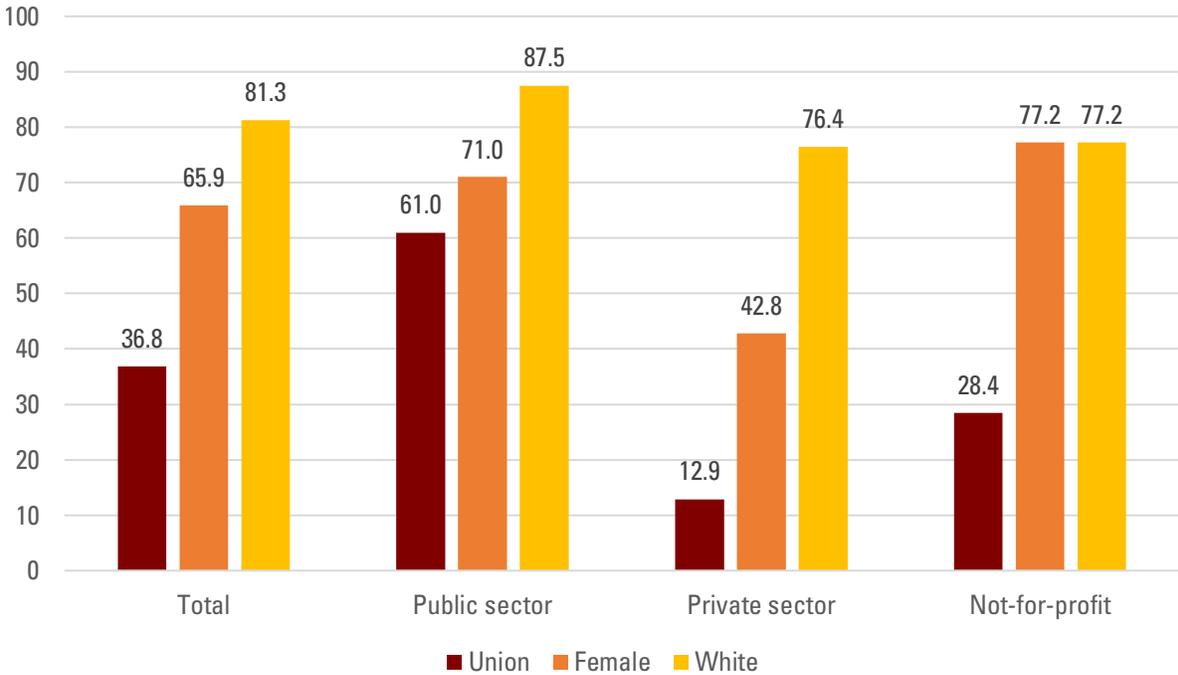


COVID and Workplace Dynamics

Worker Demographics

Nearly 37 percent of respondents who were employed during COVID were union members, which is above the unionization rate in 2020 for both Canada (31.3 percent) and Ontario (27.9 percent). This over-representation of union members is related to the fact that nearly two-thirds of our respondents were working in the public or not-for-profit sectors, both of which are more unionized than the private sector. Just over 80 percent of participants who were employed during COVID described themselves as white and two-thirds described themselves as female.

Chart 1: Worker demographics by gender, race, sector and union status (%)



Note: 440 respondents indicated their union status and 411 the sector they worked in. 143 were in the private sector, 199 in the public sector and 69 in the not-for-profit sector.

Changes in Work Organization and Safety Measures

Employers in both union and non-union workplaces took numerous actions to protect the health of their employees. Three-quarters of unionized workers and two-thirds of non-union workers were allowed to work from home. Just over 60 percent of unionized workers and just over 50

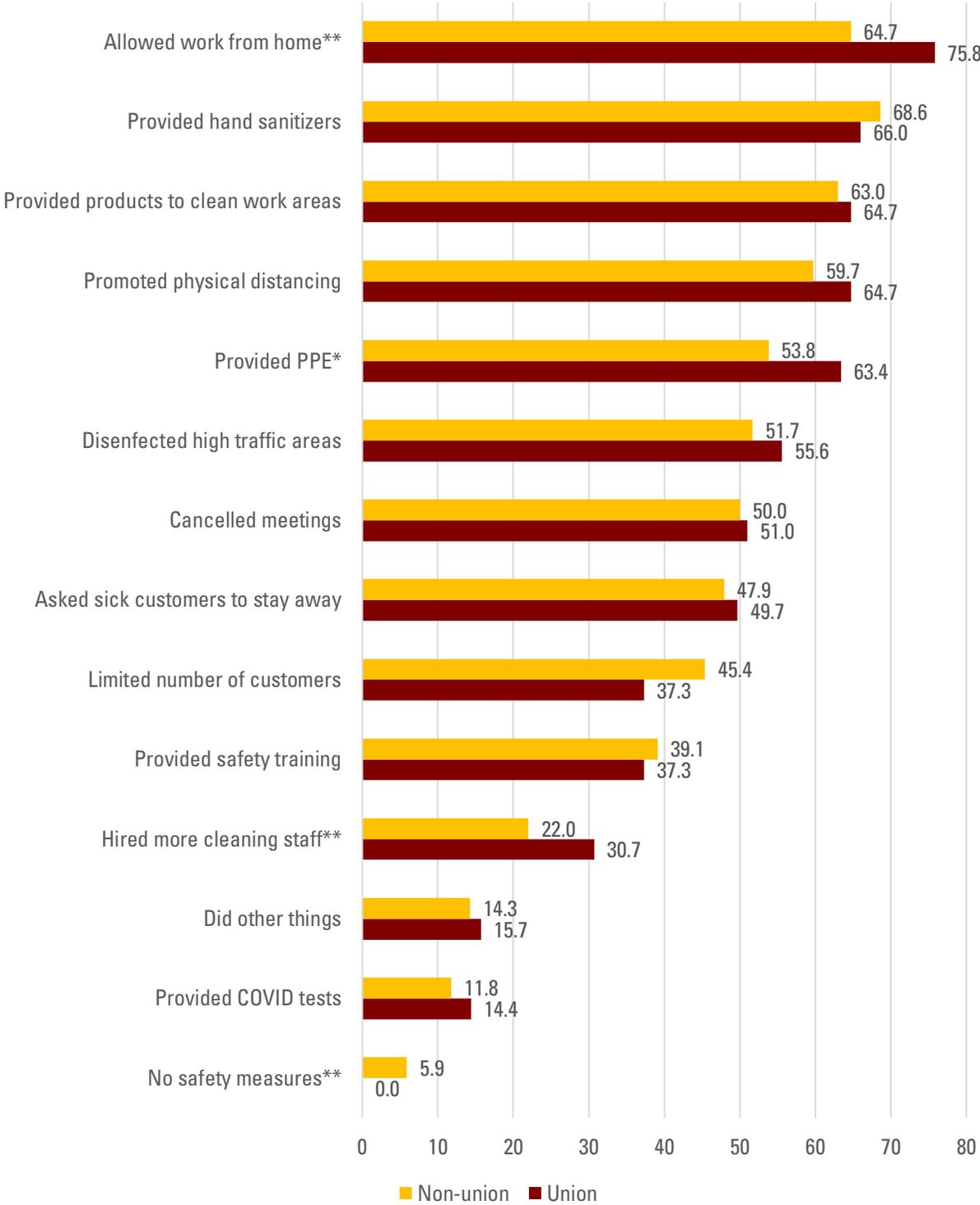
percent of non-union workers reported their employer provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Two-thirds of both union and non-union workers reported their employer provided sanitizing dispensers and/or hired more cleaning staff. However, some respondents highlighted that these measures were implemented in a crisis and that existing infection control policies had to be thoroughly rethought to deal effectively with the scale of the problem confronted.

*Before COVID-19, as a professional in the field of health and safety in the transportation industry, I was not forewarned that the company I work for would be considered essential. We had a basic policy, nothing near to the extent it is now and we were not prepared to the fullest. It is still very hard to procure supplies for our mechanics in regards to half-mask filters. I'm hoping that after the pandemic there will be textbook measures applied to ensure there's a contingent plan for prevention. Also re-directing supplies and causing panic shopping is dangerous ... a lot has been learned and **MUST** be explored for solutions — Middle-aged non-unionized woman in transportation*

Others reported that their employer's measures to reduce transmission were short-lived in the face of financial constraints and the desire to keep workplaces functioning.

Provincial government no longer allowing staff to self-distance in office because they want to increase the capacity while COVID numbers are at their highest. Office is at full staff and add to clientele ventilation issues in office. Feeling like money is the only factor with no regard to staff's safety — Older unionized woman in public sector retail

Chart 2: Employer work organization and safety measures, by union status (%)



* p<.10 ** p<=.05 ***p<=.001

Feelings of Safety and Anxiety at Work

Despite some changes to work organization and safety measures, a majority of both unionized and non-union workers reported feeling less safe, more anxious, and more stressed at work during COVID as compared to before. Interestingly, almost 76 percent of unionized workers reported feeling more unsafe at work than before COVID, compared to just under 65 percent of their non-unionized counterparts. This can be partly accounted for by the fact that a higher proportion of union workers (43.2 percent) tended to be essential workers as compared to non-union workers (36.1 percent). Some workers spoke of the stress of having every process at work changed because of the pandemic.

I work for a school board so from March to June I was lucky enough to work from home and still be paid my full wages ... I came back to work the beginning of September (in school learning) and it has been very stressful. The students (and staff) must all wear masks, social distance, and wash hands/sanitize consistently. Some students really struggle with this and give me a hard time when I try to enforce the expectations. I work with students in grades 6, 7, & 8, who you think would know better and be able to do this, but they don't care. It is making our jobs a lot harder, adds more stress to our school year. Lots of parents across the province (and country) have stated the students need to be in school due to mental health reasons, but I have seen the opposite. Since returning to school the mental health of our students has diminished and many have opted for at home learning, and many who have stayed in class have been connected to some kind of mental health support. They are quickly learning school is not fun this year, between wearing a mask all day, having to social distance from their friends, staying in their seat, etc. — Middle-aged unionized woman in education

For many essential workers, then, anxiety was driven by the attitudes and behaviours of those to whom they were delivering services. Having to work around those who did not pay attention to or believe in the necessity of physical distancing measures created heightened anxiety about contracting the virus and conditions for workplace conflict and abuse.

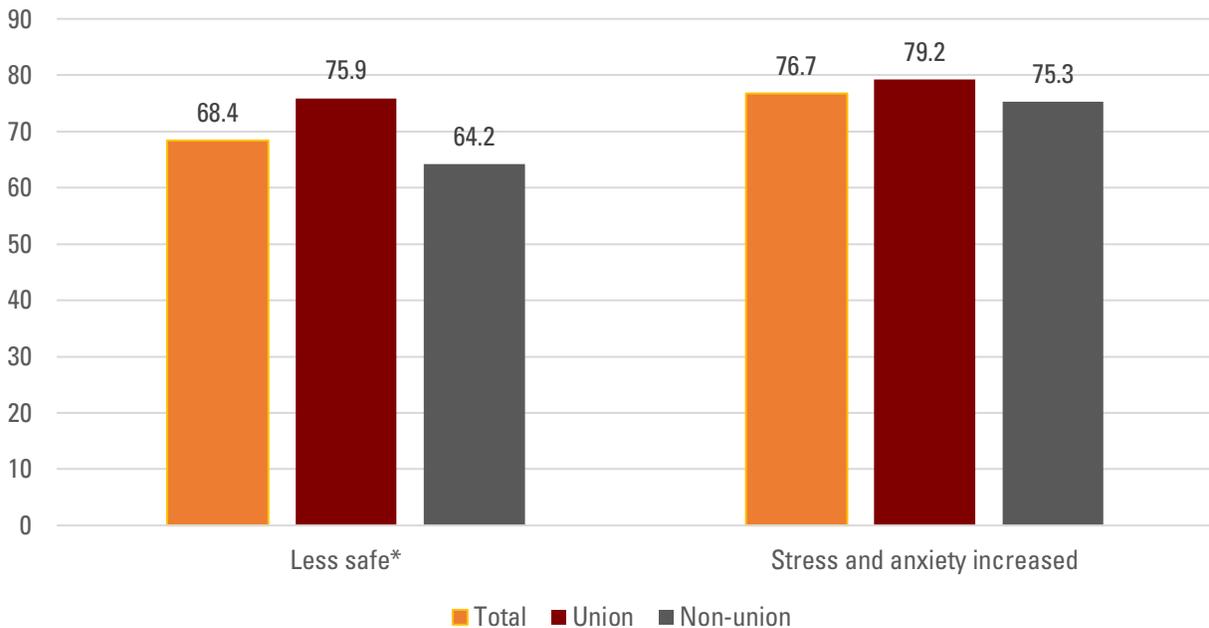
During COVID-19 I have been verbally and physically assaulted by customers. Working in the retail sector I have had to deal with a lot of

customers who do not pay attention to social distancing and refuse to wear a mask by stating I have a condition ... This is a huge failure on our government by letting people simply state they have a condition—
Middle-aged non-unionized woman in retail

For some workers, simply the fact of having to leave home and the relative safety of isolation generated new anxieties and exacerbated old ones. This heightened sense of risk was especially acute for workers who must travel on public transit for work and must engage with others at work.

Pre-COVID was doing great work to strengthen my mental health and now have new anxiety issues. Leaving home is difficult and returning to work is a very triggering concept—
Middle-aged woman in construction receiving CERB

Chart 3: Feelings of safety at work, by union status (%)

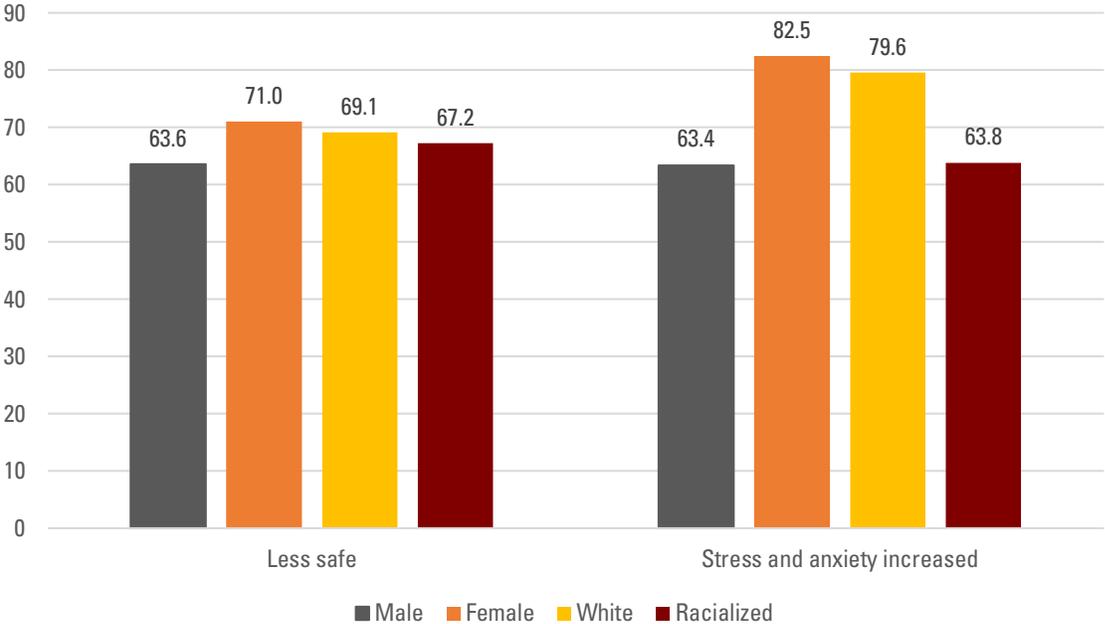


* p<.10 ** p<=.05 ***p<=.001

For a whole host of reasons, then, three-quarters of both union and non-union workers indicated they felt more stressed at work than they did before COVID.

Neither the gender nor race of respondents had any significant impact on how safe they felt at work. There were significant differences in reported frequency of increased stress at work. Women were more likely than men to report increased stress and anxiety, while white workers were more likely to report increased stress than racialized workers.

Chart 4: Feelings of safety at work, by gender and race (%)



Negative Changes to Working Conditions

Overall, one in four of both unionized and non-unionized workers reported some sort of negative change to their working conditions or interactions with their employer during COVID (Chart 5). In general, non-union workers reported more negative changes to working conditions and interactions during COVID than unionized workers. Union status helped to shield workers from the most negative impacts of workplace changes made by employers, although it did not eliminate them. Some of these outcomes around working hours, wages and workload are related to the fact that non-union workers tended to be concentrated in non-essential private sector workplaces, while unionized workers tended to be employed in essential public or not-for-profit services. Around 10 percent of unionized workers were forced to take vacations. Just over 10 percent of

non-unionized workers had issues getting paid on time. Male and female respondents and white and racialized respondents were equally likely to report negative interactions with their employer.

My engagement on a well-managed contract ended mid-October. I left the following new contract mid-November because of unsafe COVID safety practices. I am currently working occasionally and considering a different job — Middle-aged unionized man receiving CERB

My workplace is a crowded elementary school with no physical distancing and inconsistent use of PPE. Workers are terrified and have no confidence in existing measures to keep anyone safe — Middle-aged unionized male educator

Just under 17 percent of non-union workers, but only 3 percent of unionized workers, reported a reduction in their wages compared to before COVID (Chart 6). Over 30 percent of non-union workers reported their hours were reduced during COVID, while just over 14 percent of unionized workers reported the same. However, just under 4 percent of unionized workers and just under 9 percent of unionized workers reported their benefits were reduced during COVID. However, both unionized and non-union workers reported their workload increased during COVID (Chart 7).

Men and women reported similar changes to their terms of employment with two significant exceptions. Women were more likely to report their work tasks increased (55 percent) than men (42.1 percent). Women were also more likely to report their work effort increased during COVID (60.9 percent) than men (45.7 percent).

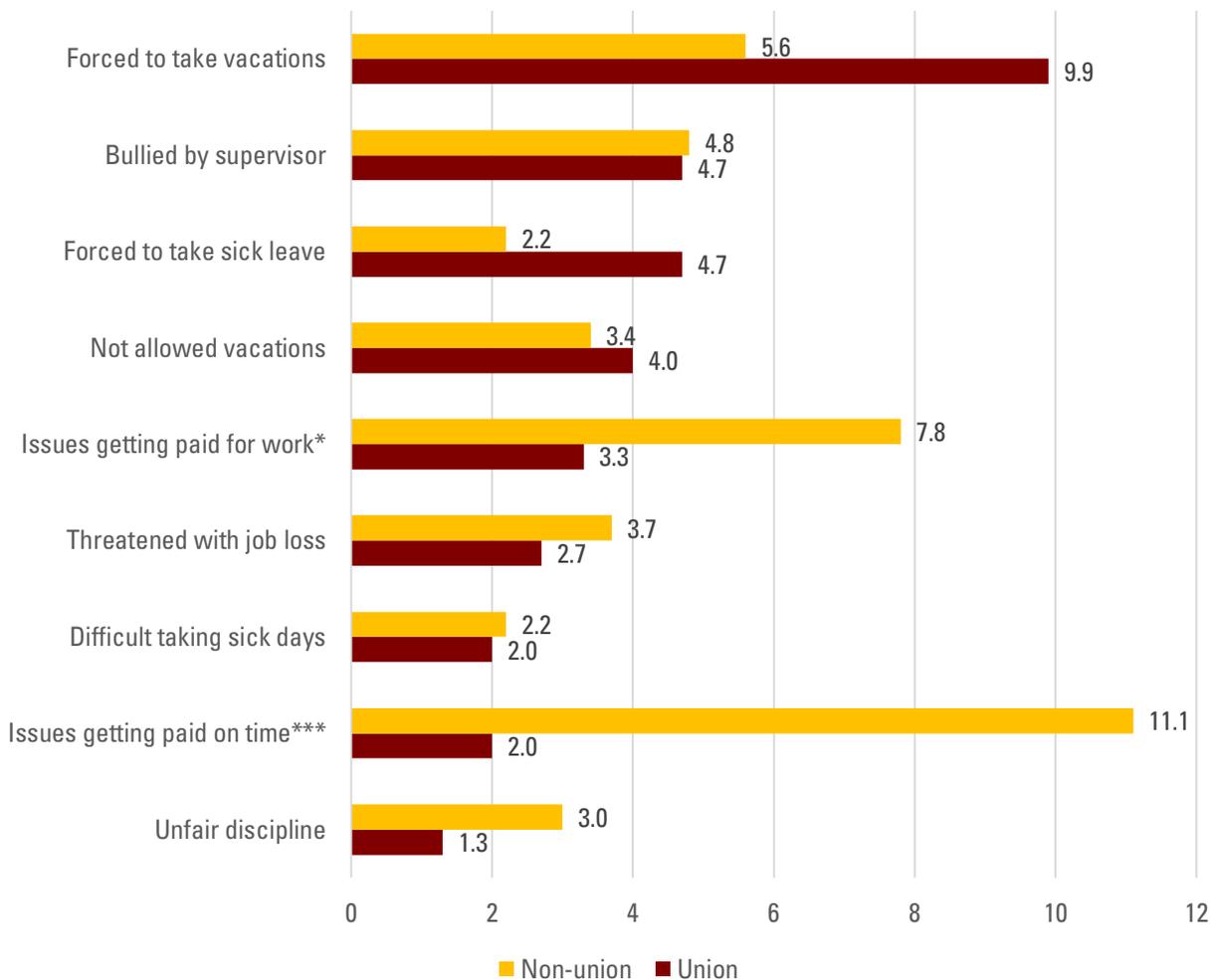
White and racialized respondents reported similar changes in their terms of employment with two exceptions. Racialized respondents were more likely to report their wage rate or salary decreased because of COVID (23.2 percent) than white workers (9.1 percent). Racialized respondents were also more likely to report reduced work hours because of COVID (35.7 percent) than white workers (22.8 percent).

Although a minority of respondents reported negative changes in their work relationships, those that did pointed to real shifts in the power dynamic between employers and workers. The conditions of mass unemployment made workers feel less able to say no to employer demands and in some cases boosted employers' sense of power.

Employer made employees feel like they owed them for keeping them on payroll (even though the government subsidized 75 percent of our wages). Staff were asked to take on more work while working from home — all for

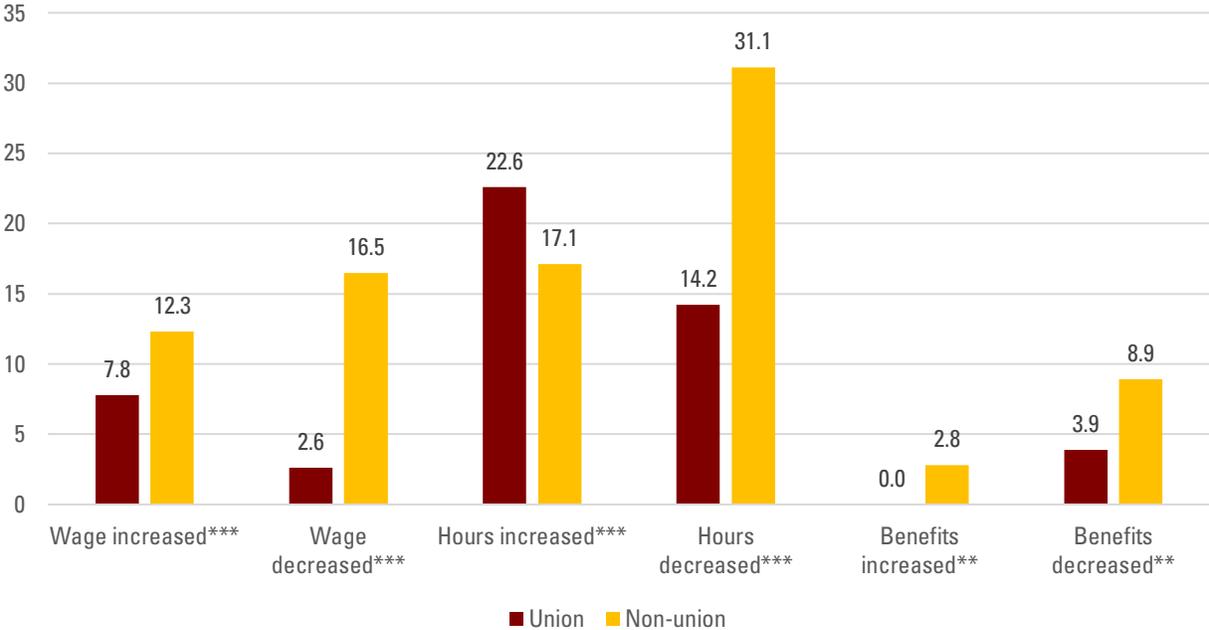
the same pay. Hours were reduced so took home less pay. Employer tells staff none of you are getting Christmas bonus this year because your bonus is you had a job. Boss held employment over our heads as threat and a way to force us to do additional work for them — even tasks that were not work-related. COVID-19 had our boss on a power trip and exploiting workers — Middle-aged non-unionized female administrative employee

Chart 5: Interactions with employers during COVID by union status (%)



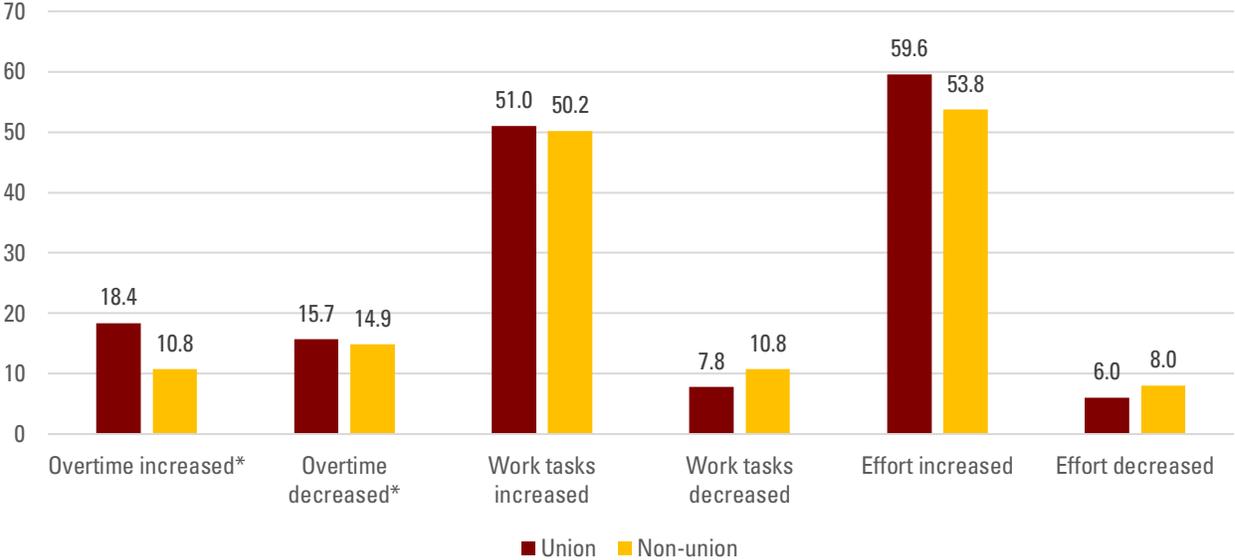
* p<.10 ** p<=.05 ***p<=.001

Chart 6: Changes to terms of employment during COVID by union status (%)



*p<.10 ** p<=.05 ***p<=.001

Chart 7: Changes to workload during COVID by union status (%)



*p<.10 ** p<=.05 ***p<=.001

This factsheet is co-authored by Mohammad Ferdosi, Dr. Peter Graefe, Dr. Wayne Lewchuk and Dr. Stephanie Ross, who are the co-investigators in the **COVID Economic and Social Effects Study (CESES)** at McMaster University. CESES is a collaboration between the School of Labour Studies, the Department of Political Science, and the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, and is supported by funding from MITACS and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. For other factsheets in the series, go to the CESES project website: <https://labourstudies.mcmaster.ca/research/covid19-impact>