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BUSINESS

Ford government planning to reduce holidays for front-line retail workers, union says

By **Josh Rubin** Business Reporter

Thu., June 18, 2020 |  4 min. read

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Just weeks after declaring front-line workers “heroes” for keeping essential services like grocery stores running, the Ontario government is making plans that could reduce the number of holidays for retail workers, the Star has learned.

According to the Unifor union, the Ontario government plans to introduce legislation later this summer for a two-year trial change to the Retail Business Holidays Act that would reduce the number of mandatory statutory holidays for retailers to three from nine.

The provincial government broke the news to union leaders during a “technical briefing” on Wednesday delivered by staffers from the office of Lisa Thompson, minister of government and consumer services.

The head of the country’s largest private sector union said he was shocked when he learned about the proposed changes, which will see Christmas, Good Friday and Canada Day as the only three remaining stat holidays when most retailers must be closed across the province.

“These are some of the lowest-paid, most precarious workers in our society, and just a few weeks ago, the Premier was calling them heroes. The pandemic is still going on,” said Jerry Dias, president of Unifor.

The proposed changes add insult to injury for grocery workers who recently had their COVID-19 pandemic premium pay eliminated by Loblaw, Metro and Sobeys, said Dias. “I can’t think of a dumber decision at a worse time.”

While the proposed changes to the Act would reduce the number of mandatory statutory holidays across the province, Toronto is exempt from the Act and has its own regulations dealing with retail openings on holidays. Other municipalities can also apply for specific exemptions from the Act.

It wasn’t immediately clear whether the existing municipal exemptions would be removed or modified as part of planned changes to the Act. There are other exemptions to the existing Act, including fruit and vegetable stores, small corner stores and retailers located in tourist areas.

City of Toronto chief communications officer Brad Ross said there has been “consultation” with the city.

“If and or when legislation is introduced, staff will review and report to city council as appropriate,” Ross said when asked whether Toronto had been advised of potential changes to the Act.

A spokesperson for the Ontario minister of government and consumer services would not confirm or deny that the Act is being changed, but said the government is consulting with “all interested parties” in an attempt to help businesses affected by the

pandemic.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented challenges to small businesses across Ontario. The retail sector has been hit particularly hard as emergency measures forced their closure for more than 50 business days ... So as Ontario reopens and begins to recover, our government remains committed to considering all options to help small businesses, and will continue to consult with all interested parties,” said spokesperson Nicko Vavassis in an email.

Opposition leaders at Queens Park blasted the proposed changes.

“Our retail workers, like everyone else in the province, deserve every single one of their statutory holidays. Mr. Ford should stop attacking the heroes on the frontlines who have served us all and put their own health at risk,” NDP Leader Andrea Horwath tweeted.

Green Leader Mike Schreiner and Liberal Leader Steven Del Duca were also against the changes.

“I will oppose legislation that seeks to reduce holidays for front-line retail workers. This is not how you treat people we’ve been calling heroes for past 3 months,” Schreiner tweeted.

“We’re not even out of this pandemic and Doug Ford is already back to his true self. He’s already taken away their sick days and now he wants to take away their holidays,” Del Duca said in a written statement.

“Over the last few months it’s become crystal clear who essential workers in Ontario were. We understand that businesses need help right now, but as Liberals, we don’t believe that this should be at the expense of front-line workers. We believe in supporting essential workers and businesses, not pitting one against the other,” Del Duca added.

An official with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business said the proposed changes would help businesses by allowing them to open for more days of the year, although that wouldn’t make up for all the time they’ve been closed.

“This might not be the be all and end all, but every little bit helps. Small businesses have been decimated by COVID-19, especially in retail. It’s definitely something I’d want to survey our members on,” said Julie Kwiecinski, Ontario regional director for the CFIB.

Kwiecinski said that working on stat holidays could benefit workers who have been feeling the pinch as their industries rebound from COVID-19.

Thompson’s office would not clarify whether employees who work on non-mandatory statutory holidays would still be entitled to the time-and-a-half holiday pay premium currently mandated under the Employment Standards Act.

While Dias suggested that retailers have long coveted fewer mandatory holidays, a spokesperson for an industry lobby group denied it had asked for changes to the Act.

“We did not initiate this,” said Karl Littler, senior vice-president of communications for the Retail Council of Canada.

Kwiecinski also added that the CFIB had not pushed for the changes.

Correction - June 19, 2020: This article was edited from a previous version that misstated the title of Lisa Thompson, Ontario’s minister of government and consumer Services.



Josh Rubin is a Toronto-based business reporter. Follow him on Twitter: [@starbeer](#)

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