



National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment

March 31, 2020

Governor JB Pritzker

State of Illinois

Dear Governor Pritzker,

I am a former elevator constructor and founder of Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT). I currently direct CWIT's National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment which works across the country to support equity and inclusion in construction, manufacturing and transportation occupations. I also served as a Secretary of Labor appointed member of OSHA's Advisory Committee on Construction Safety and Health. On Sunday you asked for input on your decision to continue to classify construction projects as essential work. I am writing to ask you to please recognize that while some construction workers and projects may be essential, no construction worker should be expendable. Building a casino, a luxury condo, a high-rise office building, a sports arena, school, or commercial building is not essential during a pandemic such as COVID-19. Mandating a statewide shutdown of non-essential construction is essential and it is the necessary and right thing for you as governor to do.

Construction sites are notorious for their lack of cleanliness and unsanitary conditions that challenge health and safety of workers regularly. These conditions only exacerbate and threaten the health of workers, their families, and the public exponentially during this pandemic. Most sites rely on shared and often unhygienic (or more accurately filthy) toilet facilities that are not cleaned or changed out every day. Handwashing stations are not a feature of jobsites and, even if they were, construction workers regularly share tools, open gang boxes, hold a ladder, climb a scaffold, and commonly work with materials many other workers touch. Workers often touch their face taking off masks and goggles, or may hold tools and materials close to their face, or at times in their mouths. Even if handwashing facilities existed, stopping work to use them would be almost impossible to do, and contractors or site superintendents are limited in what they can oversee, so that COVID-19 protocols are being followed. The nature of the work means that many workers work in teams and have to have close contact with one another. Moreover, work is often performed in confined spaces and workers ride in crowded skip hoists where social distancing cannot be applied. It is impossible for any contractor, project owner or union steward to monitor the protection of each worker to the fullest under these conditions. Many contractors may claim to follow CDC, OSHA or NIOSH guidelines, but these are still minimal and truly limited in addressing all the ways construction workers and their workplaces can spread the COVID-19 virus.

Leaving the decision to individual contractors to decide whether their projects are essential or whether they can implement safe and healthy working conditions on job sites is not enough. We need public leaders to step up and shut down sites like Governors Cuomo and Inslee did in New York and Washington, and Mayor Walsh in Boston. Without your mandate, individual workers are bearing the burden of having to make personal choices about whether to work or protect their families, or call out unsafe conditions. Many fear standing up to contractors and face consequences if they do. Apprentices feel pressure as the newer workers in the field and may fear losing their hard won apprenticeship opportunity. Many workers, and especially tradeswomen, are also facing the fact that there is no school or after school programs and limited childcare options for their families. Workers are also putting the

public and transit workers in danger, as many rely on public transportation to travel to and from work. Contractors, burdened by financial concerns, owners' demands, and project deadlines, need not just guidance, but a mandate to shut down. You alone can order that mandate.

I am asking that you use your power to make strict restrictions and make contractors get state approval to continue work. Contractors and employers must give hazard pay to those actually deemed essential. During this time, you could establish a taskforce for contractors, unions and apprenticeship programs to identify common ways they can individually and collectively develop best practices to increase health and safety practices on projects that are essential and still operating. They can also identify ways the industry can support workers that are facing layoffs or the inability to get work during this time. This should include easy access to unemployment for workers who work contingently and maintaining health care benefits for any worker regardless of their work status prior to or because of the pandemic. The Taskforce should also take into account that many construction workers have not worked since November or December of last year, and since this is the season where they are getting back to work, many have exhausted their savings and unemployment.

I hope you hear my plea, and that of many of the members of Chicago Women in Trades and tradeswomen and their brothers across the country asking for public leadership that our unions and contractors may not be offering due to external constraints of contracts or other. All businesses and workers are making great sacrifices during this time, construction workers should not have to sacrifice their lives. They are not expendable now, nor in the future. Please act now!

I truly appreciate your extraordinary and comforting leadership during this time, and thank you in advance for your solidarity with construction workers.

Respectfully,

Lauren Sugerman

Director, National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment
Chicago Women in Trades