

Canada: Form rank-and-file committees to oppose COVID-19 back-to-work drive

By Roger Jordan and Keith Jones
6 May 2020

Starting this week, large numbers of businesses in Quebec and Ontario, Canada's two most populous provinces, have begun to recall tens and soon hundreds of thousands of workers to their jobs, even though the novel coronavirus pandemic continues to rage.

Quebec—which is the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada with more than half of the national total of 62,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 2,398 of the 4,036 deaths—is also rushing to reopen elementary schools and daycares in stages over the coming two weeks. This is so it can force working parents back on the job.

The back-to-work drive is being spearheaded by Canada's hard-right premiers, Francois Legault in Quebec and Doug Ford in Ontario. They are defying the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other medical experts, so as to relaunch the process of profit extraction from workers' labour.

Quebec's top health officer, even as he promoted the province's back-to-work plan as necessary for economic "health," was forced to admit that it is a "risky bet" that will cost lives.

At the beginning of last week, Premier Ford declared that there would have to be 14 days of declining infections in Ontario before lockdown restrictions could be safely lifted. However, emboldened by Quebec's rapid reopening and no doubt under pressure from his big-business backers, he promptly did a volte-face and announced a plan to allow the construction industry and several other sectors to open on Monday.

The ostensibly "progressive" federal Liberal government is playing a critical role in implementing this precipitous return to work, which prioritizes capitalist profit over the lives of workers and their families. With the support of the unions, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is using hollow demagoguery about Canadians standing together and helping each other to cover up the predatory actions of the ruling elite. With consummate cynicism, Trudeau asserted last week, "Restarting our economy will be gradual and careful, and will be guided by science." Yet he has green-lighted the provinces' "reopening" decisions, even though they run roughshod over his own government's guidelines for restarting the economy.

The capitalist elite's drive for a premature reopening of nonessential businesses is deeply unpopular. In a recent poll, 90 percent of Canadians said lockdown measures should remain in place until a vaccine is available, or the health care system has been sufficiently strengthened, through a major injection of resources, to cope with a surge of COVID-19 cases. But anger and

outrage are inadequate to stop the precipitous back-to-work drive. What is required is the independent political mobilization of the working class to fight for policies that prioritize the saving of human lives and protecting working people from the pandemic's economic fallout, not corporate profit and investor returns.

Absent the independent intervention of the working class, workers face a ruinous choice between risking their health and lives by returning to work, or being driven into destitution, and ultimately hunger and homelessness.

Big business, its media mouthpieces, and the Conservative official opposition are already complaining that the makeshift programs the Trudeau government has set up to provide temporary relief to the more than 8 million workers who have lost their jobs—the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the recently adopted Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB)—are too generous. Both Conservative leader Andrew Scheer and Manitoba Tory Premier Brian Pallister have denounced the CERB, with Pallister, whose government is in the process of laying off thousands of public sector workers, declaring that he is "fighting against a federal program" that is "paying people to stay out of the workforce."

The C.D. Howe Institute, arguably the country's best-connected business think tank, published a report last week that demanded the CERB be cut back because it acts as a "disincentive to work." *National Post* columnist John Ivison complained that the \$2,000 a month CERB, which does not even cover the cost of renting a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto and Vancouver, is a "lavish handout" that risks turning workers into "welfare slackers."

To force workers back on the job under unsafe conditions, governments and employers intend to threaten them with the loss of the CERB and all entitlement to Employment Insurance. This task will be made all the easier given the Trudeau government's underfunding of the CERB program, which has reportedly paid out more than 60 percent of its meagre \$35 billion budget less than two months after its creation.

Quebec's Labour Minister Jean Boulet has repeatedly said that workers who fail to return to work when ordered by their employer will lose their government benefits. Asked at his Monday press conference what he thinks of Boulet's remarks, Premier Legault endorsed them.

Throughout the pandemic, the focus of the Trudeau government, like the Trump administration and Europe's governments, has been on safeguarding the wealth and investments of the rich and

super-rich. Either directly, or through the Bank of Canada, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and other state institutions, the Liberals have injected more than \$650 billion into the financial markets, banks and big business. Workers, meanwhile, have been given rations-style relief. Similarly, the Liberal government has committed only a pittance—less than \$4 billion—to strengthening Canada’s health care system, which has been ravaged by decades of cuts, and to seeking a vaccine or other treatment for COVID-19.

The ruling elite views the inevitable surge in cases and deaths that will result from a premature return to work as a price worth paying to boost corporate profit. Blurting out what government and business leaders across the country are saying in private, Premier Legault declared April 23 that “herd immunity ... is the best way out of the current pandemic.”

All experts agree that pursuing a policy of “herd immunity” will result in the deaths of tens, or more likely, hundreds of thousands of Canadians.

Workers should reject the implicit claim that lies behind the reckless drive to reopen the economy—that there is not enough money to support them through the pandemic. The \$650 billion that has been turned over to the banks and financial markets would be sufficient to provide every one of Canada’s 37 million residents with a cheque for \$17,500.

The New Democrats and trade unions are intimately involved in the attempt to swindle and bully workers back to their jobs in the midst of a pandemic. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) played a leading role in designing the CERB, as part of what it touts as a “collaborative front” with government and business. And both the NDP and unions have joined in the conspiracy of silence over the vast sums that have been turned over to the banks, business, and investors—sums that are claims on value extracted from the working class and that in the future will be invoked in justifying a new and even deeper round of austerity measures.

Events at the Cargill meatpacking plant in High River, Alberta show just how far the union bureaucracy is willing to go in defending its collaboration with the bosses and state. The plant has recorded over 900 infections and one death, with seven workers remaining in hospital. However, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) opposed job action to prevent the reopening of the plant this Monday, joining management and Alberta’s United Conservative Party government in condemning a strike to protect workers’ lives as “illegal.”

Workers have already shown their determination to fight the ruling class’s criminal return-to-work policy. Lockdowns and social distancing measures were only adopted after a wave of strikes and protests across North America in March, including by Fiat-Chrysler workers at the 6,000-strong Windsor, Ontario, assembly plant. Strikes by delivery workers, transit workers, and medical staff in the US and internationally for personal protective equipment and other safety measures mark a direct challenge to the corporate elite’s policy of placing profits before workers’ lives.

Working people must reject all efforts by the ruling class to bully them back to work amid a raging pandemic. They must intervene with their own independent program to protect lives and

working people’s livelihoods—a program that begins with social needs, not what the capitalists claim they can afford. This program should include the rollout of mass testing, contact tracing, and quarantining to contain the virus; the shutting down of all nonessential industries with full pay for all workers affected; the provision of masks, gloves, and other personal protective equipment to medical staff and other essential workers; and the investment of billions in the health care system to provide the best possible care to those infected by the virus.

To fight for these demands, workers must create committees of action in their workplaces and neighbourhoods, independent of and in opposition to the trade unions and NDP, which for decades have suppressed the class struggle and are now aiding the ruling elite in dragooning workers back on the job.

None of these demands can be achieved under capitalism. The financial oligarchy that constitutes the core of the ruling class and to whom the politicians are beholden deems all money spent on workers’ livelihoods and social services to be a drain on its profits. Workers must wage a political struggle in alliance with their class brothers and sisters internationally to bring to power workers’ governments committed to socialist policies, so that society’s abundant resources can be redeployed to protect human life and workers’ livelihoods, rather than augmenting private profit and death.

The authors also recommend:

Workers at Cargill’s Alberta meatpacking plant forced back to work despite 935 infections
[5 May 2020]

Quebec workers denounce government’s rush to “reopen” the economy amid raging COVID-19 pandemic
[1 May 2020]

Canada’s coronavirus wage-subsidy tailored to propping up business, not protecting workers’ incomes
[14 April 2020]

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