



## BERMUDA PUBLIC SERVICES UNION

### PRESS STATEMENT

By: President Bro. Armell Thomas

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At a press conference held on Tuesday, March 31, 2020, the Premier, the Hon. E. David Burt JP, MP warned Public Officers that they will not be paid if they fail to report to work during the Covid-19 crisis. This message came after it was alleged that transport workers at the Department of Public Transport (DPT) downed tools. The Bermuda Public Services Union (BPSU), as the representative of some of the Public Officers at the DPT, would like to take this opportunity to provide the public with some clarity on this matter.

In mid-March, a meeting was held to provide DPT employees with information regarding the impact of the pandemic on public transportation. On Monday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, the Government's Health and Safety Officer advised the DPT's Health & Safety Committee that bus drivers must not engage in work without the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). While not essential for all workers, PPE for frontline employees provides protection and helps to prevent the further spread of the virus to the wider public. As per the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations 2009, Bermuda's employers are obligated to provide their workers with the PPE needed to keep them safe while performing their jobs.

After originally discontinuing public transport to ensure public safety and limit the transmission of the virus, the Government subsequently called bus drivers back to work to assist with the transport of frontline medical staff to and from the hospital. However, bus drivers were not provided with PPE and, as a result, they opted to follow the advice provided by Government's own Health and Safety Officer and refuse to work.

It is worth noting that Clause 7A (1) of Bermuda's Occupational Safety and Health Act 1982 states: "...an employee who has reasonable cause to believe that the condition of an article or a place of employment presents an imminent and serious danger to his health or life shall have the right to refuse to work." In such instances, Clause 7B lays out the procedure for both employees and employers to follow. Clause 7C outlines the protection for employees against unjust disciplinary measures imposed by employers as a result of refusing to work on the grounds of Clause 7A (1).

As the representative for DPT's bus drivers, this is a matter for our sister Union, the Bermuda Industrial Union, to address. However, while BPSU members did not down tools, the bus drivers' work stoppage has directly impacted them. For example, BPSU members responsible for DPT's dispatch were re-assigned to provide dispatch services for the Royal Bermuda Regiment.

It appears that this work stoppage was the result of a breakdown in communications; the Government's Health and Safety Officer's insistence that bus drivers do not work without PPE contradicts the Government's failure to provide PPE. Bermuda's bus drivers are understandably concerned for their personal well-being as well as the well-being of the members in their household. The BPSU encourages the Government to foster better lines of communication with both Public Officers and the Unions that represent them. Effective communication between parties is an important skill in any environment, however, during a national crises, it is essential. With this in mind, the BPSU reiterates its call to Government to bring together a taskforce of the Island's Unions and employers to help co-ordinate the national effort.

The BPSU supports the Premier's plea to Public Officers that they must *"move beyond the barriers of their job in order to provide service to the people of Bermuda"* and *"make every effort to ensure those who need the services provided by Government can receive them."* To avoid any misunderstandings regarding workers obligations to their employers, the BPSU encourages its members to reach out to their Union for proper guidance if they have any concerns.

To protect Bermuda's future, the Government, Unions, employers and employees must actively and effectively work together during this crisis; together, we will prevail.