National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale des déterminants de la santé

Mind the Disruption

PODCAST EPISODE TRANSCRIPT & COMPANION DOCUMENT

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 1

Disrupting Gig Work

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Mind the Disruption is a podcast about people who refuse to accept things as they are. It's about people pushing for better health for all. It's about people like us who have a deep desire to build a healthier, more just world.

The first season of Mind the Disruption focuses on Cultivating Creative Discontent: what it means to look around, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then take bold action despite the resistance we might face.

This episode companion document, available in English and French, provides a new way to engage with the podcast. It includes a written transcript of Episode 1 as well as highlighted powerful quotes and related resources to prompt further reflection and exploration.

HOST

BERNICE YANFUL

Bernice is a Knowledge Translation Specialist with the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH). Bernice is also a PhD candidate studying the intersections between school food and food security, and she has worked as a public health nurse in Ontario.

PODCAST GUESTS

JENNIFER SCOTT

Jennifer is the president of Gig Workers United and a gig worker doing bike delivery for various apps in Toronto.

MONIKA DUTT

Monika is a public health physician and a medical officer of health in Newfoundland and Labrador. She is a family doctor at the Ally Centre of Cape Breton. She volunteers with the Decent Work and Health Network and the Anti-Racism Coalition of Newfoundland and Labrador. She is currently in Hamilton, Ontario, with her son, where she recently started a PhD in health policy.

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Disruptor Jennifer Scott delivers food on her bike in Toronto and organizes with other gig workers to fight against the challenging — and often unsafe and harmful — employer practice of misclassifying workers. Listen to or read this episode to learn about Jennifer's personal story of becoming a gig worker, organizing with other workers for safer and healthier working conditions, and becoming the president of Gig Workers United. Later in the episode, we also talk to Dr. Monika Dutt and reflect on what this means for public health in Canada. Monika is a family doctor, medical officer of health and advocate for decent work. In speaking with Monika, we discuss the many links between employment and health and explore the role that public health practitioners and organizations could play in supporting workers like Jennifer to advance health equity.

BERNICE YANFUL (NCCDH)

Hi. Welcome to Mind the Disruption. I'm Bernice Yanful. I'm a PhD student and public health practitioner working to move knowledge into action for better health for everyone.

On this podcast, I chat with community organizers, public health professionals, academics and more with a key thing in common: they're disruptors. They're people who refuse to accept things as they are. Passionate about health for all and are pursuing it with a tenacity, a courage and a deep conviction that a better world is possible.

In Season 1, we're talking about creative discontent. What it means to look around us, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then taking bold action despite the resistance we might face.

In each episode, we hear from a disruptor who has done just that in different areas: work, food, Whiteness, migration and much more. And we hear their personal journeys.

Then we dive into a reflective conversation about what all this means for public health. Wherever we find ourselves — in research, policy or practice — how do break from the status quo and move forward with boldness?

REBECCA CHEFF (NCCDH)

This podcast is made and brought to you by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. We support the public health field to move knowledge into action to reduce health inequities in Canada.

We're hosted by St. Francis Xavier University. We're funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and we are one of six National Collaborating Centres for Public Health working across the country. The views expressed on this podcast do not necessarily represent the views of our funder or host.

We are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People.

JENNIFER SCOTT

One worker wrote, "I think if I go to work today, I'll die." In this moment, I feel like, "Oh, I'm not the only one." And then one of the managers, he posts, and he's like, "Well, you have a weather app on your phone. When you booked your shift, you should have looked at the weather app and known that it was going to be like this. You booked a shift, you have to work it." And his response to somebody saying "I think I might die at work" was "Didn't you check the weather app before you booked your shift?" And that was when I was like, "Mm, I don't think that this is right."

BERNICE (NARRATION)

You just heard from our disruptor for today's show, Jennifer Scott. Jennifer is a gig worker. She delivers food on her bike for an app-based delivery service. She's a worker in the ever-growing gig economy.

There isn't one widely recognized definition of gig economy, but generally it describes work arrangements that depart from the traditional employee-employer relationship. The gig economy includes many different types of gigs, including on-demand work that uses platforms to connect gig workers with paying customers. With this type of arrangement, you have:

- gig workers who are considered independent contractors or self-employed;
- specific on-demand tasks to be completed such as food delivery, furniture assembly or destination to be driven to;
- paying customers for whom the tasks or services are to be completed; and
- online platforms such as Uber, Lyft, TaskRabbit or DoorDash connecting gig workers and their customers.

Contrary to popular belief, for many, gig work is not a side hustle. It is the main source of income for an increasingly larger share of people in Canada. And for Jennifer, because gig work is like any other kind of work, she believes it should have the same protections. But it doesn't. It is this reality that has led Jennifer to fight for gig workers' rights. In 2021, she became the president of Gig Workers United, a worker-led organization in the Greater Toronto Area that used to be known as Foodsters United. It supports delivery workers like Jennifer who work on platforms such as DoorDash, Uber Eats and SkipTheDishes.

Canada
EH SAYERS
Statistics Canada

Who Wins and Who Loses in the Gig Economy?

Bridge T, Glavin P. [2022].

This Eh Sayers podcast episode from Statistics Canada explores the growing gig economy and how it is impacting workers.

In our conversation, we talked about the importance of fighting for all workers, which includes gig workers' rights, and what Gig Workers United is doing to organize for better pay, safe and healthy work conditions and so much more, so that every worker is treated with dignity and respect.

And then later, I chat with Monika Dutt, and we reflect on what we heard from Jennifer. Monika is a very talented writer, family doctor and medical officer of health for central and western Newfoundland. She's also a member of the Decent Work and Health Network, a group of health workers advocating for better health and work conditions. In chatting with Monika, we talk about the many links between work and health and the role public health should play in supporting workers.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

In 2017, Jennifer was a personal assistant, struggling to make ends meet and keep up with the cost of living. So she googled "how do I get a job quickly?" and within 72 hours, she was on the road on her bike, delivering food.

BERNICE

Thinking back to those early days of being a gig worker, what was that like for you? What did you experience and were other gig workers that you knew experiencing similar things?

JENNIFER

This job can be really isolating because we don't share a workplace. So for the first year and a half, maybe 2 years, I didn't know anybody else who did this job. And I would go to work every day and not have any coworkers that I talk to. There's no training, no education. Sometimes I'm not certain why I didn't get hurt more severely during that time. I didn't know how to ride a bicycle professionally as a delivery person in this city. I didn't know how to deliver things efficiently and effectively. I didn't know a lot of things that I've learned now about, like safe food handling.

It was hard. It was really, really hard. And something that I think happens to a lot of us — because we're told by apps that we're independent contractors, that our ability to succeed is dependent on how much we put into it, you-get-what-you-put-in kind of mentality — I internalized a lot of those things and was like, "Oh well, you know, I'm not doing well because I'm not trying hard enough. I'm not making enough because I'm not hustling enough."

And this is one of the narratives that app employers want gig workers to internalize. Because when we think that we are the problem, we don't look to collective solutions. We don't place the blame on our employer and then look to unionize and organize or go on strike. It wasn't until I think my second summer in this job that I met other people who worked [like this], and it changed my experience immensely.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

You heard Jennifer mention that the app she was delivering food for considered her an independent contractor. What is an independent contractor? When you're an independent contractor, that means you're self-employed, you're your own boss running your own business. Generally, you have control over the hours you work, the tools you use, and you can hire your own employees and set your own rates among other things.

But when Jennifer thought about her work, she didn't feel independent. She didn't feel like her own boss. She had limited say on the conditions of her work, and the biggest tool she needed to do her job and connect with paying customers — the app — was fully outside of her control and ownership. So, for Jennifer, the work seemed anything but independent.

Being considered an independent contractor, however wrong, meant that she didn't have the protections a regular employee would be given, including minimum wage and safety training. And she felt isolated. She felt as though the challenges she was experiencing were because she wasn't working hard enough. But eventually, she met others while out on delivery or waiting in restaurant lobbies. She met other food delivery workers who were dealing with the same things. And for Jennifer, that was critical. She told me about how those connections helped her learn what she really needed to know about the job and how to protect herself.

JENNIFER

I would work between 7 and 12 hours a day, 5 to 7 days a week, depending on the week. I didn't know how to work that much and ride a bicycle, a very physical job in the summertime, and not suffer from heatstroke. So I would get very, very sick. And I would wake up the day after a shift and feel like my whole body had been hit by a car, because it was dehydrated and it had been a really rough day before. I didn't know that I could buy electrolytes, that there was no amount of water that I could drink that would rehydrate me if I was working in this way.

"I would get very, very sick. And I would wake up the day after a shift and feel like my whole body had been hit by a car, because it was dehydrated…"

JENNIFER SCOTT

I learned things about how to keep myself safe. For the first few years that I did this job, I didn't know what would be good ways to dress appropriately in the wintertime for somebody who's being athletic. The first two winters that I worked, I had toenails fall off from having inadequate boots and socks and pants. And so my coworkers taught me about how to dress for the weather, how to take care of myself, protect myself in the weather, whether it was summer or winter.

I learned things about how the algorithm works, that when I'm looking for orders, I should stay within this area and away from that area. Or when there are common problems with pay or common reprimands, others were able to talk to me about how serious or not serious they are based on community knowledge of how those reprimands have impacted other workers.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

In 2018, for Jennifer, everything changed. It was a hot summer day.

JENNIFER

Summertime can be slow. I think my goal for the day had been to try to earn like a hundred dollars, and it was towards the end of the lunch shift and I'd not earned enough to be able to feel certain that I would be able to reach that goal by the end of the dinner shift. And so I was feeling really stressed about, you know, what am I going to do? I didn't earn enough today, that means I have to figure out how to earn more tomorrow. But if today was slow, how am I going to earn more tomorrow? I pulled off on the side of the road, and I was sitting on this big rock downtown, just kind of feeling bad for myself and trying to figure out how I'm going to fix this situation.

And this man approached me, and he had a delivery bag, and he was like, "Hey, are you delivering?" And I'm like, "Yeah! Are you?" And he's like, "Yeah!" And he does what we do at Gig Workers United, what we did at Foodsters United, we call it street outreach. He talks to me, he asks me how I'm doing. He asks me what are the issues that I'm experiencing that are important to me and how would I change them if I could.

And part-way through our conversation, I'm like, "Are you talking about a union?" And he was like, "You know, yeah? Like, would that be cool? Like, yeah?" And I'm like, "Yes!" And so we exchanged phone numbers, and we started talking, and I came to Foodsters United because organized workers were out on the street doing worker-to-worker organizing — and it works. I think that's a really amazing way to have joined the union.

When I talked to him about some of the things I was frustrated with, he asked me how I would change them if I could, and I gave my answers. He was like, "Yeah, you know, I like that idea, that other idea is interesting." Then he asked me, "Who, you know, you can't right now, but who do you think could?" And so he asked me to put the onus, the responsibility of fixing these things on my employer. And that … that was the moment.

Because when we were just venting or we're talking with each other, we don't always remind each other that our boss is responsible for the things that we're frustrated about. Because we're trying to see each other, to allow each other to vent. But when we're organizing, we always want to help each other have that moment where we take venting and we make it practical. We turn it into action. And I think putting the responsibility onto the boss is one of the ways that we do that.

BERNICE

You mentioned feeling frustrated. So, for you, did that frustration with the work that you were doing grow over time, or was there a particular moment or series of events that you thought to yourself, "I really need to do something about this"?

JENNIFER

The very first winter that I worked, at the time, one of the apps had a workplace group chat, which was very reckless of them. It's my first winter, and in the group chat, there are a number of folks who are talking about how there's been a really big snowfall. We had scheduled shifts on the app, and they were like, "I am afraid to log into my shift today. The roads are not cleared. It's still snowing. It's like 70 kilometres-an-hour winds. I'm scared to go to work." And one worker wrote, "I think if I go to work today, I'll die."

So there were these workers having this conversation, and I feel all these things too. In this moment, I feel validated, like, "Oh, I'm not the only one. Like, yes." And then one of the managers, he posts, and he's like, "Well, you have a weather app on your phone. When you booked your shift, you should have looked at the weather app and known that it was going to be like this. You booked a shift, you have to work it." And his response to somebody saying "I think I might die at work" was "Didn't you check the weather app before you booked your shift?" And that was when I was like, "Mm, I don't think that this is right."

BERNICE

So what changed for you? Because you mentioned at the beginning, when you started gig work, that you would blame yourself if things weren't going well. You put the responsibility on yourself, saying you had to work harder. So, for you, what changed in that moment when you saw that text saying you should have checked the weather app, where you realized, "No, this isn't right"?

JENNIFER

I don't think that anybody should be severely injured or die at work. I think, when workers are saying to their employer, this is my fear, the employer should do something about it, should take action. And so, for me in that moment, my community that I had been brought into up until that point had helped me to see some of the things that weren't on me, that were on the apps. And that moment was like a door-opening moment of, like, I am starting to learn and understand that apps are controlling. In that moment, it felt like just such a very visceral demonstration of that control and what that control would look like. It felt like a very cruel response.

> ***"I don't think that anybody should be severely injured or die at work. I think, when workers are saying to their employer, this is my fear, the employer should do something about it, should take action."***
>
> **JENNIFER SCOTT**

BERNICE

And it sounds like in that moment, it wasn't only about you and what you're experiencing, but you're seeing how it was affecting your coworkers that you had built a community with as well.

JENNIFER

Yes. And there are lots of jobs that are really dangerous where folks can understand that danger. When they go into the job, they receive training to help protect them from that danger, they have PPE or other — when we know that people do dangerous work, we try to make it safer for them. And in this job, there's no training and there's no PPE and there are no sick days and there's no money if you get hurt and, for that kind of response, I just found that very unacceptable.

BERNICE

So when that person approached you in 2018, it sounds like you were ready to try to do something.

JENNIFER

Yes, I was excited. I had no idea what we were all about to do. I didn't know what it would mean. I didn't know how I would grow and change, but I was excited to jump on the journey.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

And for Jennifer, that journey organizing for workers' rights began in 2018. Just 1 year prior, she was feeling isolated in her gig work and didn't have the information or protection she needed to do her job in a safe and healthy way. Then she met coworkers who were experiencing many of the same things, and eventually she was approached by a street outreach worker for Foodsters United, a group of couriers working for the Foodora app, who helped her see that the things that she and her coworkers were experiencing were not their fault. It wasn't because they weren't working hard enough, they weren't smart enough, they weren't resilient enough. It was because their employers, the apps, were failing them, and that needed to change.

Next, Jennifer talks about what led her to take that first step of action with Foodsters United. She describes a tax clinic she attended where she not only learned how to file her taxes, but she also met others with whom she set up a women and trans committee. And she also talks about how getting involved with Foodsters United changed her for the better.

JENNIFER

As gig workers, misclassified as independent contractors, we have to file our taxes as self-employed workers. And I didn't know how to do that.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Remember earlier when we talked about gig workers being wrongly labelled as independent contractors, but really they have very little control over the most important tool — the app they need to do their job. This is a type of misclassification. Misclassification is when companies wrongly classify workers as self-employed contractors when they should be considered employees.

Misclassification is illegal in Canada, but that hasn't stopped its widespread practice. It's one way that employers avoid basic legal responsibilities to workers. Through misclassification, they avoid paying workers minimum wage, providing sick leave, on-the-job training and paying into the Canada Pension Plan and Employment Insurance. Because if workers are independent contractors and not employees, then they don't have guaranteed access to any of those things under the law.

And now back to Jennifer who was talking about how she learned to file her taxes.

JENNIFER

I got this email, and I'd seen some posters that there was going to be a tax clinic with a local accountant who knew about these things. And he would teach us for free, and I'd be able to file my taxes, and that sounded like something I needed. So that was the first event that I went to. And I was shocked because, up until that point, all of the workers that I knew in my community were men and, at the clinic, there were a whole bunch of women workers. And I was so excited. I wanted to sit next to them, I wanted to talk to them, and there were all these guys who were in the way, and I was like, "Get out of the way, I wanted to sit here!"

BERNICE

Make room!

JENNIFER

Then when the tax clinic was finished, I went outside to unlock my bike and some of those women who were there approached me and started talking with me about this work, about how they work, how I work. We started talking about a women and trans committee and something that workers were trying to build within Foodsters United at the time. I was like, "I would love to be part of that." And that was how they pulled me in. And I was so excited to be able to increase my community with people who had some of the same nuanced experiences that I did.

BERNICE

So, the women and trans committee, can you tell me a little bit about that? Why was there a particular committee for women and trans gig workers?

JENNIFER

There are different kinds of experiences that we might have at work. Everybody would have a different experience, but for me, a lot of the road violence that I experience when I'm delivering from drivers is gendered. Delivering to customers to apartments late at night in isolated areas can be really scary. And sometimes things happen that aren't okay, and apps don't really support us when that happens.

So I think the idea around the committee was that this one thing that we have in common, which is a different version of violence in the workplace, we can unite around. We can see each other, make space for each other, help each other and use what we experience, how we want it to change, as an organizing tool — to build more power for a movement and to try and bring real change to these very serious issues that we are experiencing.

BERNICE

Did you find that your experiences as a gig worker were changing due to your involvement with Foodsters United?

JENNIFER

My mindset changed, and that changed the way that I looked at my work and the way that I worked. But I think that was a change for the better.

BERNICE

How did your mindset change?

JENNIFER

Before I joined the union, when I would go to work, I felt isolated and ashamed of my work because, like apps say, it's not real work. It's not a real job. I'm not a real worker. And there's a lot of shame in our community, in the world, around not being able to earn enough money to pay bills, to buy food, to do the things that we need. It's hard. We internalize it.

When I joined the union and I began to organize with others who are going through the same thing that I was, struggling with the same thoughts that I was, we would talk them out. We would go, "Hey, you know what? That's not logical. We shouldn't feel bad about that. That's not on us. That's on the app. That's on our boss." I was able to understand that the anger and the frustration that we felt was reasonable and fair for us to feel angry. And then I had a community of people who together wanted to discuss and think about the consequences of this job, how it makes us feel, how it makes us think, how it impacts our lives, the risk that we live with.

And I imagine, identify a vision, a future that's different. And in envisioning a future, a path to a future that was different, I think individually that made it a lot easier to live my life and not feel like what I was doing was

something to be ashamed of, because it wasn't. That narrative — that we're not real workers, this isn't real work — is a narrative established by an international corporation to make a little bit more profit each year.

I felt more confident, and I grew, and I grew with my coworkers. We helped heal each other. We helped make space for each other. And we helped each other learn how to envision something past that future that we were envisioning unionizing Foodora — we were also dreaming of what happens after that. It feels good to have hope and optimism. And when you find hope and optimism within other people, it's very meaningful.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

This hope and optimism is what kept them fighting for their rights as workers. And in 2020, a breakthrough: Foodsters United in the Greater Toronto Area fought to be recognized by the Ontario Labour Relations Board as true employees, so that they could unionize — a right denied to independent contractors. And they won.

The Ontario Labour Relations Board agreed that they had been misclassified as independent contractors and therefore they should have the right to unionize. They were the first group of app-based workers in Canada to win that right. And 89% of Foodora couriers voted in favor of unionizing. For Jennifer, who had played a key role in this fight, she was happy but knew there was so much more work to be done.

JENNIFER

When we opened that ballot box and we got that certificate that we'd won our union, we'd won our local, that almost 90% of us voted for it, there was nobody who was like, "Oh, okay, we're done, back to work." Who cares about work? We're not going to hold that certificate and be like we don't want workers' rights anymore. No. We spent months talking and organizing and strategizing and planning on what would next steps look like for us. What would a future where we have workers' rights look like?

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Shortly after the Ontario Labour Relations Board decision, Foodora suddenly declared bankruptcy in Canada. But Foodsters organizing, backed by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, won a historic settlement in excess of $3 million that went to all Canadian couriers who suddenly lost their jobs. In 2021, Foodsters United became Gig Workers United, who are now organizing to support delivery workers on all apps across the Greater Toronto Area. Also that year, Jennifer was elected president of Gig Workers United. She told me that the fight against misclassification isn't new; it is ongoing and happens to many types of workers.

Next, I asked Jennifer about some of the challenges she faces in her work. What has surprised her the most about her journey organizing for workers' rights and what keeps her going? She uses a few acronyms. WSIB is referring to the Workplace Safety Insurance Board, which is the workplace compensation board for regulated workplaces in Ontario, and OHSA is the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

BERNICE

I can imagine that this community organizing work that you're doing as part of Gig Workers United, it must be challenging and there must be a lot of significant hurdles you experience. What is the most significant challenge you faced in this work, would you say?

JENNIFER

As a gig worker, as a precarious worker, something that a lot of us talk about is your job is precarious, which means you don't know if you're going to have one tomorrow. And how much money you earn is precarious, and so access to things like health care, food or housing are equally as precarious. Those things make sense to talk about, but there are more ripples.

So, if I'm working and I'm delivering like 10 to 12 hours a day and it's an incredibly physical job, I come home, I'm really sore, it's hard to sleep. And something that we talk about is that we sacrifice sleep so that we can work, or we can't sleep because we're so tired and burnt out from the work. So there is a justice issue for workers around lack of sleep. Justice issues around lack of food seem to make a lot of sense to folks, but sleep is also equally as important. As a gig worker, I don't have paid sick days. I don't have any sick days. I either go to work or I don't.

It's unclear, it's fuzzy, it's grey, if or how we can file WSIB. Everyone's had different experiences. It's very difficult as one person to file a complaint. Maybe it's an OHSA complaint or a complaint with the Ontario Labour Board around employment standards violations. It's very difficult as one person to file a complaint against a multinational corporation that has enough money for nine lawyers to fight back against you.

So what that means is that we delivered during the pandemic without PPE, without access to sick days, without a safety net. And most of us being precarious workers, that means that what I was experiencing when I first met that street outreacher from Foodsters United — I didn't make enough money that day and so I had to figure out how to make up more money later in the week — I can't control how much money I make. So during the pandemic, if I got COVID, if I couldn't work, I had to confront: I can't work, which means I won't be able to pay rent, what do I do? And there is nowhere to go. There is no app who cares. There's nobody to ask for support. That's what that looks like.

Another problem here in Ontario, in Canada, with misclassification is that the burden to prove that a worker is misclassified is on the worker. And so, after the fact, while struggling in this job that is not working for me, for us, we have to then prove that we're misclassified before we can seek and win rights and justice.

Gig workers' Bill of Rights

Gig Workers United. [n.d.].

Public health practitioners and organizations can support and amplify the grassroots call for change coming from gig workers for fairer, safer, healthier employment conditions. This bill of rights was developed by gig workers and lists the public policy changes needed to guarantee protection, fairness and non-discrimination for gig workers.

BERNICE

So what drew you to that role as president? What made you think, "Yes, I'm ready to step into this role"?

JENNIFER

I wasn't certain, I felt precarious because — maybe I wasn't listening enough — but I felt bashful to say that I wanted to be considered for this responsibility. But workers voted for me, and I continue to be deeply grateful for this opportunity. It's very meaningful.

BERNICE

Has there been a moment when you doubted you were the right person for this work?

JENNIFER

I don't really have moments like that, but I think the reason why I don't might be interesting. The way that we organize is rooted in collectivism and democratic collectivism. So, if I have a moment where I don't feel super confident today or the plan doesn't feel as possible today as it did yesterday, there's just this enormous group of people who are like, "Oh yeah, let's talk about it. Let's talk it out. Let's figure it out." And so I never feel like I am doing something. We are doing something. I never feel like I shouldn't be here or I'm not

doing the right thing or I'm not confident, because we are doing it. And if there's a gap, if there's something that isn't working, if there's something that feels uncertain, then we will fix it.

And that to me feels like why I don't ever have moments where I feel like I shouldn't be here or I'm not doing a good job, because it's not me. I'm just one of many people who are here doing this. If any of us feels like we're not doing a good job, everyone else is ready to step in and be like, "No, let's talk it out. You're good."

BERNICE

Amid all of these challenges that you're experiencing doing this job, how have you found the courage to push through those challenges and stay on the path you're on and continue to fight against misclassification and all of the other injustices that you're facing?

JENNIFER

In 2021, Uber was lobbying for this really regressive labour policy. And the reason it didn't move forward is because Gig Workers United along with a lot of other allies in the labour movement, we fought back, we held ground. I would go, and I would be there with my coworkers, my comrades, and we would be organizing, building our union, seeing each other, validating each other. And I just didn't feel so bad anymore.

BERNICE

So it's your coworkers, the people that you're struggling with that's keeping you in this work, it sounds like.

JENNIFER

Yes. And I come back to: we do this work together and that's what makes this work powerful. So, if we're having a hard time, if we're having a bad day, if we're going through a struggle in our life, we have each other's backs. It means more than just fighting for our rights — it's care work at times too, caring for each other.

App employers are constantly asserting this narrative that they've gotten away with for a very long time now, that the people who do this work are not real workers, that we don't deserve real rights, that this isn't even a real job despite having been essential workers during a pandemic.

And so we say we deserve rights. We deserve *everything* that any other worker would have, and we're going to win it. We're going to win it through uniting together, standing together, learning from each other, helping each other learn, building each other up and taking back the power that we should have in a more equitable relationship with our employer.

> ***"…we say we deserve rights. We deserve everything that any other worker would have, and we're going to win it."***
>
> **JENNIFER SCOTT**

BERNICE

How has your journey as an organizer for workers' rights been different than what you imagined when you first joined Foodsters United in 2018?

JENNIFER

I didn't know that to organize a union, you have to grow as a person. I knew I'd have to learn things about unionizing, but I didn't know that I was going to learn things about myself and challenge myself. But that's also part of the beauty of this work. We get to become, we get an opportunity to learn from each other, to shape each other and to become somebody who is influenced and taught and patiently supported by dozens or hundreds of other people who are equally invested in your growth, in their growth and in our collective growth. And it's a very hopeful thing to be able to do with others.

BERNICE

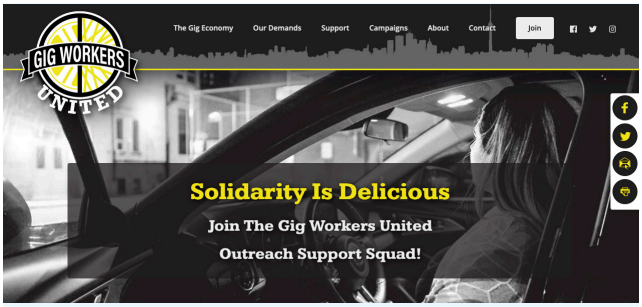
What have you challenged about yourself through this work?

JENNIFER

As an individual, on a personal level, patience — patience and generosity. I've learned to be able to see myself and see other people with more kindness than I did before. I think it's a really positive change. It makes existing and interacting with others feel a lot kinder. And I think, of all the things we could be, I would make a pitch that kind is maybe the most radical.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

When asked about what listeners could do to help support workers' rights, Jennifer talked about getting involved in order-in days. Order-in days entail reaching out to app-based workers by ordering through one of the apps and then talking to the delivery workers when they arrive about Gig Workers United. To find out more and how to get involved, visit gigworkersunited.ca.



Step-By-Step Guide io Participate In Order-In-Days

Gig Workers United. [n.d.].

"How's your shift going?" "Do you ever worry about getting injured?" "I support Gig Workers United!" This toolkit developed by gig workers at Gig Workers United is a starting point for community members to talk with the gig workers who deliver their food about their employment conditions and connect them with other workers who are organizing for fairer and safer employment and working conditions.

REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION

BERNICE (NARRATION)

The next part of our episode is the reflective conversation. In this segment, I chat with someone from the public health field to make the important connections from the main interview to current public health practice in Canada. Joining me for the reflective conversation is Dr. Monika Dutt. She is a medical officer of health in Newfoundland and Labrador, a family physician and member of the Decent Work and Health Network.

So what is decent work? Well, if precarious employment is the problem, decent work is the solution. Decent work is a concept that describes dignified and healthy employment for all. And public health professionals at the Decent Work and Health Network like Monika are advancing decent work by advocating for improved labour standards.

Monika has had the opportunity to listen to Jennifer's story. So let's jump in.

BERNICE

In the context of your work as a family doctor, is there a story that stands out for you in terms of really illustrating connections between work and health?

MONIKA DUTT

Oh, so many. Thinking about one that stuck out for me in particular: Decent Work and Health Network, we've been doing a lot of work around paid sick days and most of my patients don't have paid sick days, so I had somebody who was dealing with a lot of personal stresses. She had actually lost her home in a fire. She was dealing with that. She also worked in a low-wage job in retail. And she had come to me for a note for work, which is a whole other discussion about people really shouldn't need to have to come to their doctors to get a note for short-term illnesses.

But, even though she was dealing with all these pieces and she had no paid sick days, her employer was still saying, "If you are off sick, you need to get a note." So it just seemed like an incredibly sad situation that you have to deal with all these pieces in your life, plus you need to get a paid sick note, plus you're not getting paid when you're sick. She was struggling with all of those pieces as well as not having paid sick days, not having even a living wage from the job that she had. So she really had left an impression on me.

BERNICE

I can imagine. And did you feel limited in your role as a family doctor to be able to address the root of the issue there?

MONIKA

Oh, absolutely. You deal with so many health issues that you know cannot be dealt with just on an individual basis. And, of course, I do the best I can as does anyone who works with people directly, and that's really important. But what we really need to do is change the environment and the legislation and the supports that people have on a much broader scale, which is why I spend most of my time focused on policy change and public health.

BERNICE

Thinking about precarious employment, I've heard it described before as a public health hazard. What makes it a public health hazard?

MONIKA

There's so much evidence now around how precarious work is bad for health. We know that it can impact your mental health, your physical health. There are many examples of how depression and other conditions like diabetes, heart disease, all of them

can be impacted from a range of different reasons. So whether it's because you're a low-wage worker and you don't have that income to be able to support your health. Even what Jennifer was speaking about, about impact on sleep. So her job as a gig worker making it much harder to get a good night's sleep, which impacts her health. So, as she talked about, things like your food security is impacted, your access to housing is impacted, all of those have impacts on your health. All these other pieces that may not be the first things people think of, that if you can't get a good night's sleep, it is absolutely going to impact your health.

There are so many aspects of precarious work, which is a broad category. It could be low wage, it could be temporary work, it could be the fact that you don't know if you have a shift tomorrow or not. So it's many different aspects that can contribute to poor health, but there are so many other layers around racism and health, because precarious work is so tied to, often, people who are Black or Indigenous or racialized.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

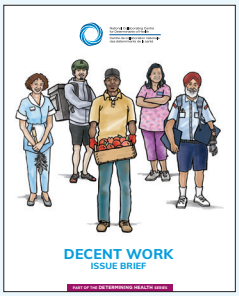
Let's unpack some of the layers Monika was referring to about racism and precarious work. Research shows that structural racism in the labour market contributes to an overrepresentation of Black and racialized workers in temporary, low-wage and dangerous work. This includes sectors such as long-term care and food processing plants.

Even in permanent work arrangements, research shows that Black and racialized workers have unequal access to adequate wages, benefits and sufficient hours. In Ontario, for example, racialized men earn 76 cents and racialized women 58 cents for every dollar earned by White men. We also know that colonialism and racism are structural barriers that negatively shape the experiences of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples' participation in work, who, for example, entered the pandemic with lower employment rates than non-Indigenous populations.

The National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health recently published a report about decent work, and in it, there are lots of connections made between racism and precarious work. So make sure you check it out to learn more.

Determining health: Decent work issue brief

NCCDH. [2022].



If precarious employment and hazardous working conditions are the problem, then decent work is the solution. This review of evidence from the NCCDH describes the impacts of employment as a determinant of health and health equity in Canada, and decent work as a critical solutions space for public health action.

BERNICE

I used to work as a public health nurse at a local public health unit. As we know, in public health practice, the fact that income is a social determinant of health is very widely recognized and discussed. But, in my experience, there has been very little focus on how precarious employment in particular is dangerous for health and well-being. And also what public health's responsibilities should be in tackling it and advancing decent work. Has that been your experience as well?

MONIKA

Yes, it has been. I think, like you said, the social determinants of health are fairly embedded into public health work. Now people understand that income, education, housing, all of these pieces impact health. Some places are already doing this, but, in general, we can be going more deeply into how other aspects of work impact health.

BERNICE

Why do you think there has been so little focus on precarious employment and decent work in public health?

MONIKA

Probably a few reasons. I know education is always only one piece of what's needed because sometimes people know the issues but may not be acting on them. But I think some of the work, say, Decent Work and Health Network and National Collaborating Centre do in terms of trying to expand a conversation is really important. So understanding that there is a public health role in terms of, yes, income is a determinant of health, but what are all the pieces that contribute to someone's income and what can we be doing about that? That needs to be more clearly outlined for public health or by public health. And I think that is slowly happening.

I think some parts of it come with trying to navigate whose role is what because labour standards typically don't fall under, say, public health legislation or the direct control of public health. The structure in public health across the country is often quite different, so there are different ways in which public health can be influencing policy changes. So depending on the structure, you need to figure out where are the places that, in public health, we can be influencing those changes.

But I do think there are so many aspects of employment and work that impact health that we do need to be looking at what are the different pieces — for example, looking at gig workers and workers who may not be in as historically traditional kind of employment roles — that we need to evolve to think about what are the health impacts of that type of work. And even for me, in the last few years, that was learning for me because I had not thought so much about what are the public health considerations for gig workers. That's been part of my learning too, and so I've now been integrating that more into my own public health work.

BERNICE

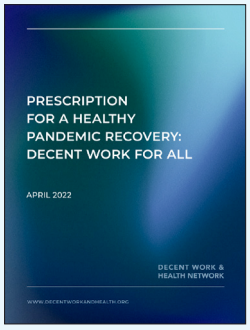
You started to get into some of the different pieces we would miss if we had solely a focus on income as a social determinant of health. Do you mind expanding on that a little bit? What does the public health workforce need to know about precarious employment and decent work?

MONIKA

I think there are probably a few pieces. One is some of the evidence around it, so the sharing of that information is really important to really be able to speak to — we know the mental health impacts, the physical health impacts — to be able to speak to that because that helps to give credibility when you are wanting to make those policy changes. I think a better understanding of some of the legislative aspects. So I've learned also from some of my work in the last few years, what is the legislation that either is in place that is harmful, what are some of the changes that are needed? And that's helpful because they're really concrete pieces.

Prescription for a Healthy Pandemic Recovery: Decent Work For All

Decent Work & Health Network. [2022].



This report by the Decent Work & Health Network presents evidence-based recommendations for healthy wages and hours, 10 permanent paid sick days, and adequate workplace protections to improve working conditions for all workers, and address widening health inequities.

So with something like paid sick days, knowing that this is the number that is the most useful, they need to be accessible in a certain way. Some of the criteria that have been put out saying this is what we need around paid sick days has been really helpful for me to be able

to say these are some of the specific policy changes that public health should be looking at and trying to advance.

And I think, lastly, just really strengthening those connections to communities and community organizations, which is already often a core part of public health, but I think it's always something we can be doing better. And really learning from and often, as much as possible, taking the lead from community groups that are living these issues. So going back to Jennifer who was talking about how not only was she organizing, but she's living the impacts that these unfair practices and policies have on her life. I'm not living those impacts, so I need to be able to as much as possible learn from her and other workers, and really listen and integrate and make sure that we are working directly with people who are most impacted.

BERNICE

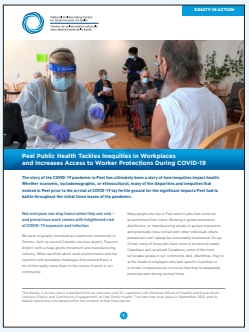
So to get really concrete for a moment, what would be some bold actions that public health could take in terms of public health practice, policy and research regarding precarious employment and decent work?

MONIKA

I think one of our key roles is understanding our communities, and so the data and evidence piece is something that we often are key to be able to contribute. But we need to be asking those questions and looking at the data. So, for example, in the pandemic somewhere like Peel Region in Ontario that could specifically say that we know that people who were in precarious work situations were more likely to go to work sick because they didn't have any other option. So as much as workers know that's happening, sometimes it may be frustrating that you also need to collect that data to prove to some people it actually is a problem. I do think that's really important. I think whatever area we're in — I work in smaller jurisdictions where there's not always a lot of data available — we may need to take extra steps to be collecting information from community members, reaching out to community groups.

Peel Public Health tackles inequities in workplaces and increases access to worker protections during COVID-19. Equity in Action

NCCDH. [2022].



Peel Public Health found that 1 in 4 cases in the COVID-19 second wave were people going to work symptomatic who often faced the impossible choice of staying home or getting paid. This Equity in Action story from the NCCDH documents the approaches used by Peel Public Health and partners to better protect precarious workers, such as specific workplace protections, low- barrier vaccination clinics, isolation housing, socio-demographic data collection and use, and paid sick day policy advocacy.

BERNICE

That's a great point. I imagine, not only do we need to collect data on the problem in terms of precarious employment, but it would also be important to be able to collect data regarding possible solutions or interventions. So what would data around decent work look like?

MONIKA

Looking again at something like the pandemic, and I think it's also applicable to other areas because — especially for communicable diseases, so meaning infections that may pose a risk to others in the public — we often do interviews with people. And lots of people who have had COVID-19 infection probably got a call from public health, at least early on, and were asked lots of questions. If we knew what some of the areas are that people are struggling with, say it's paid sick days, a question we could be asking is, "Do you have paid sick days?" And there are many aspects to that too because we're also asking people personal questions, and it always needs to be voluntary, and there are lots of things that need to be considered.

BERNICE

So, in addition to supporting some of those policy pieces through collecting data, what are the other ways that public health can be involved in terms of trying to advance those policies that are needed to help support decent work?

MONIKA

I think public health standards are really important. I've worked in jurisdictions where, say, in Ontario where there are clearer standards, and there are always places that things can be improved, but I've also worked in places where we don't. In Newfoundland and Labrador, we're working on those standards right now. So I think having something that clearly outlines that this is a role of public health is important.

"So those policy recommendations, they exist. I think we can be better at supporting them and making sure they are part of what we are saying is needed from a public health perspective."

DR. MONIKA DUTT

Organizations like Justice for Workers and Decent Work and Health Network, they have clearly outlined a lot of really excellent policy changes that are needed that would be beneficial for health. So whether it's changing how gig workers are classified so that they have access to basic standards that will support their health, whether it's a decent wage, whether it's immigration status, which we know that if you are undocumented, if you lack a stable immigration status, that impacts your health. So those policy recommendations, they exist. I think we can be better at supporting them and making sure they are part of what we are saying is needed from a public health perspective.

BERNICE

In your time exploring and trying to address the connections between work and health, have you seen any exciting breakthroughs in public health action when it comes to advancing decent work?

MONIKA

I'll use paid sick days again just because that's something that I've been most involved with, Decent Work and Health Network, but then also have tried to be kind of a bridge with public health in different jurisdictions. And we've seen some movement. I think you always want more, but to even have some of the temporary programs that came up and changes in some jurisdictions towards permanent paid sick days, I think that's all connected to the fact that workers and sometimes public health have been part of creating that pressure.

Advocacy wins – Paid sick days, public support and sustainable change. Equity in Action

NCCDH. [2022].

Health and public health practitioners have social capital, power and opportunity to collaborate with precarious workers and advocate for fairer and healthier employment policies. This Equity in Action story published by the NCCDH documents the work done by the Decent Work and Health Network — a group of health professionals supporting grassroots worker organizers — to successfully advocate for paid sick days and raise awareness about precarious employment as a determinant of health.

BERNICE

How does that feel for you to see some of the movement around that?

MONIKA

It's always a mix. I think it's always fantastic when there is some movement and you get excited about that. But knowing that it needs to be so much more than what's there can also be really frustrating when you look at what seems to be some of the slowness of change.

Celebrate successes that come up, but then also come back to: that doesn't change what this person, what these workers are experiencing right now, who still lack the protections that they need, and there's still more work to do. So we need to keep that in mind that, yes, there have been changes that may not have happened if there wasn't this strong community voice and often a strong voice from public health, but there are still many more steps that that need to happen to truly have decent work.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Thanks to Jennifer and Monika for walking us through how much work impacts health. Jennifer talked to us about how gig workers are real workers and they're fighting against misclassification for profit. Misclassification and precarious work are hazardous for workers' health, and we all have a role to play in supporting these workers. Visit gigworkersunited.ca to learn more about Jennifer's work.

And for Monika, she talked to us about the links between precarious work and public health and what public health can do to take action: working with worker organizers and community groups, and understanding legislation and how factors beyond income impact workers' health. You can learn more at decentworkandhealth.org.

Our takeaway: workers' rights are part of healthy public policy, and change is possible. Check out the episode description to take action on work and health.

REBECCA

Thanks for listening to Mind the Disruption, a podcast by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Visit our website nccdh.ca to learn more about the podcast and our work.

This episode has been produced by Carolina Jimenez, Bernice Yanful and me, Rebecca Cheff, with technical production and original music by Chris Perry. If you enjoyed this episode, tell a friend and subscribe. We have more stories on the way of people challenging the status quo to build a healthier, more just world.

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