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CUPE 3902: University of Toronto does too little, too late as staff, students contract COVID-19

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CUPE News release

TORONTO, Oct. 20, 2020 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- COVID-19 outbreaks at the University of Toronto highlight another missed chance to protect students and staff; Staff Union CUPE 3902 demands they do better. The University announced that as of October 10, 2020 it would limit access to on-campus activities but continues to require in-person instruction for some courses. As predicted, the protections came too late as COVID-19 outbreaks came to a head that same week among staff and students.

The announcement required all campus gyms and fitness centres to close, food services to shift to takeout-only, and for all “social gatherings and organized public events” to be subject to new limits of 10 people indoors and 25 people outdoors. The University also asked its principals and deans to “review” other “in-person activities, including instruction.” The Faculty of Arts & Science (the largest faculty on campus) announced on October 10, 2020 that all classes in the Faculty currently offered via hybrid dual delivery mode (with both online sections and in-person sections) would move completely online for the remainder of the fall semester. Disappointingly, classes offered in-person only have continued to be offered in the same manner. On October 13, 2020, after a number of predictable on-campus outbreaks, CUPE 3902 was advised that the University was finally ‘moving toward’ required screening for students and staff.

“Our members are already paying the price of U of T’s irresponsible attitude. Predictable COVID-19 outbreaks are happening on campus and we hold the University of Toronto responsible. It’s completely unacceptable,” says Amy Conwell, chair of Staff Union CUPE 3902. The union represents more than 10,000 contract academic workers at the University of Toronto. “To add insult to injury, U of T isn’t disclosing the real number of COVID-19 cases related to recent on-campus outbreaks. Canada’s top university needs to listen to its own world-class faculty if it wants to do better than the D-grade it received on its Fall reopening plan,” continues Conwell.

As early as July, CUPE 3902 and a coalition of other campus Unions including UTFA called for fall term classes to be offered online-only in anticipation of the second wave of COVID-19 cases currently sweeping the province. The University's own expert epidemiologists agreed, noting that the University's plan to hold in-person classes ignored the danger posed by aerosol transmission of COVID-19 and suggesting the University adopt reopening plans in line with those of other Ontario universities that went entirely or mostly online.

The University refused to meet with the coalition to discuss reopening plans despite public calls to do so from more than twenty professors of epidemiology, occupational and environmental health, global health, indigenous health, and social and behavioural health science. Staff unions requested that U of T establish proactive mandatory screening, on-campus testing, centralized contact logs, and take the Fall semester completely online. Instead, the University launched UCheck in September, a U of T branded voluntary self-assessment tool that pulls together widely known public health guidance.

Similarly, the University has taken the position that it has no obligation to inform University Joint Health and Safety Committees when students who have been present in their workplaces test positive for COVID-19. The Union believes that the University of Toronto's approach is completely irresponsible and violates employees' rights to be made aware of hazards in their workplaces.

CUPE 3902 is a trade union representing over 10,000 contract academic workers at the University of Toronto.

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