

**April 9<sup>th</sup> 2021**

## **ENSURING A SAFE WORKING ENVIRONMENT FOR STATE EMPLOYEES**

### **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to exact enormous strain on the resources of this country by the continued necessity of having to invest more in the area of health and economic relief of citizens. This reality is further exacerbated by the reduction in government's revenue as a result of significant fall-off in tourism and other sectors that have experienced major disruptions. A regular update of the government's financial position offered by Prime Minister Gonsalves indicates that there continues to be a decrease in revenue, while on the other hand the government continues to increase its expenditure in an effort to cushion the economic impact on individuals whose jobs were affected. In April of 2020, following the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the government announced a stimulus and recovery package of in excess of \$75 million to address the challenges brought on by Covid-19. While the opposition NDP clamoured for a closing of our borders and accompanying lockdown, Comrade Ralph and the ULP strongly resisted those calls, knowing the effects such actions would have on the ability for many to feed themselves. It was against this backdrop that the recovery and stimulus package was crafted, offering income support to individuals in the tourism and other sectors whose jobs were affected. With the new year came additional challenges, as a spike in cases attributed to the activities of the Christmas season, created a situation where a number of government departments and schools were now unsafe because of the high infections rates. This threat to the safety of public sector workers at their work place, including schools,

prompted the government to introduce a rotation system across the public sector where the departments' population were reduced by half at any given time to ensure social distancing. The introduction of these measures also meant that schools remained closed for the entire second term so as not to jeopardise the health and safety of students and teachers.

### **Restoring A Sense of Normalcy**

The recent announcement by the Ministry of Education that the tentative date of April 12, 2021 has been set for the reopening of school, is welcome news to the thousands of students who have had their education disrupted since the start of this pandemic. Students have already missed an entire term of face-to-face learning, having to rely on online teaching/learning that was less than ideal owing to a number of circumstances. Similarly, the period of rotation for public servants ended with a return to normalcy for all departments with strict protocols of mask wearing enforced to protect workers from infection at the workplace. The country was able to get to this position when we can attempt to restore some normalcy for students and the public service primarily because of the management of the pandemic after the spike. The swift action taken by the government to expand the protocols to include public transport, indoor and outdoor gatherings, entertainment spots and restaurants and mask wearing in public places, all proved effective in flattening the curve and eventually reducing significantly the spread of the virus. While doing this excellent work, the government vigorously pursued the procurement of vaccines to ensure that our population would have access to medication that would help to protect us from serious illness and possible death. Taking nothing for granted, it is clear that this Comrade Ralph and

the ULP would do everything possible to protect the health of Vincen-  
tians through the implementation of relevant protocols and through  
vaccination once available.

### **Duty to Provide a Safe Working Environment**

One of the common law duties of employers, including the govern-  
ment (the single largest employer in this country) is to provide a safe  
working environment for its employees, in this case public servants  
and teachers. The resumption of normal working schedule for public  
servants and the plans to re-open school must be done in a manner  
to ensure that the working environment is as safe as possible for em-  
ployees and the general public. To this end, the government is en-  
couraging all public servants, teachers, police and nurses to get vac-  
cinated to protect themselves and those they interact with, against  
this deadly virus. With close to 30,000 students getting ready to go  
back to school it is important that the school environment be safe.  
This can be achieved through inoculation of employees with contin-  
ued adherence to the protocols and through screening for infections  
until every employee is finally inoculated. The government's policy to  
regularly test employees throughout the system who have not been  
inoculated is a reasonable measure to ensure that the school and  
work bubble do not become infected by employees unaware of their  
status. It would be impossible for the government as the employer to  
provide a safe working environment if the same employees making  
these demands refuse to get vaccinated and tested. This is a wholly  
unreasonable position held by some employees and runs counter to  
the demands of Union representatives for safety guarantees, as well  
as the very reasonable expectations of parents and the general public  
to interact in safety at schools and government departments. The

presence of vaccines on island offers an excellent chance for all Vincentians especially employees in the public sector to protect themselves and ensure that the working environment is safe for everyone.

## **Conclusion**

At this point, achieving population immunity is key to restoring a sense of normalcy in this country. The restoration of our tourism sector, the robust return of the local economy, the holding of festivals that generate much economic activity and the safe and effective re-opening of schools, depend on the health and safety of Vincentians. Protecting our population from Covid-19 takes community effort as each Vincentian takes responsibility for himself/herself and at the same time considers the interest of the society as a whole. Now more than ever, we are required to act in the best interest of this nation that we love, by protecting ourselves and our work places. In these circumstances, the encouragement from the employer is to get vaccinated!