread in the industry, as is a lack of labour code adherence on issues like minimum wage and vacation pay.... Before immigrating, I was under the impression that it would be easy to make a lot of money in the United States or Canada, says Michael, but after arriving, it seems like the life of an immigrant is spent scrounging for enough to eat.

Michael — Grocery Store Worker (see pg. 42)

## 2.

**1 in 2**  
frontline workers  
surveyed reported  
feeling that their  
workplaces are unsafe



Jasmine's employer does not provide her and her co-workers with personal protection equipment (PPE), leaving them to supply their own N95 masks, face shields and gloves to care for clients. Because of the one-time-use nature of PPE, and the high volume used, acquiring what she needs to protect herself at work has amounted to a costly out-of-pocket expense. Workplace safety is a cause for concern that has generated additional psychological stress.



Jasmine — Domestic Care Worker (see pg. 33)

## Workplaces are unsafe for Chinese Canadian frontline workers.

Workplace safety is a concern for many workers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Work related accidents, injuries and long-term health impacts are issues many Chinese Canadian frontline workers face every day. Low job mobility and other barriers make racialized and immigrant frontline workers and those with precarious status more likely to experience unsafe work conditions. When they do, there are few resources and options available, especially when current labour laws do not protect workers from unjust dismissal. In the pandemic, **1 in 2 frontline workers surveyed reported that they feel their workplaces are unsafe.** 1 in 3 frontline workers reported they do not have enough PPE. Most are working in the healthcare sector, where **41.46% of workers in long-term care, hospitals and private care settings expressed they lacked adequate PPE.**

In comparison to men, **women are more impacted by the inability to improve unsafe and poor working conditions in their places of employment.** Amongst the frontline workers surveyed, 58% of women felt their workplaces were unsafe in comparison to 30.8% of workers who were men. In the food, healthcare, service and production sectors, frontline workers are predominantly women. In these sectors, workers were more likely to feel unsafe at work and less likely to receive a pay increase.

Our study found that women make up 68% of production workers and **58% of frontline production workers expressed concerns about an unsafe workplace.** According to our survey, three out of four (75%) production workers did not receive a pandemic wage increase. Respectively, 50% of retail and grocery workers, 51.2% of healthcare workers and 45.5% of food sector workers also felt unsafe at work.

**1 in 3 workers reported they lacked adequate PPE.**



**In the food, healthcare, service and production sectors, frontline workers are predominantly women. In these sectors, workers were more likely to feel unsafe at work and less likely to receive a pay increase.**

**Workers' Perspectives on Workplace Safety by Gender**



CC This January, Anna and her husband both contracted COVID-19 from a meat processing plant in Mississauga where he and their second eldest son work [...] Anna's husband was the first to experience symptoms and he spent 3 weeks at home in recovery while the plant closed to contain the outbreak. For Anna, who had stopped working in March of last year, the symptoms were more severe. Because of her underlying conditions, everyone in her family was anxious and terrified, fearing the worst. Four months later, she is still suffering from the debilitating and prolonged consequences of the virus, such as difficulty breathing, fatigue and strain in her lungs when she tries to go up the stairs. CC

Anna — Injured Worker (see pg. 47)

CC The psychological state of nervousness and worry is exacerbated by the fact that he did not have a health card. Mr. Xie says that whenever someone gets too close to him or coughs in public, he would feel a pounding anxiety...As a grocery clerk stocking shelves, he is frequently approached by customers inquiring about where different products can be found. Although he doesn't speak English, Mr. Xie, being a person serious about his work, would use his phone to translate and communicate with customers. This kind of close contact at work makes him feel especially vulnerable during the pandemic. CC

Mr. Xie — Grocery Store Worker (see pg. 38)

**Statistics from Production Sector Workers Surveyed**



**58%** of frontline workers in the production sector surveyed expressed concerns about an unsafe workplace.

**68%** of frontline production workers surveyed are women.

**3/4** frontline production sector workers surveyed reported that they did not receive a pandemic pay increase.

# 3.

## An overwhelming majority of Chinese Canadian frontline workers feel powerless to change their circumstances.

“

The foreman often used insulting words to abuse employees and constantly threatened to fire them...No matter how hard the work is and no matter how little you're paid, you have to abide by the foreman's every order, otherwise they'll curse at you or threaten to replace you. You have to do what you have to do to survive. Having some work is better than nothing.

”

Copy — Construction Contractor (see pg. 40)



of frontline workers surveyed reported feeling incapable of improving unsafe work environments.



Nearly 3 in 4 Chinese Canadian women in frontline work reported feeling they do not have the power to improve unsafe conditions at work.

*“ Do you feel you have the power to change unsafe conditions at work? ”*

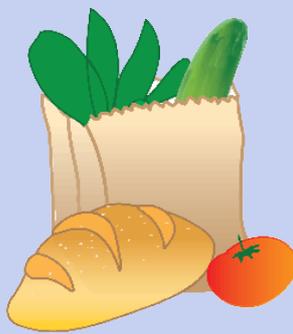
This is not uncommon in precarious work sectors as workers are not protected from unjust firing. In addition, a lack of enforcement from the government and low mobility in the job market all contribute to the sense of powerlessness in seeking changes in the workplace. Asked if they felt they had the power to improve unsafe work environments, the vast majority of workers responded no. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents feeling incapable and 5 indicates feeling capable, **70% of frontline workers responded with 1 and 2**, implying that they feel quite incapable of improving unsafe work environments.

**74.4 % women in frontline essential work feel they do not have the power to improve unsafe conditions.** 58.72% of men feel they cannot improve their unsafe conditions at work. **Feeling a lack of safety at work also increases with age**, but is significant in every age group. The age bracket with the lowest percentage of workers who feel unsafe at work is the 20 to 39 age group at 37%. At the 40 to 64 age bracket, this percentage rises to more than half of all workers, at 51.7%. **For workers 65 and above, 66.7% reported they feel unsafe at work.**

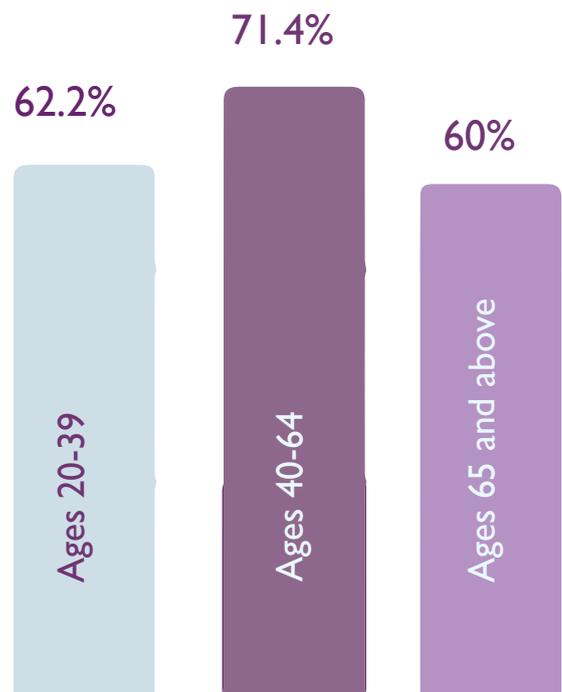
In all three age groups, the percentage of workers who feel powerless to change unsafe conditions at work are considerably high, ranging between 60% to 71.4%. Workers in the 20 to 39 age bracket

**Workers between the ages 40 to 64 marked the highest at 71.4%.** 60% of workers ages 65 and above recorded feeling incapable of changing unsafe work conditions.

Whether or not workers were unionized did not appear to make a substantial difference in relation to the overall prevalence of unsafe work conditions and how workers felt about their inability to address issues of workplace safety. This might reflect the encroachment of union power and the temporary order overriding of collective agreements issued by the Ontario government during the pandemic. It may also be due to the fact that **69.4% of frontline workers are not unionized** to begin with.



Workers who feel powerless to change unsafe work condition (by age group)



☺☺

When I asked Ah-De about his thoughts on this (his wife's termination), he said this wasn't a fight they could win. As newcomers without any other options, they had to take what jobs they could get. Ah-De said that in China, things would be different.

☺☺

Ah-De & Da-Zi — Grocery Store Workers (see pg. 36)

# 4.

## Chinese Canadian frontline workers are suffering from stress and negative mental health impacts.

Ms. A's relationship with her daughter has deteriorated from the confinement of the pandemic. Her daughter was also diagnosed with depression during the pandemic and has started taking a drug newly available in March. Whenever Ms. A thinks about this, she becomes upset, often causing her to lose sleep at night.

Ms. A — Restaurant Worker  
(see pg. 32)

# 61.3%

of frontline workers feel too much stress at work.



**61.3% of frontline workers reported they are under too much stress.** Of all the workers interviewed, those in the healthcare sector (majority working as PSW, nurses and caregivers in long-term care homes, hospitals and private settings) were the most impacted, with over 75% of health care workers saying work in the pandemic is too stressful. **Production workers and retail (grocery stores) workers are also amongst the most affected by workplace pandemic stress, with 57.9% of production workers and 55% of retail workers reporting that they are feeling over stressed.**

With the exception of retail, the vast majority of workers across these sectors are women of colour. The uneven indicators of stress levels between two genders reflect the disproportionate exposure of women of colour workers to dangerous, low-pay, and stressful work conditions. **66.7% of frontline workers who identify as women reported experiencing too much stress**, while 53.8% of frontline workers who identify as men reported they experience too much stress. Workers who identified as women also tended to have more caregiving responsibilities in addition to work in the wage system.

A major source of stress and anxiety also comes from anxiety and concerns about the vulnerability elderly adults and other family members in multigenerational households. Such worries are often combined with the pressure of navigating confusing and everchanging school policies for their children, especially with regards to the adjustments around school reopening policies and the inadequate supports for students learning at home.

# 54%

of frontline workers are concerned about the future.

There is also a disparity in stress levels between unionized workers and non-unionized workers, where a higher percentage of unionized workers (78.3%) reported feeling too much stress. This likely reflects the higher concentration of unionized workers in the healthcare sector, as well as the dangerous, immediate and traumatic nature of the work performed by healthcare workers during COVID-19. By contrast, though still alarmingly high, 55.1% of non-unionized workers expressed feeling too much stress. **In the 40 to 65 age group, 68% of workers are overstressed, the highest rate of stress reported amongst all 3 age groups.** Between ages 20 to 40, 45% of workers report feeling too stressed and those ages 65 and above report the lowest rate of stress at 33%.

**Another devastating impact of frontline work during COVID-19 is the ability to feel hope for the future.** 54% of workers surveyed told us they are worried about the future. What impact the prolonged experience of stress and anxiety of high-risk work during COVID-19 will have on workers is a cause for concern. Robust **mental health care for workers across all sectors, and especially for those frontline workers most impacted by stressful work environments is urgently needed.**

Social determinants of health such as income support, job security, housing, workplace health and safety also have significant impacts on Chinese Canadian frontline workers' mental health.

“

**Both before and during the pandemic, she takes care of her daughter by shopping for groceries and cooking for her. Tensions are high however, due to her daughter's illness and due to her own lack of status. She has had close encounters with the police and negative experiences with her landlord. During the pandemic, her fears have been doubly magnified. She is living in fear of contracting COVID-19 and getting evicted by her landlord.**

”

Ms. X — Cleaning Service Worker (see pg.35)

# 5.

## Workers Are Voicing Their Demands

### Frontline Workers Perspectives on Policies

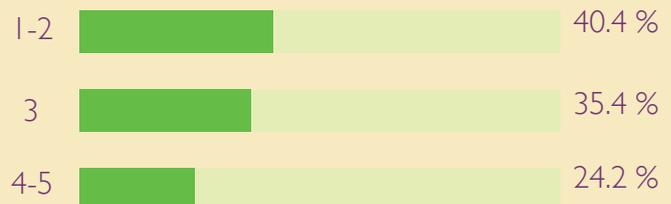
We asked workers 14 questions related to politics and policies changes in Canada to get a better understanding of their perspectives on what they feel are most relevant to their lives. The responses of frontline workers collected here better reflect the realities and desires of Chinese Canadian and immigrant working class communities. What workers expressed through the community survey is that they are demanding meaningful policy and legislation changes that allow working class families' equal access to decent and secure opportunities. Workers desire transformative changes that prioritize working class communities, such as a statutory minimum wage increase, universal permanent paid sick days, better jobs for all marginalized groups, fair working class taxation, universal basic income, affordable housing, status upon arrival, infrastructure investment, and housing security through supports for low-income home buyers.

**73%**

of workers surveyed feel strongly that the government needs to do more to reduce the burden placed on essential workers.

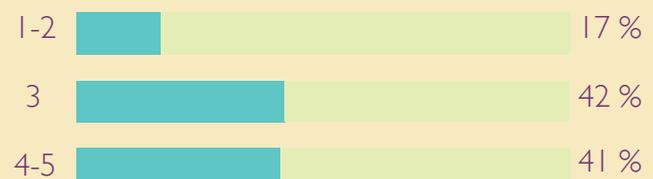
#### Perspectives on Pandemic Policies

*1-5 from least satisfied to most satisfied*

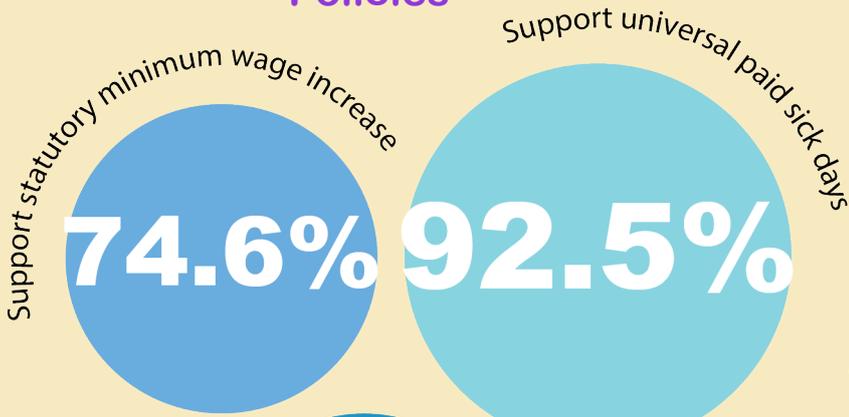


#### Perspectives on Pandemic Income Support Measures

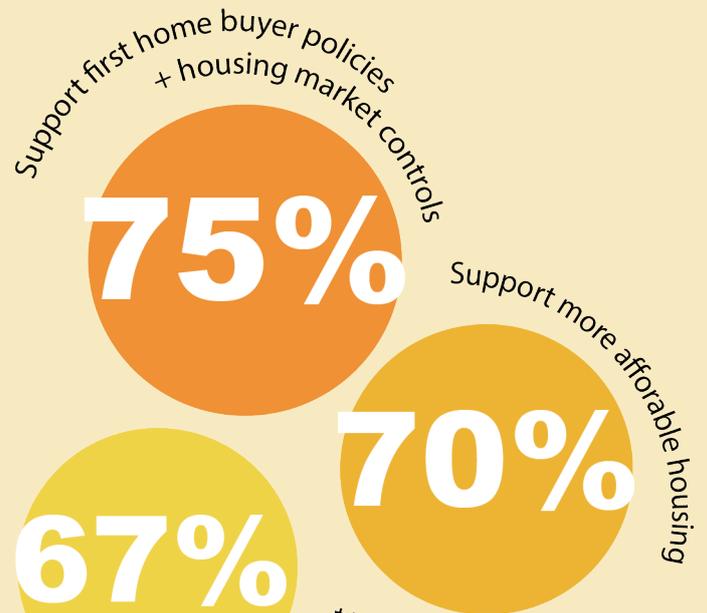
*1-5 from least satisfied to most satisfied*



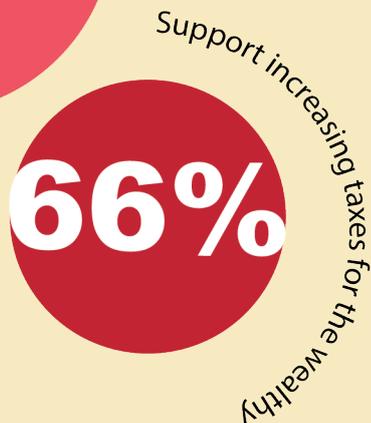
## Views on Labour Policies



## Views on Housing Policies



## Views on Tax Reform + Income Support Policies



## Views on Immigration Policies



“She took three buses to get to work everyday, followed by three buses to get back home. While she cannot remember exactly how much she got paid everyday, she estimates that she was paid \$10 an hour, lower than the legal minimum wage.”

— Ms. X  
(Cleaning Service Worker)

# Recommendations

Canada's COVID-19 response insisted essential workers were too important to stay home and stay safe, but also suggested that they were too disposable to be protected and compensated with living wages. A just pandemic recovery requires everyone to be able to live healthy, dignified and secure lives—including frontline workers. The community survey completed by frontline workers demonstrated a number of pressing needs that require immediate attention.

The results of the study provide the basis of the recommendations included in this report. The voices of Chinese Canadian frontline workers inform more robust and progressive policy changes that reflect the needs and concerns of Chinese Canadian working class communities themselves. Workers' stories contribute concrete examples of how structural issues such as anti-Asian racism, low-wages, precarious work conditions, housing insecurity, and disparities in language access, health, education, and immigration status are impacting their lives.

There is an urgent need for governments and community groups to take immediate measures to protect the health, safety and dignity of all frontline workers, with special attention to those who experience intersectional oppression and marginalization.

The following are five recommendations which reflect the findings of this report:

## **I) Expand worker protections now: Workers deserve safe, fair and dignified work conditions.**

- a. Workers need fair compensation in line with a living wage — Increase the statutory minimum wage to \$20 per hour!** Low wages and income insecurity predispose frontline workers to long hours and to dangerous and precarious work with little capacity to assert their fundamental rights. The minimum wage in Ontario is currently \$14.35 per hour, which is grossly insufficient to cover basic costs of living in the GTA. The Ontario Living Wage Network calculates that the current living wage for Toronto is \$22.08. A mandatory legislated changes that increase minimum wage to \$20 per hour allows a worker to meet their basic needs and participate in community.
- b. Workers need guaranteed and permanent paid sick days now!** Ontario's temporary 3 day paid sick leave program during the pandemic is woefully inadequate. Ensure all workers have access to legislated universal and permanent paid sick days: 10 permanent paid sick days and 14 paid sick days during public health outbreaks. It is well documented that paid sick days protect workers and communities most impacted by COVID-19.
- c. Expand employment protection to all workers regardless of their employment classification.** This is especially important to many marginalized and racialized workers who are being misclassified as independent contractors and have no access to basic rights under labour law or full access to income support programs.
- d. Empower workers by amending Ontario's Employment Standards Act, 2000 to include protections against unjust dismissal, similar to the unjust dismissal protections under the Canada Labour Code.** Requiring cause for dismissal will increase job security and protections for workers, particularly low wage and non-unionized workers who feel powerless to change poor working conditions.
- e. Ensure strong enforcement of labour law to protect the workers with precarious employment conditions and who often face various barriers exercising their rights under the law.** Strong enforcement practices such as proactive investigation and penalty to employers are ways to increase workers' power to challenge unfair and unsafe employment conditions.

## 2) Provide permanent free and accessible mental health care for all workers as a part of a just recovery plan.

- a. **Provide free, accessible, long-term and emergency mental health support that is culturally appropriate and language specific for all workers, racialized working class communities.** A troubling majority of frontline workers reported experiencing too much psychological stress due to pandemic related work conditions. Prioritize mental health care for frontline workers as well as community members who lost their jobs or were unable to work during the pandemic. The existing mental health system places excessive barriers for those seeking care, including barriers to accessing culturally-sensitive care in an individual's desired language of care; barriers to accessing free programs in the community.
- b. **Fund community-based education and resources to promote mental health and de-stigmatize mental illness in Chinese and Asian Canadian communities.** Support workers' mental health by providing income support and financing relevant social and peer support.

## 3) Invest resources into Chinese Canadian working class communities to increase workers' capacities to fight for more just and equitable labour conditions.

- a. **Ongoing funding from all level of governments to support community organizations** offering free and accessible migrant and workers' rights training programs, workshops, educational resources and initiatives focused on empowering working class communities.
- b. **Invest resources to increase workers' capacity to unionize, organize and take collective action** to win against employers, landlords, and state apparatus that harm them.
- c. **Fund programs that support workers' representation, leadership and participation in directly shaping the conditions of their workplaces** through a diversity of means, including: unionization, committee membership and civic participation. This includes prioritizing worker power in decision making processes in workplaces, unions, local committees, and government bodies. Employers, unions and government bodies must take concrete measures to ensure the the voices of racialized and marginalized workers are centred.

## 4) Status for All!

- a. **Develop an immediate and comprehensive program to grant status on arrival** and regularization program for permanent residency for all migrants, workers and community members with precarious status. Precarious immigration status puts workers in positions where they have fewer options and less power to change unfair and poor work conditions. The immigration system creates an additional layer of state and workplace violence on top of the problems that workers already confront.
- b. **Immediately end all deportations and immigration detention.** Deportation and immigration detention function as a state mechanism to silence workers and break up working class and migrant communities, while keeping workers in dangerous and precarious living and working conditions.
- c. **Stop all legislation and practices that target migrant and racialized workers.** Migrant and racialized workers are contributing daily to make our society function. No worker should be targeted by law enforcement or subject to racist laws that put them at risk. Workers must be supported to assert their rights and have full access to services provided by all levels of government without fear.
- e. **Ensure workers' full access to income support programs regardless of their immigration status.** This includes expanding unemployment support and basic income support to all workers (i.e. undocumented workers, migrant workers, international students, workers without work permit) who contribute to our society daily.

# Conclusion

Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers, working class community members and low-income community members work in precarious, low-wage, dangerous conditions every day. They are treated as invisible and disposable. The health and economic impacts frontline workers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect the daily violence of systemic racism. Anti-Asian racist attacks often involve overt acts of violence, but there are also structural incidents of racism enacted by the immigration system, labour exploitation, income insecurity, language exclusion and the denial of access to safety and to permanent resident status.

Due to limitations, this report does not provide a comprehensive account of workers' experiences across all sectors. However, we stand together with all the workers, including sex workers in our community. The struggles and aspirations of Chinese Canadian workers are real and important. More action must be taken to bring about the necessary policy and labour changes to improve the wellbeing and protect the lives of all Chinese Canadian and other marginalized workers. Most importantly, we must treat Chinese Canadian workers and community members with dignity and respect.

# Frontline Worker Stories

Interviews with  
Chinese Canadian workers

# Ms. A's story

## Interview and story written with Zichen Xu



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

Ms.A is a frontline worker in the restaurant industry

Ms.A worked at an automotive factory prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Her job involved using large metal pliers to make car doors; her hands would be sore and numb afterwards up to the point of feeling pain when driving. Though she visited a doctor and took medicine for the injury, she ultimately quit her job to work at a restaurant.

Restaurant work was not much better. Ms.A worked for eight to nine hours straight, with only a fifteen-minute meal break in between. She would still feel sore and tired after work, and decided that she couldn't carry on. A friend eventually introduced Ms. A to her current restaurant job in 2019; based on her strong work ethic, apt for quick learning, and the English she picked up in ESL classes, she was the best candidate to handle the demands of food delivery platforms.

Life was never easy for Ms. A, and her struggles were only exacerbated by the flood of troubles brought on by

the pandemic. Her son had graduated with an aviation major just prior to the pandemic, and was unable to find a job, resignedly waiting for responses from employers. Ms. A's relationship with her daughter has deteriorated from the confinement of the pandemic. Her daughter was also diagnosed with depression during the pandemic and has started taking a drug newly available in March. Whenever Ms. A thinks about this, she becomes upset, often causing her to lose sleep at night.

"No matter how grim our finances are, I will persevere," says Ms. A "I want my children to be mentally and physically healthy; I want everyone in our family to be healthy."

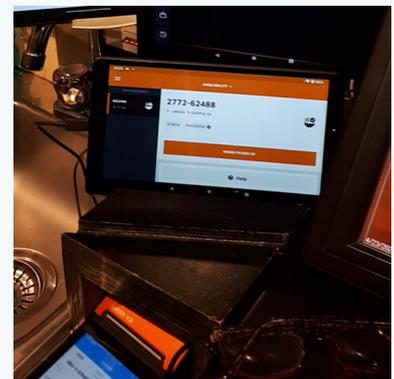
Ms. A also faces constant pressure at work. Despite her exertions, she often receives complaints from entitled customers commenting on her attitude and demanding her manager replace her. Though she deals with difficult customers and a demanding boss, Ms. A continues to work hard to alleviate the financial burden on her family.



Image of the restaurant window from the outside. The restaurant provides service on many delivery platforms. Photo by Ms.A.

When confronting these various injustices, Ms. A says: "I don't engage in politics or do petty things; I just want to do things well, finish what I start, and earn every cent fairly."

Ms.A has little confidence in the Canadian government's ability to contain the pandemic. When it first broke out, she trusted the government's plans, but as the cases increased, so did her doubt. Every day, Ms. A rinses her mouth with salt water and takes traditional Chinese medicine to reduce the likelihood of catching COVID-19. When asked



Multiple tablets are used in the restaurant for delivery platform service. Photo by Ms.A.

about her opinions on the government's current pandemic policies, she mentioned that in her home province of Guangdong, and even within the entirety of China, the pandemic is mostly a thing of the past. People are already living normally, leaving the house and filling the streets.

Ms. A hopes that the Canadian government can adopt similar pandemic policies as China to quell the outbreak here. At the same time, she hopes that the government will also remain mindful of youth employment during the pandemic. If there were more opportunities for meaningful employment, people like her son would be able to contribute to the family finances.

# Jasmine's Story

Interview and story written with Chuck Yachun Li



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Jasmine is a frontline worker in domestic and care work.*

Jasmine, a Chinese Canadian frontline worker, shared some of her experiences of living and working during and prior to the pandemic. Jasmine has been working as a domestic care worker for over 5 years now. Because she doesn't own a vehicle, she takes public transit to get to work. Not knowing whether other transit passengers have been following public health guidelines, where they have been or if they have been exposed to risky and dangerous situations, makes her anxious and wary every time she rides the bus, fearing the possibility of direct and indirect COVID-19 transmission. To add to that, Jasmine's employer does not provide her and her co-workers with personal protection equipment (PPE), leaving them to supply their own N95 masks, face shields and gloves to care for clients. Because of the one-time-use nature of PPE, and the high volume used, acquiring what she needs to protect herself at work has amounted to a costly out-of-pocket expense. Workplace safety is a cause for concern that

has generated additional psychological stress. However, because of her belief in Buddhism, Jasmine has managed to feel grounded and is optimistic that she can make it through this difficult time.

Speaking about the impact of the pandemic on her family and daily life, Jasmine tells us her father is a senior living in a long-term care home. Because of COVID-19, she has not been able to visit her father as regularly, and her father too, has not been able to go out, enjoy leisurely activities or chat with other residents like he used to. Her father's loneliness during this time has had an effect on his mood and made him slightly irritable. She doesn't know how long things will continue this way and only hopes that the pandemic can quickly come to a close so she can return to her normal life.

With regards to the Canadian government's COVID-19 response, generally, Jasmine is relatively satisfied, noting as an example how some basic supports are still available to those who have not filed taxes due to the fault of employers. She just hopes that the government and the community can manage to provide sufficient personal protection equipment for everyone to lessen the financial pressure workers have had to bear. Further, the ups and downs of the repeated ordering and lifting of lockdowns have left people with a sense of uncertainty and confusion. She hopes that the Canadian government can make improvements to their pandemic response mechanisms and to their plan for fighting COVID-19. As for her employers, Jasmine says they have provided her

with reasonable compensation during the pandemic already, and she doesn't feel the need to ask for anything else.

On her experiences with work before becoming a domestic care worker, Jasmine shares that she had worked in the restaurant industry for around 20 years. When she first started, she was young, didn't have any specialized skills and her level of English was relatively low. She felt as though restaurant work was her only option. At the time, the minimum wage was about \$ 10.00. Because she didn't file taxes for work, she didn't have the support of Employment Insurance (EI) or Canada Pension Plan (CPP). She was injured many times at work. During the restaurant's busy peak hours, she often had to run around. Sometimes, things were so hectic that she wouldn't even have time to change her menstrual hygiene products and resorted to using larger menstrual pads to reduce the number of times she would have to change it.

**“ Because of the one-time-use nature of PPE, and the high volume used, acquiring what she needs to protect herself at work has amounted to a costly out-of-pocket expense.”**

Each and every time she needed to use the washroom, she was required to notify her supervisor and the time spent in the washroom was not to exceed 10 minutes. If it did, employees would be reprimanded.

20 years ago, Jasmine was working at what was at the time, the largest Chinese restaurant in Toronto. Workers were treated extremely poorly. Originally, employees had a table where they could eat their meals.

But the manager thought allowing customers to see workers eating would reflect badly on the restaurant, and so required all workers to take their meal breaks in the kitchen. Then, each time the boss saw workers in the kitchen on break, he would assume they were being lazy and would reprimand and even threaten to fire them. In response, the manager asked that workers go hide in the women's washroom for their meal breaks.

The women's washroom was piled up with miscellaneous things, and while they ate their meals workers had to endure the stench of the restaurant toilets. The environment was toxic. The employees felt enraged but were too afraid to speak out then, largely because they had no knowledge of their rights, nor did they have devices like cell phones to record evidence of their mistreatment in order to seek help from legal organizations. On top of this, the restaurant would frequently change or cancel the employee's shifts last minute according to the management's own needs and convenience. Because everyone was so afraid to lose their jobs, they kept their mouths shut and just swallowed their complaints.

In her time at the restaurant, Jasmine also heard numerous accounts of women co-workers sexually harassed by management and staff in positions of power and of workers having to seduce their superiors in order to be scheduled for more hours. There were also kitchen supervisors who abused their authority to make women employees do tasks that far exceeded their job responsibilities, including asking workers to clean their personal dirty laundry. The degree of gender and sexual discrimination and exploitation in the restaurant industry was severe.

Years of labouring in such awful working environments caused Jasmine to develop an inflammatory condition in both hands and to suffer injuries in both her feet. Eventually, she decided to leave the restaurant industry behind and began her career in domestic care work following a recommendation

with meals. If care was needed overnight, she would be paid an additional \$100-200. These days, she no longer has the mental or physical energy to do this work. If woken up at night, it's likely she won't fall back asleep again.

Reflecting on her immigration experience as a whole, Jasmine recalls the days of earning very little as a factory worker in Guangzhou. In the 80s, during the feverish rush to go aboard, she too wanted to leave China and experience living in another country. At that time, the availability of news and information about what life was like in other places was limited. Under the impression that there would be more

**“The environment was toxic. The employees felt enraged but were too afraid to speak out then, largely because they had no knowledge of their rights, nor did they have devices like cell phones to record evidence of their mistreatment in order to seek help from legal organizations.”**

from a friend.

In comparison to the low wages domestic care workers used to make years ago, the hourly rate for care workers today has almost doubled. The conditions of the work itself has also, generally speaking, gotten better, though it is still a fairly demanding kind of work. On occasion, when she has encountered clients who didn't speak Chinese, communication has been a challenge. Other times, clients have asked for both household cleaning and childcare to be done at the same time—near impossible tasks to simultaneously fulfil. On another occasion, a senior she was caring for suffered from dementia and needed assistance with using the washroom and other things such as cleaning, dressing and diaper changing. This, along with the ever-changing day and night scheduling made her work especially difficult and exhausting.

When she was working as a live-in nanny, Jasmine would earn approximately \$130-150 a day, and if she was lucky enough to come across a decent employer, she might even be provided

opportunities abroad, she decided to immigrate to Canada with her family. When she first arrived in Toronto, she remembered finding the streets very dim. The atmosphere and environment in general were indeed quite pleasant, however things were not as vibrant and bustling as she had imagined. Still, she doesn't look back on her decision to immigrate to Canada with regret because she likes the government and the people here. Her hope now is that the next generation would not have to live through as many difficulties as she had, and that they can live a better and more enjoyable life.

# Ms. X's Story

## Interview and story written with Tony Hu



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Ms. X is a frontline worker in the cleaning service industry.*

I met Ms. X outside a local school on a cold, cloudy April day. She is an elderly Chinese woman, dressed simply wearing a face mask and face shield. Here is her story.

As a frontline worker during the COVID-19 pandemic, she has worked at a factory creating flavoured vape products. The term frontline worker romanticizes the job, making it sound more glamorous than it really is. After all, the terms 'frontline worker' and 'essential worker' sound nicer than the terms 'minimum wage worker' and 'sacrificial worker'. She took three buses to get to work everyday, followed by three buses to get back home.

While she cannot remember exactly how much she got paid everyday, she estimates that she was paid \$10 an hour, lower than the legal minimum wage. Adding to these challenges is the fear that she would get infected

with COVID-19 while commuting or at work.

Ms. X shared that she was an undocumented immigrant. While the difficulties associated with not having legal status in Canada are obvious, how someone becomes an undocumented immigrant is considerably less so. Ms. X became an undocumented immigrant after overstaying her visa to take care of her ill daughter. Both before and during the pandemic, she takes care of her daughter by shopping for groceries and cooking for her.

Tensions are high however, due to her daughter's illness and due to her own lack of status. She has had close encounters with the police and negative experiences with her landlord. During the pandemic, her fears have been doubly magnified. She is living in fear of contracting COVID-19 and getting evicted by her landlord.

My initial impression of Ms. X was that she was reluctant to advocate for herself. I realized that this was a result of her bad experiences with social services and supports. In 2018, she inquired through a social service organization about applying for a temporary resident permit, which would give her temporary status and allow her to travel back and forth between Canada and China while waiting for the Humanitarian and Compassionate Permanent Residency application. She remembers that Miss Kuang, a staff helping her, scared her by telling her that she should not apply because she is currently an undocumented immi-

grant and that Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada would certainly deport her. She is still upset about this experience until this day because without a temporary status, she later missed the chance to accompany her seriously ill mother in China. Unfortunately, such stressful experiences are common for many marginalized peoples accessing social supports.

Fast forward to today, Ms. X describes a heartbreaking experience, one that I cannot even begin to understand. Her mother, back in China, fell ill with cerebrovascular disease. Any decent person should take care of their parents, according to Ms. X. At the same time, leaving to see her mother meant that she would be leaving her ill daughter to take care of herself in Canada. Since Ms. X lacked status, it was likely that leaving for China meant that she would never be allowed to return to Canada to see her daughter. Caught between these two choices where choosing one meant sacrificing the other, Ms. X tear-

**“ During the pandemic, her fears have been doubly magnified. She is living in fear of contracting COVID-19 and getting evicted by her landlord. ”**

fully explained how she decided to stay in Canada to take care of her daughter. During the pandemic, her mother died. Ms. X became a permanent resident several months ago. Her greatest regret is listening to the advice from social services telling her not to apply for a temporary residence permit, so she did not have the chance to take care of her mother.

# Ah-De and Da-Zi's story

## Interview and story written with Jessie Tang



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

Ah-De and Da-Zi are frontline workers at a grocery store.

In 2017, Ah-De and his wife, Da-Zi arrived in Canada on a visitor's visa to visit their son and grandchildren. Ah-De's son and daughter-in-law were often busy at work, so he and his wife offered to help raise the children. However, it wasn't long before differences in parenting style emerged between the young parents and the older generation, so Ah-De and his wife stopped spending as much time with the children.

Living in Toronto was also expensive; necessities such as housing, property tax, and car insurance cost much more than it did back in China. As visitors, Ah-De and Da-Zi were also unable to receive a pension, so they had decided to search for employment.

In China, Ah-De and Da-Zi worked as street cleaners, earning 10,000RMB a month. In Canada, the supermarket Ah-De has worked at for over four years pays \$2000 a month for six days of work a week.

Without immigration status allowing the work in Canada and with their age, they could only find work as cleaners, earning less than \$100 a day for ten hours of work. Though the pay wasn't good, Ah-De and his wife liked working, since they felt it helped them stave off boredom and integrate into this new country. When asked about the biggest adjustment they had to make in Canada, Ah-De gestured to the deserted road and replied that there were never any people on the streets.

During the pandemic, Ah-De referred Da-Zi to a job at the supermarket because they were short-staffed. However, as the pandemic started easing, the manager started criticizing her work. After three months of hard work during the peak of the pandemic, Da-Zi was replaced by another employee. She felt taken advantage of, as the two of them had worked as hard as three people. Although she disputed her termination with the manager to the best of her

ability, nothing came from it. When I asked Ah-De about his thoughts on this, he said this wasn't a fight they could win. As newcomers without any other options, they had to take what jobs they could get.

Ah-De said that in China, things would be different. The manager has been satisfied with his work so far, he added, because he takes his work seriously, and is quite handy. Though Ah-De believes in the strength of his immune system, which he attributes to his military service, he is concerned about the people who refuse to wear masks inside the store.

**“ Without immigration status allowing them to work Canada and with their age, they could only find work as cleaners, earning less than \$100 a day for ten hours of work.”**



Ah-De riding his bike outside of his home.

He feels that China is taking the pandemic much more seriously than Canada is, and constantly locking down and opening up will only lead to an increase in cases. In China, regulations are strict and although people cannot move freely between neighbourhoods, things will return to normal sooner.

A few weeks ago, Ah-De was hit by a car while bicycling home from work in a hit-and-run accident, falling hard onto the ground. In a while, his son, the ambulance, and the police all arrived, and there was fortunately no serious injury. From that day onwards however, Da-Zi started walking twenty minutes to pick him up from the supermarket after work. She feels that a hit-and-run is less likely with a pair of people walking together.

In Toronto, Ah-De and Da-Zi often have little to do outside of work. After waking up on his day off, Ah-De spends time on his cell phone, eats a little food, and goes back to sleep. On Da-Zi's days off, she sometimes takes walks with neighbours. Both of them feel that seniors lead aimless lives in Canada, and though working in China was tiring, they had always been happy.

They will return to Canada to visit their son and grandchild in the future, but the trips might grow shorter as they grow older. When Ah-De does come back, he intends on continuing to work at the supermarket.

He feels that if he became a permanent resident in Canada, things would perhaps be easier. Ah-De hopes everyone will stay healthy and safe during the pandemic. Cherish your body.

**“ Ah-De hopes everyone will stay healthy and safe during the pandemic. Cherish your body.”**



*Ah-De and Da-Zi walking together holding hands, with their backs towards the camera in a residential neighbourhood.*

# Xie and S's Story

## Interview and story written with Jessie Tang



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

Mr. Xie is a frontline worker at a grocery store. S is a small restaurant owner

Since coming to Canada in 2015, Mr. Xie has worked at a Chinese restaurant and later at a grocery store. For over a year he's been working at a Chinese supermarket, going to work each day feeling the emotional stress of the pandemic. His state of nervousness and worry is exacerbated by the fact that he did not have a health card. Mr. Xie says that whenever someone gets too close to him or coughs in public, he would feel a pounding anxiety. As a grocery clerk stocking shelves, he is frequently approached by customers inquiring about where different products can be found. Although he doesn't speak English, Mr. Xie, being a person serious about his work, would use his phone to translate and communicate with customers. This kind of close contact at work makes him feel especially vulnerable during the pandemic.

In addition to the fear and unease around catching COVID-19, the recent rise in anti-Asian racist incidents since the pandemic also fills Mr. Xie with anx-

ety. His life of overwhelming stress was crushing.

During the pandemic, Mr. Xie has to get out of bed at around 5 a.m. in the morning, before spending almost 2 hours commuting to work. By the time he finishes for the day, it's almost 11 p.m. 6 days a week, he gives 12 hours each day to his job and loses over 4 more hours a day commuting to and from work.

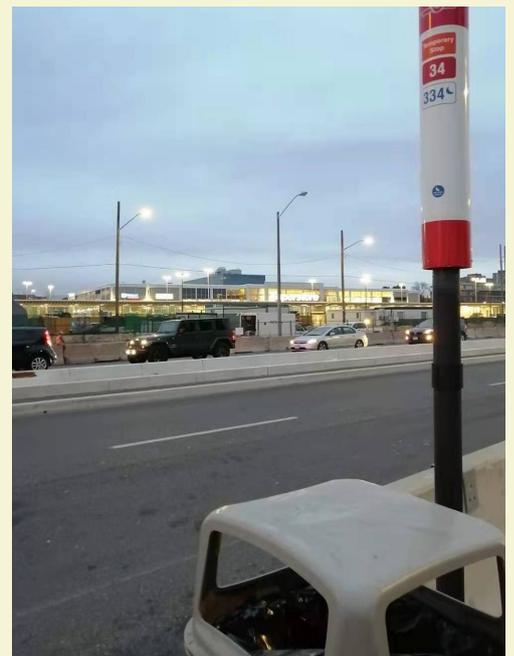
There are times when his mood suffers, and in his few remaining hours of rest at the end of his day, Mr. Xie can't fall asleep. His relative S, who lives with him, says that Mr. Xie, overcome with emotion, would sometimes lose his temper. He would repeat "I'm about to collapse, I'm so tired, so tired", making everyone unhappy.

At the same time, S can empathize with how living a life of such stress—and to be without status, on top of it all—would understandably lead Mr. Xie to feel a profound sense of loneliness and bleak hopelessness for what

lies ahead. Such precariousness in the body and mind really is hard to bear.

After almost 6 years without a health card, Mr. Xie finally succeeded in getting coverage under the Federal Interim Health Program with the support of community groups in January this year. Before this, whenever Mr. Xie felt ill, all he could do was buy over-the-counter medication, rest for a bit and push through again. His feeling, as S explains, is that "if the sickness can be hidden, hide it and if the suffering can be endured, endure it."

**“There are times when his mood suffers, and in his few remaining hours of rest at the end of his day, Mr. Xie can't fall asleep.”**



Mr. Xie works 6 days a week and spends 4 hours each day on his commute.



Mr. Xie, who is responsible for stocking products in the store, takes care to neatly and carefully arrange the items on the shelves.

S says that in the past few years, Mr. Xie has fainted several times, but because he didn't have a health card, and with the rush of their hectic schedules, they didn't pay much attention to Mr. Xie's health. It wasn't until this year, when Mr. Xie finally got his health card and did a full physical examination that they realized the situation was serious.

On the very day of the checkup, he was rushed to the hospital and had 5 bags of blood transfused. The doctor told him if he hadn't come and sought medical care in time, with such severe anemia, he would have likely passed away in his sleep. At this point, Mr. Xie has only been diagnosed with diabetes. There are still a slew of other medical tests he needs to do to find the underlying cause of his illness.

Mr. Xie and S are grateful for the help they received from the community and hope that they could use their own power to help other people in situations similar to their own, marginalized immigrant working class families. Mr. Xie said, "I'm very grateful for the community members who helped me get my health card and am thankful to the people who donated blood to me. Narrowly escaping death this time taught me that I want to work and live

happily in Canada, like everyone else."

Compared to working in a hot kitchen, Mr. Xie much prefers his job at the supermarket. He is good at his job and carries a remarkable sense of pride and responsibility in his work. In the pandemic, co-workers who have more resources and economic options can choose to stay home from work, but Mr. Xie doesn't have that choice.

Even after the medical exam showed severe health issues, Mr. Xie spent just one day in the hospital, before immediately returning to work. Mr. Xie says if he had to take sick leave, the employer can simply find someone to replace him. Without much workplace training or English language skills, he wouldn't know what to do if he lost his job.

Mr. Xie feels comfortable with the

**“ Mr. Xie says if he had to take sick leave, the employer can simply find someone to replace him.”**

supermarket's pandemic health and safety protocols. S, who runs a small shop, hopes that the government can take stricter measures to control the pandemic, to wait for things to stabilize before carefully considering reopening. Borders and airports should be properly managed, as should the flow of people, she believes. S, who for over 3 years has been running her small shop inside an office building, has seen almost no business because everyone is working from home. Even if life returns to normal in the near future, it will be difficult to get back to how things were before.

Mr. Xie has been living with his relative S since he came to Canada. He really enjoys living in Canada; the air quality is good and he can be free to join whichever organization he pleases.

Even though Mr. Xie wants to live a happy carefree life, as things stand now, his life consists of "daily headaches combined with other forms of mental stress...I want to be like the average person and buy a car...there is pressure from exhaustion at the end of each workday, along with being afraid of eviction by my landlord. So even with the pain and tiredness, I want to buy my own house—at least at the end of each workday, I'll have a comfortable place to fall asleep and set my mind at rest."

"I think of a Chinese song from my childhood: I want a home, a place in no need of extravagance, in my hours of tiredness, it comes to my mind. I want a home, a place in no need of bigness, in moments of fright, I don't have to be afraid. Who wouldn't want a home, but there are people without it, tears streaming down, that you can only lightly wipe away." This song represents the sentiments in Mr. Xie's heart, it is also his most genuine wish.

# Copy's Story

Interview and story written with Zichen Xu

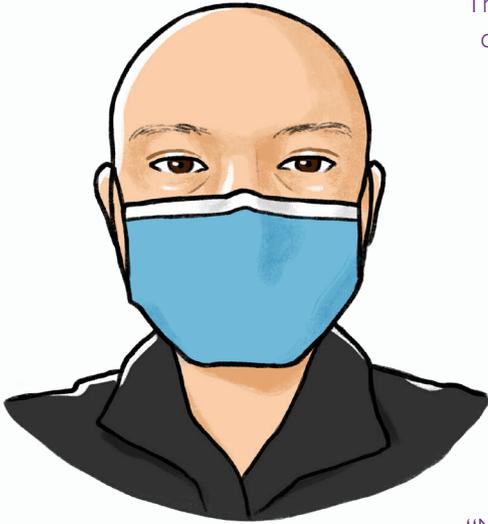


Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Copy is a frontline worker in the construction industry*

When the pandemic started, Copy's boss at the restaurant he worked at lied about the restaurant being closed for two weeks, as this two weeks became four weeks. Even with no work to do, Copy's boss would not let Copy return to his dormitory provided by the restaurant to get his luggage and belongings. After six months of delays, and seeing that the end of the pandemic was nowhere in sight, the boss allowed Copy to retrieve his luggage from the dormitory. Now, Copy stays home every day. In the beginning, this was comfortable for Copy because he had plenty of time to rest and catch up on TV shows. However, seeing restaurants, supermarkets, and other businesses suffer, Copy lost hope as the pandemic went on.

Concerned about his financial situation and feeling like staying at home wasn't an option, Copy decided to find temporary work in renovation. Copy said that temporary workers in renovation are the ones who take on the dirtiest and most tiring work.

They often need to demolish walls covered in dust, dispose of the most troublesome renovation debris and garbage, and take the foreman to and from work. They also need to prepare, in advance and for themselves, the mandatory protective equipment and meals for the job. The foreman often used insulting words to abuse employees and constantly threatened to fire them. Copy said:

"Now that restaurant, supermarket, and barber shop services have been cut down a lot, in addition to the fact that renovation workers are not public facing so the industry is relatively safe, everyone has flocked to work in the renovation industry. These renovation foremen are particularly arrogant. No matter how hard the work is and no matter how little you're paid, you have to abide by the foreman's every order; otherwise they'll curse at you or threaten to replace you. You have to do what you have to do to survive. Having some work is better than nothing."

"For example, when I had to change tiles, I had to kneel on the ground all day. When I got home, my knees were swollen, bruised, and bloody. I already felt dirty every day, but even then, I would be scolded. Furthermore, we would be on standby for 30 days a month, and the actual work only lasted 4-5 days."

It is unlike before the pandemic, when workers could go to restaurants close to their workplaces to buy food, which

would save the time it takes to prepare food at home. At the same time, Copy thinks that with the coming of spring, gardening, roofing, and other industries will start to open up, which may reduce competition among the workers and improve the situation for renovation workers.

"The pandemic has brought a lot of inconveniences. I'm too afraid to go to places like the family doctor, the hospital, and I'm afraid to use public transportation."

"The pandemic has slowed many things down and has even made things

**"No matter how hard the work is and no matter how little you're paid, you have to abide by the foreman's every order, otherwise they'll curse at you or threaten to replace you."**

impossible to do. I'm afraid to go and update my health card. I haven't been able to do a lot of things that I normally would." Copy expressed strong feelings of powerlessness about the problems he encountered in his life during the pandemic. Copy doesn't believe he can overcome them.

"Under certain conditions, I would especially want to return to China." "It feels like under the atrocious conditions of this pandemic, none of us can do anything. Like ants, the most we can do is change our mindset, adapt to these conditions, and wait for the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines to become widespread."

With the problems he has faced at work, Copy said that because he



Three images of an injury Copy sustained on his forearm. Photo by Copy.

couldn't stand the renovation foreman's bullying and exploitation, he reported to their boss and asked to resign.

Other colleagues who had similar experiences of being abused by the foreman came forward and spoke up for Copy. Not long after, the abusive foreman was dismissed.

Copy is very disappointed with the Canadian government's pandemic measures and with Canada's overall efforts to counter the pandemic. Copy believes that many people in Canada are generally unable to prevent and control the pandemic as effectively as people in China. Helplessly, Copy said: "The weirdest thing is that I once drove to get the mail during the lockdown, and got stuck in traffic on the highway... there were cars everywhere on the highway, as if there was no pandemic."

Copy believes that in Canada, it's difficult to reduce and restrict peoples' going out by having officers with authority in the community. In Canada, the solution to the pandemic depends only on vaccines. However, the vaccination rollout is extremely slow. Copy also believes that due to differences in national political systems and ideologies, people in Europe and

North America care too much about their so-called individual rights and freedoms, even during pandemic. He feels that people are seriously lacking in their sense of public and common good, and that the whole situation is worrying.

**“Other colleagues who had similar experiences of being abused by the foreman came forward and spoke up for Copy. Not long after, the abusive foreman was dismissed.”**

“For example, when I worked in renovation, I once worked a job with local Canadians. All of them didn't wear masks, and even hugged and shook hands.”

“When I saw them hug and shake hands, I wanted to get as far away from them as possible. To protect myself from infection, I wore a mask for the whole day, and when it was time to eat or do anything, I kept a big distance between us.”

Regarding the government's pandemic

measures, Copy hopes that the Canadian government can adopt approaches similar to those of the Chinese government. Rather than distributing money on a large scale, it would be better to use the money to hire volunteers and let these volunteers block and restrict peoples' outings and gatherings, and to expand the density and scale of disinfection sprinklers and helicopters.

Copy believes that if the government could implement these measures for a month, the pandemic would be over. At the same time, Copy knows that these measures would be difficult to implement in Canadian society.

In this situation, Copy feels a deep sense of helplessness. In any case, Copy hopes that everyone, especially those outside of the Asian community, can act in everybody's common interest and reduce their outings, wear masks frequently, and that the government increases their pandemic measures wherever possible. Copy believes that this is the only way we can all see the end of this pandemic.

# Michael's Story

## Interview and story written with Jessie Tang



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Michael is a frontline worker who works at a grocery store.*

Michael has been working in Chinese supermarkets for nine years. Like many working-class families, everyone's income has been affected by the pandemic. His father, who works in a bakery, has also seen reduced hours. In addition to a reduction in pay, they've had to pay out-of-pocket for masks, other personal protective equipment, disinfectant, and so on. As the primary breadwinner, and under the pressure of rising prices, Michael has no choice but to continue working at the supermarket.

For Michael, the most unbearable part of the pandemic has been the exhaustion and feeling of helplessness after a day of work. However, it's difficult to find sympathy for his struggles, so all he can do is persevere and encourage himself. "Practice good hygiene, wash your hands frequently, and persist!"

After the pandemic began, Michael felt

that people started looking at him a bit differently because he was Chinese. Recently, he has also had some minor conflicts with other employees as hours began to be reduced. When the manager eventually asked him to take leave, he was unwilling to provide Michael with a notice of unemployment. Ultimately, Michael was forced to quit during the midst of the pandemic, and look for a job elsewhere.

Michael believes that most of these workplace issues existed before the pandemic. Low pay and long hours are widespread in the industry, as is a lack of labour code adherence on issues like minimum wage and vacation pay. Unless government employees arrive on-site and investigate for themselves, they will remain ignorant of his reality. Though it is difficult to imagine in Canada, he was unable to receive the minimum mandated vacation pay, much less dental benefits for his job. The guarantees and protections under Canadian labour codes are out of reach

**“Many colleagues are treated unfairly by management because they lack the legal right to work in Canada. There is no protection against workplace injury, no holiday pay, and no overtime pay.”**

for Michael. Many colleagues are treated unfairly by management because they lack the legal right to work in Canada. There is no protection against workplace injury, no holiday pay, and no overtime pay. Despite this, Michael's colleagues continue to work, silently contributing to Canada's economy through their

blood, sweat, and tears. He hopes that the Canadian government will one day recognize their efforts and provide them with a stable immigration status.

Before working at a supermarket, Michael spent half a year working as a technician, helping install air conditioning, electricity, water, and gas in residential and commercial properties. As a newcomer in the industry, the pay was low, and he had a hard time maintaining living expenses after taxes, so he soon returned to working in supermarkets.

Before immigrating, I was under the impression that it would be easy to make a lot of money in the United States or Canada, says Michael, but after arriving, it seems like the life of an immigrant is spent scrounging for enough to eat. For immigrants like him who don't speak English and don't have diplomas or technical skills, the only work available is in supermarkets, restaurants, and factories. These jobs don't require anything more than two hands, two legs, and a tolerance for hardship.

Michael feels that the government acted appropriately in response to the pandemic, but the lion's share of the benefits went to employers. Policies were designed to support business owners first, and simply meet the survival needs of the working class. The pandemic and lockdown have made everyone

bored and stressed out of their minds. This summer, Michael looks forward to meeting people in parks and in person, as well as organizing events to unite the community.

# Biying's Story

## Interview and story written with michelle liu



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Biying is a frontline worker at a restaurant who will be entering university in September.*

Biying immigrated with her family to Toronto from Guangzhou 4 years ago. She works part-time as a waitress at a small sushi restaurant in Scarborough, where she started about a month before the arrival of COVID-19's third wave. Biying, who is now 19, typically works 5-hour shifts 4 days a week and devotes her evenings to night school, while awaiting confirmations of acceptance from Universities for the coming Fall.

Pandemic restaurant work presents a dilemma for many workers in the food service industry. Like many working-class jobs, food service work now requires every individual worker to carefully weigh risk and wage. With take-out orders making up the bulk of what Biying does, and a reduction in overall restaurant patronage, her income from tips—an important supplement to minimum wage (and often below) that many food industry workers rely on—has nearly disappeared.

At the same time, Biying is relieved that fewer people in the restaurant also means a lower risk of workplace outbreaks and a diminished chance of catching COVID-19.

Although the impact of the pandemic on her personal life has not been unmanageable, Biying relates that worries of contracting COVID-19 and exposing her family to the highly contagious and deadly virus remain constant. While PPE is provided at work, and the number of employees per shift at the small restaurant rarely exceeds 2-3 people, there are nevertheless moments of uncertainty around COVID safety in the day-to-day motions of work, transit, home and school. Without a driver's licence and access to a car, Biying primarily relies on TTC and carpooling for her commute to and from work.

Biying finished her last semester of high school as the pandemic began nearly a year ago. Like many young people living and learning during the pandemic, suspension, missed birthday celebrations and remote hangouts on WeChat became the norm.

In February, before the first wave began in the Greater Toronto Area, she made the decision to quit her part-time job at a restaurant to focus her energy on her studies. Biying made many plans for her much-anticipated post-graduation year, a valuable gap year she

had planned for herself between high school and university. She was looking forward to the time to reflect, gain new life experiences and work opportunities in her anticipated field. She had planned on getting her driver's license, working at a summer camp and gaining hands-on experiences related to teaching.

The impacts of the pandemic on high school and post-secondary students have often been invisible, and its effects are not always easily measured. When the pandemic hit and Biying found herself without a job, the emergency relief programs (CERB, CESB and CRB) left her and numerous workers like her—in industries where pay in cash is common—behind.

Despite having worked in the restaurant industry from the middle of grade 11 to the middle of grade 12, she was disqualified from accessing the emergency assistance programs meant to lessen the damage of the pandemic and its accompanying economic crisis.

While some students, youth and workers were able to find short-term relief through the much-needed emergency assistance programs, there were many others who were excluded.

When asked what she thought could be done differently to better support students, Biying suggested bringing changes to OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) that can permanently broaden eligibility and increase the amount of financial aid

**“While some students, youth and workers were able to find short-term relief through the much-needed emergency assistance programs, there were many others who were excluded.”**

**“While it is still possible to survive—and many students do find different ways support themselves, whether it’s part-time work-study programs or off-campus jobs like retail and restaurants...wouldn’t it be even better if the government can help students so that we have more time to study?”**

available to students, to reflect the real costs of living and studying.

As Biying says, “while it is still possible to survive—and many students do find different ways support themselves, whether it’s part-time work-study programs or off-campus jobs like retail and restaurants...wouldn’t it be even better if the government can help students so that we have more time to study?”

Reflecting on the experiences of her friends as she considers her own post-secondary studies in September, Biying remarked that for many of her peers, the assistance they receive is simply not enough to live on—especially in a

city like Toronto where tuition and the costs of living are exceedingly high.

This insecurity is further compounded by a loss of income due to the pandemic and an increased pressure to work on the frontlines without adequate supports. A guaranteed basic income for everyone is one form of assistance Biying would support. If, she added, it also included students and helped take off some of the financial pressures to enable students to focus on their studies.

Biying’s experience of working and studying during the COVID-19 pandemic of course takes place in the context of increased Anti-Asian racism.

Fortunately, Biying has not had to experience it herself, “I feel really lucky, I’ve never seen it personally, it’s never happened to people close to me.” Despite it all, Biying remains optimistic. Although the plans she had originally made for her year-off could not be realized, she will make the best of this summer.

# Yuanfeng's Story

## Story written by Zhang Yuanfeng



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Yuanfeng is a frontline worker in the Food delivery app industry.*

2018 was the year when I, a then newly licensed G2 driver, steadfastly entered the food delivery industry under the recommendation of a friend. As a student who wasn't too confident with English, the requirements of working as a delivery app driver for a Chinese company seemed relatively low. Since I wasn't yet familiar with road conditions or the locations of businesses, I moved slowly with my food deliveries in the first year. This was a time when investment capital brought by numerous delivery platform companies rushed onto the market, and I hoped that it would be here that I too, would carve a path for myself. Friends around me who were delivery app drivers were making up to \$300-350 a day.

For a new driver like me, each day on the road was a chance to experience Canada's awe-inspiring scenery and the unique, local characteristics of North American culture (for instance, the notable tipping culture and the traffic and safety awareness signs seen

on the roads). I also got to meet and interact with people from all walks of life. This certainly helped me integrate more into Canadian life. Plus, all you need to do take-out delivery work is a driver's license, a car and a smartphone. In the eyes of many people, this really is a promising new entrepreneurial opportunity.

Then in 2020, the pandemic enveloped the globe. Sectors of every kind experienced a downturn, some on the verge of shattering, even collapsing in a bang. The take-out delivery industry was also hit and problems surfaced. The client base of Chinese delivery platforms is, for the most part, made up of international students who face enormous pressures from the costs of education and rent, in search of quick and convenient meals. The

**“ Having self-employed drivers, allows the company to not pay taxes, auto-insurance, retirement benefits, vacation pay or workers' compensation. They can also shift the responsibility of communicating with customers onto the drivers.”**

pandemic resulted in many international students returning to China to work or continue their classes online. Besides this reduction in the customer base, many people lost their jobs during the pandemic and also joined the food delivery app industry. In the fierce competition between platforms,

reduced delivery charges appeared like an attractive adjustment, but in reality, it was done at the expense of delivery drivers' incomes.

Chinese delivery platforms' blurring of the distinction between self-employment (independent contractor) and employment for drivers is based entirely on the companies' self-interest. Having self-employed drivers, allows the company to not pay taxes, auto-insurance, retirement benefits, vacation pay or workers' compensation. They can also shift the responsibility of communicating with customers onto the drivers. Yet under the terms of self-employment, drivers are still required to strictly follow the company's rules and regulations.

For instance, accurately reporting when you start and finish a shift, punching out during mealtime, wearing the company uniform, using the company delivery

carrying case, and having a car sticker on your vehicle with the company logo on it. If there was a traffic accident, insurance companies can deny the drivers' claims on the grounds that the car is used for business purposes and dispute it through a long,

drawn-out case. If a driver was caught working without the company's designated carrying case, car sticker or uniform by the manager, they would receive a fine of \$50. The money you've earned after a long day's work goes immediately back to the employer.

For the sake of customer comfort and satisfaction, and to stand out amongst the many delivery platforms, drivers must complete orders within the specified timeframes. Drivers often joke: "Business owners may be slow with a meal order, but traffic on the road can be slow just as well." If something goes wrong, the employer has three

up with this over-saturated market, most of us working drivers will only have enough orders to be busy during the peak meal hours, all other times there are few orders to

**“ You get off work, rush home and eat, but can't help feeling that it was another trying day that ended with empty pockets.”**



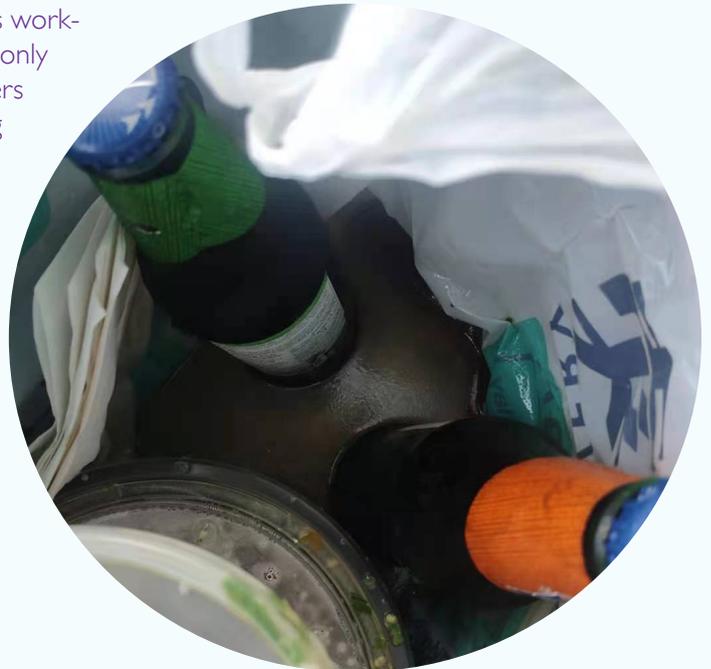
*A rectangular dark green bag on a seat in a car. During his shifts Yuanfeng's company delivery bag rides in the passenger seat. Photo by Yuanfeng.*

principles of denial: not knowing, not aware and not sure. The platform will have a way of using some sort of reason, however strange, to shift all the responsibility onto the driver.

Today, in the seriousness of the pandemic, drivers cannot but come equipped in full gear, complete with masks and gloves. Reluctantly putting

the restaurants, so we often get some extra soup and dishes with our meals.

Because we are racing against time, rushing to get the hot and piping meals delivered into customers' hands within the company's mandated time frame, the probability of getting a ticket when driving is much higher. Delivery drivers are often speeding.



*Soup spilled on the way to the delivery destination. Top view into a plastic bag with two beverage bottles and food container. Photo by Yuanfeng*

fill. One order an hour, sometimes none at all. When we're hungry and want to eat, we have to contact the manager and see if there are enough hands-on-deck at that moment, since, of course, there must always be one or two unfortunate people remaining vigilant at their posts. A good thing is that we have long befriended chefs at

Leaving your car for too long downstairs while delivering a meal to a customer's apartment can also result in parking tickets. I heard a friend say that these days, a hectic, exhausting 13 hour day will only earn you \$200. You get off work, rush home and eat, but can't help feeling that it was another trying day that ended with empty pockets.

Day and night, under winter's snowy skies and on icy skating-rink roads; in the summer's sweltering heat, sweat drenched back, for a bit of gas money - so little that I think twice about turning on the car's AC. These days when viruses are rampant, meet our cutest delivery boy who greets you with takeout. What remarkable energy sustains this young delivery boy, that he will not only work in such high-risk conditions, but also endure the platform's oppression and exploitation? I ask repeatedly, has the delivery industry in the past two years come to an end?

# Anna's Story

Interview and story written with michelle liu



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Anna is an injured worker and former factory worker.*

Anna loves everything about film. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, watching movies has been the primary way she has coped with the fear and anxiety of living as a sick, former factory worker with family members who continue to work full-time on the frontlines. Anna calls watching films her ultimate stress reduction technique, "it saves a lot of money when I don't have to pay for therapy." She recalls spending countless evenings and weekend afternoons in Guangxi with her friends, all in their early 20s, pouring over every TV drama and movie they could find; films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Hollywood and Vietnam. Vietnam is where her grandfather, whose ancestral home is in Guangxi, had settled and where she was born and raised until the age of 12.

In 1978, a year before the Sino-Vietnamese War broke out, she followed her widowed mother, elder sister and younger brother across Vietnam's north-eastern border to Guangxi, in hopes of arriving to her mother's hometown Fangcheng and finding a way out of the insecurity, violence and chaotic uncertainty of an international conflict far beyond their control. They were assigned to a town just outside of Chongzuo where they were strangers

with no roots or family. This was her first experience with leaving her home behind and the first of two experiences living as a refugee. Her second experience took place in Hong Kong, when changes to the British Hong Kong colonial government's immigration laws turned what was previously a common immigration pathway for Vietnamese people in China to exit the country into a crime and made Anna a refugee. Her third experience leaving home was her immigration to Canada.

Anna's love of learning languages was met easily by the hours spent absorbing the dialogues, plot twists and romantic escapades she admired in films. Vietnamese is her mother tongue. It was the movies, migration and community that taught her Cantonese, Mandarin, a little English, and the Zhuang languages she only distantly remembers. Finding herself back in Guangxi after deportation from Hong Kong, Anna entered the local hemp textile factory to work as a seamstress. In part because of limited economic options and in part because of interest, Anna, a self-taught tailor and clothes-maker, would spend her off-hours with her friends pouring over movies; carefully studying, designing and recreating the newest styles of dresses and skirts they had seen in films into fitting clothes they were proud to wear.

When she was around 20, Anna decided to leave Guangxi for Hong Kong and then the UK, taking the same trip her uncle and relatives had taken without her years earlier. She wanted to work, see the world and have a chance at better economic opportunities like her relatives in the diaspora had described.

To pay off debts at home, Anna at 18 went door to door to fruit canning factories, day in day out, whole-selling fruits she grew from farmland allocated to her family, and 2 years later succeeded in making what was then considered a small fortune. She left some money for her mother and siblings and set off with her friend, bringing what was left of her savings with her across the southern stretches of China towards Guangdong province, following the route many other Vietnamese migrants and refugees had taken in the years during and after the Vietnam war and into the Cultural Revolution.

Border crossing and more specifically the making and remaking of place was an experience that profoundly shaped Anna's world view and her life in Canada. The border was a site of both trauma and possibility, a threshold both

**"In perspective, Anna is a sick and injured migrant worker, her health changed by decades of low wage, overtime, unstable and often essential work"**

shapeless and heavily patrolled that leaves invisible reminders in your body. The watery border of the South China sea was where Anna almost lost her life. In the crowded turbulent crossing towards Hong Kong, she fell off the boat and nearly drowned. Today, Anna speaks of what she describes as a terrifying and nerve-wracking time with a casual directness. She remembers the anxiety of daily survival and the frequent dizziness and migraines that came along with prolonged hunger. Both experiences continue to show up and impact her life.

For 3 months she was detained at the Sham Shui Po camp for Vietnamese migrants before being transferred to another camp in Tuen Mun.

Living in detention, she awaited a decision on whether she could settle in another country in the West or be repatriated to Guangxi.

Because of the government's distinction between "political" and "economic" refugees, Anna didn't have the freedom to leave the camp, visit new places, or work as she intended. Thinking about her own experience, Anna remarks that she did not personally suffer any violence during her time in detention and got along well with everyone, including the officers. In the camp, Anna regularly helped other Vietnamese migrants translate between Vietnamese and Cantonese and took on liaising with the police on behalf of

other detainees. She also helped run classes for children growing up in the camp, teaching singing and dancing. After a year in detention she was deported to Guangxi and resigned to work at the local hemp textile factory.

Anna married her boyfriend of 5 years, who is also Vietnamese, in Toronto, after leaving Guangxi by herself once more to join him and his parents in Canada. Their romance was one of serendipitous feeling that Anna described as love at first sight; he was a friend of a friend who worked in the same factory, the one in their town of almost infrastructural scale where over 2000 other mostly young people worked, yet somehow, they had never seen each other. She was on the hemp textile production line and he was one of the mechanics who fixed the machines. When his parents' application for residency in Canada was approved, he accompanied them with the promise they would be reunited.

Once in Canada, her life as an immigrant here was complicated by feelings

of loneliness and longing. She knew no one. She was separated from her friends, relatives and her family and the only English she knew was the little she had picked up from watching Hollywood films. As someone with a facility with language, she hated not being able to express herself and felt incapacitated by the language barrier. She didn't want to be told she couldn't work, and she wanted the warmth of having all her loved ones together with her. With her husband's love and support, she was determined to find a way to bring her whole family to Toronto.

Anna had to make the difficult choice between learning English or working as much as possible to afford the costs of sponsoring her family in Guangxi to join her in Canada.

There were two motivations that kept Anna going, to put away money for days that may unexpectedly turn grey and to bring all her family members together. Both, she observes, were tied to her experience with migration and precarity; the impossibility of saving much of anything when you live as a refugee, the pressure of escaping instability and poverty, the separation from friends and family and the uncertainty around how long she would be able to stay in one home. Her desire to create a home for herself and her family was often countered by the double-bind of labour and time, where the hours you both want and need is what steals away your time. For the next few decades Anna and her husband worked in factory after factory, each taking many shifts and often at different times. For years she worked overtime. At one point, she was working 7 days a week, 2 shifts at 2 different factories, totaling 16 hrs a day Mondays to Fridays after dropping the kids off at school and picking them up, and she worked as a cashier on Saturdays and Sundays. She took as many shifts as she could, working in the production

line making everything from textiles to lighting fixtures, VHS tapes, carpets, windows and bakery goods—thousands of times over, making the things that fill up people's homes.

The jobs acquired through temp agencies were the most demanding and difficult. It was in those environments where she would experience impacts on her health that should be called occupational injuries but would likely not be recognized as such by the Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB). The job Anna liked most and felt she was best at was her role as quality control worker for the VHS production facility where she was employed for 10 years before the factory shut down. It was a connection somehow to the films she missed watching and the stories she missed being engrossed in. This was prior to the widespread rise of temp agencies.

Since being in Canada, watching films and going to the movies, a favorite activity of Anna and her husband when they were young and in love, has become unfamiliar. Of some regret to her was missing out on years of learning English—a goal that would have opened more possibilities for her but was at the same time eclipsed by the promise of work. Although Anna sometimes laments experiences and opportunities she didn't get to have, Anna is proud of her years of work and gratified with having the security of her own home. "It was all worthwhile" she says, because over the years, she successfully managed to sponsor 5 family members, including her mom, sister, brother, nephew—who now all live close to her in the GTA.

These days, Anna suffers from vertigo, migraines, asthma, weakness, lethargy, forgetfulness and a host of other health issues. Some may be traced to the difficult experiences of displacement and insecurity and others the result of years of exhaustion, precarity, overworking, and exposure to stressful and harmful work conditions.

**“On the dusty lines of the carpet factory, Anna developed chronic allergies and asthma, respiratory conditions that now make her especially vulnerable to COVID-19.”**

On the dusty lines of the carpet factory, Anna developed chronic allergies and asthma, respiratory conditions that now make her especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The toll on one's body is severe when you don't have the stability of a home, when you have to move and move, chasing survival.

Although for Anna, that toll is a fact of life, a trade off one makes between a seemingly permanent rock and a hard place. Vulnerability induced by structural inequality has a way of making you vulnerable again, even when the initial circumstances seem to have passed. Last January, a few months before the pandemic hit in Canada, Anna's temp agency Nuleader, suddenly shut down and stole weeks of wages off the already slim paychecks of hundreds of minimum wage workers. Anna, who was contracted to work at a baked goods factory at the time, was one of them. Anna and her former co-workers are now fighting to win their stolen wages back. In perspective, Anna is a sick and injured migrant worker; her health changed by decades of low wage, overtime, unstable and often essential work. Survival as a working-class immigrant should not be an occupational hazard, yet one is often repeatedly exposed to multiple risks that take up residence in your body.

This January, Anna and her husband both contracted COVID-19 from a meat processing plant in Mississauga where he and their second eldest son work. Other members of their family of 5 include their eldest son, a manager at a restaurant who now works from home as a videographer and editor; and their youngest son who works at a factory. Anna's husband was the first to experience symptoms and he spent 3 weeks at home in recovery while the plant closed to contain the outbreak. For Anna, who had stopped working in March of last year, the symptoms were more severe. Because of her underlying conditions, everyone in her family

was anxious and terrified, fearing the worst. Four months later, she is still suffering from the debilitating and prolonged consequences of the virus, such as difficulty breathing, fatigue and strain in her lungs when she tries to go up the stairs.

Luckily, when she and her husband were most sick, her sons took care of everything else, cooking, cleaning and bringing meals to their doors where

**“Survival as a working-class immigrant should not be an occupational hazard, yet one is often repeatedly exposed to multiple risks that take up residence in your body.”**

they were separately isolating. While Anna herself was no longer working on the frontlines, she and her family were all vulnerable. For over a year she tried her best to stay home, be cautious and carefully observe public health measures—fully aware of the risk if she were to be infected with COVID-19. Such individualized measures did not protect her. With 5 people in the house, and Anna and her husband still several years from retirement, staying home from work to prioritize their health was not an option. He had to go to work and so did their sons.

Now, Anna worries most about sickness. She is relieved that her husband is still working. Yet each day she undergoes the stress of wondering if her husband and sons will be bringing home the virus. Because they've lost friends and relatives around the world to COVID-19, the danger of the virus feels especially immediate. For the duration of the pandemic Anna has been living with intense feelings of anxiety and depression, in constant unease about the possibility of severe illness and loss. The heavy-heartedness and worry are supplemented by grief. Anna and her husband both fear they

will be infected with COVID again, only this time the consequences for Anna would be much worse.

Each day, Anna wonders whether her body will allow her to do the things she wishes to do. Her existing illness, now worsened by the disabling impact of COVID-19 leaves her more vulnerable than she was before. This year, for the first time in decades, Anna has been able to rest and watch movies.

She talks about the ability to watch movies as the unexpected upside of this pandemic, her therapy and vehicle for imaginative escape to offset the dull and panic of lockdown and illness. On good days, she has time to catch up with films and catch up with friends in the US, UK, Australia, Sweden, Canada, China and Vietnam for mutual support. When her body allows her to, she walks around her garden. How she will find work again is another source of stress.

At the end of April, Anna received her first dose of a vaccine. She wishes that the Canadian government can quickly and effectively administer the doses, because the best thing that can be done, she believes, is to prioritize the health and safety of everyone, including working-class people in her position with underlying health conditions. This, for Anna, means making sure every single person can get a vaccine, regardless of immigration status and that people's personal information should be respected and not shared with the police. She stresses that the vaccination plan needs to protect everyone because all of us are on the same boat; if people with precarious status can be safe, then we are all safe. “Vaccination would be ineffective if not everyone can access it”, she adds “if there is a threat of deportations and arrests, people will not risk taking it. Protecting everyone is a way of protecting Canada as well. Immigrants and refugees arrive in Canada from all over the world. They are not only Chinese. They need to be cared for too.”

# David's Story

## Interview and story written with Nikki Huang



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

David is a Part-time Personal Support Worker in a Long-term care facility.

I am David. I turn 61 years old this year and immigrated to Canada back in 2006. When I first arrived in Canada, I lived in Montreal for a bit, but ended up moving back and forth between Canada and China because the lifestyle here did not suit me. Eventually, after taking my children's education into consideration, I decided to reside in Toronto.

Speaking of my work experience in Canada, I have worked as a delivery worker, a picker in a warehouse, an auxiliary worker at a car dealership, and a worker in a factory assembly line. Unfortunately, it is difficult for me to get full-time positions with these jobs. Considering my age, I wanted to find a stable job which I am physically capable of as my learning ability and physical strength decline as I age. So, in 2019, when I turned 59, I enrolled in a

course for personal support workers (PSW) and earned a diploma after practical training. Since then, I have been working as a PSW for one and a half years now, but I am still facing difficulties in obtaining a full-time position since more years of work experience is required.

Personally, joining the healthcare industry is very stimulating as well. PSWs' work can be roughly divided into two types: one, serving in the long-term care home (which is what I'm currently doing), and the other type is care work in the community. Working in the community would mean needing to visit the patient's home and assist those with mobility impairments.

The work of the latter may be relatively easy, but the income is relatively low. Even though PSW is a profession with relatively stable working hours compared to my previous jobs, it is still difficult to apply for a full-time position and requires at least three years of work experience. Further, despite inflation in recent years, salaries of personal support workers have not increased much, resulting in fewer and fewer people willing to join this profession.

The pandemic immensely impacted my work. Before the pandemic, many of my part-time colleagues and I worked in different long-term care

homes to ensure that we earn the same income as full-time workers since many long-term care homes only provided part-time positions. With COVID-19 restrictions in place, we are only allowed to work at one fixed home, which is financially brutal for us. Take my situation for instance, I can only work two days a week. Just looking at numbers, my income has reduced by a lot. Sometimes what I earn is less than my friends who applied for government relief. But I insist on working on the frontlines because I take responsibility for what I do and did not apply for any benefits. I think this income maintenance policy may not have taken us into consideration much.

On the other hand, the pandemic drastically decreased my job options. Since I started working in this field relatively recently, I want to try out working in different working environments. Unfortunately, the pandemic has restricted my job mobility, leaving me with no options at this time. When work shift slots come up, I try to work

**“Nevertheless, my livelihood is not as stable as before the pandemic, and I can only rely on my general savings to maintain my day-to-day life.”**

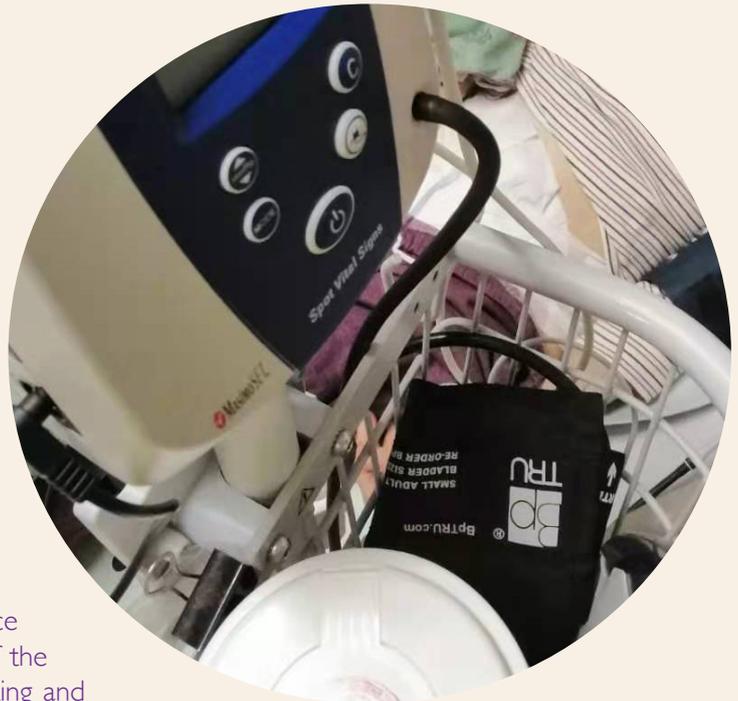
as much as possible to sustain my livelihood, and at the same time I want to help more people. Nevertheless, my livelihood is not as stable as before the pandemic, and I can only rely on my general savings to maintain my day-to-day life. Fortunately, outbreak prevention measures in my workplace are efficient, and many of my colleagues persist in continuing to work as well. I remain at home as much as possible; except when I need to go to work and make essential trips for groceries. I abide by government regulations with strict stay-at-home orders.

**“My wish is for the government to be more considerate and show more appreciation towards part-time employees. In fact, many part-time positions are significant to the entire healthcare field, but they have not received corresponding benefits and a stable income.”**

I have always wanted to be a person who positively contributes to society. With that said, I hope that my children can see how their father, I, persist to work during these challenging times; I hope that I can serve as their role model and inspire them as a positive influence as well. In the near future, when they become part of the larger society, I hope that they can also be hard-working and honest people. These thoughts and dreams motivated me to stay grounded and keep working hard during the pandemic.

My wish is for the government to be more considerate and show more appreciation towards part-time employees. In fact, many part-time positions are significant to the entire healthcare field, but they have not received corresponding benefits and a stable income. For instance, those who work part-time do not receive paid leave; and if they do not have a job, they have no income. Again, if the government can take more account of the working conditions of those who work part-time, they may help a lot of people. Likewise, newcomers and immigrants who have just arrived in Canada need to adapt culturally and integrate into their Canadian life. If they are welcomed, well supported, and encouraged to work faithfully, they will be more confident living here and play a greater role in the unity of society.

I think that CCNCTO can act as a community organization to help vulnerable groups and protect the rights and interests of the Chinese Canadian community and can become a bridge between the community and the government as well. There is a lot of room for development in the future. I hope the organization can extend their activism to help more ethnic groups in the future. I strongly believe in the work done by CCNCTO.



*Closely framed image from top view showing medical equipment and food container. Photo by David.*

# Thank You Frontline Workers!



## Join Us!

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