

As unemployment soars to Depression-era levels, Canada's unions endorse reckless back-to-work drive

By Roger Jordan
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Canada's official unemployment rate has risen to its highest level in over four decades, after almost 3 million workers lost their jobs during March and the first three weeks of April.

Released last Friday, the latest employment figures from Statistics Canada revealed that 1.9 million workers lost their jobs in April alone. A further 1.1 million people were not included in StatCan's official jobless total because they have stopped looking for a job. Had these "discouraged workers" been included in StatCan's calculations, the jobless rate would be 17.8 percent rather than the current official figure of 13 percent.

As horrific as these numbers are, the scope of the social disaster produced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the manifest failure of Canada's big business governments to prepare for it is even greater. Nearly 7.6 million workers—equivalent to one-third of the country's total labour force—have applied for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the utterly inadequate, temporary \$2,000 per-month stipend that Ottawa is providing to workers who have lost their jobs or are unable to work due to the pandemic.

Certain regions of the country have been especially hard hit by the job losses. In Quebec, unemployment more than doubled from 8.1 percent in March to 17 percent in April. The greater Toronto region lost over 500,000 jobs, while the jobless rate in British Columbia rose from 7.2 percent to 11.5 percent. More than one in four young people are now out of work, with the official jobless rate for 15 to 24-year-olds surpassing 27 percent.

The ruling elite expects high unemployment to remain a key feature of the economy for the remainder of the year and beyond, even as it recklessly forces workers to return to their jobs amid a raging pandemic.

The increased competition for jobs, combined with the desperate social and financial crisis facing workers and their families, will be used to intensify the exploitation of the

working class. "(W)e forced this on the economy," Economics professor Mikal Skuterud told CTV News, "but that's going to have permanent ripple effects, specifically on manufacturing and the construction sectors. There's serious concern that this isn't going to be just a quick bounceback; there could be long term effects."

The jobs massacre and social misery triggered by the pandemic are the inevitable product of the policies pursued by the Trudeau Liberal government, with the support of the entire political establishment and corporate elite. The government did nothing for almost two months to prepare the health care system for COVID-19, yet it proved able in March to rush through bailout measures for the major banks and big business totalling more than \$650 billion. Meanwhile, workers and their families have been placed on rations. The health care system has likewise received only a pittance. No more than \$4 billion in additional funding has been made available to fight the pandemic and develop hospital surge capacity.

Yesterday, the federal Liberal government announced yet another measure to bolster big business—a multi-billion-dollar program that will enable companies with annual turnover of more than \$300 million to access loans or loan guarantees of more than \$60 million.

Having orchestrated the greatest heist of public funds in Canadian history, the federal government and its provincial counterparts—led by the hard-right governments of Quebec and Ontario—are spearheading a back-to-work campaign, prioritizing big business profit over workers' lives. They are doing so even as the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases approaches 70,000 and the death toll reaches 5,000. More people have now died from the coronavirus in Canada than in China, which has a population more than 35 times larger and where the pandemic first erupted.

The twin threats of economic destitution and the cut-off of CERB benefits will be used by big business and their political servants in government to pressure workers to

return to work under unsafe conditions. Although the Trudeau government has said it is considering extending the CERB beyond its original June 15 end date, powerful sections of the ruling elite are urging that the benefit be scaled back or made conditional on recipients proving they are looking for work. Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister and Conservative federal leader Andrew Scheer have denounced the meagre benefit as “too generous” because it provides low-paid workers, including many “essential” long-term care, grocery and logistics workers, more than they are paid in a month of full-time work.

Quebec’s Labour Minister has bluntly declared that workers who refuse to report for work when summoned by their employer will lose their entitlement to the CERB, even if they fear for their safety.

Under these conditions, the trade unions are continuing to expand their corporatist collaboration with the Trudeau Liberal government and big business at the expense of workers’ interests, and indeed their very lives.

The same day Statistics Canada revealed record job losses in April, the CLC published a lengthy document on its website endorsing the ruling elite’s reckless back-to-work campaign. Cynically entitled “Health and safety conditions for reopening sectors of the economy,” the statement accepted without question the right of the bosses to put the lives of workers and their families at risk by organizing a precipitous return to work that flies in the face of all medical and scientific advice.

A return-to-work, said the CLC statement, is a “monumental challenge in the era of COVID-19, but it is a challenge we must meet.”

The “challenge” the union bureaucrats have set themselves is to use bluster about ensuring a “safe workplace,” to suppress the growing worker opposition to a premature return to work and thereby ensure that Canadian capitalism can resume raking in massive profits.

The CLC and Unifor, the country’s largest industrial union, committed last month to partnering with government and employers to ensure that Canadian businesses “come roaring back.” In a statement issued jointly with the federal Labour Minister, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and the Canadian Bankers Association, they declared, “We agreed that as the situation continues to evolve, we must remain flexible and adaptable ... and, above all, we must continue to work together. Our meeting reinforced the fact that we have common goals—to protect the health, safety, and well-being of Canadian workers and keep Canadian businesses ready to come roaring back and ensure the economy can recover by getting people back to work quickly and in a safe manner after the crisis ends.”

Workers have no “common goals” with the corporate

elite, who have thrown millions of workers onto government rations, while gorging themselves on vast state handouts.

The capitalist elite is exploiting the coronavirus crisis to intensify the class war it has been waging for decades. This has included: the gutting of health care and other essential social services through round after round of austerity; massive tax cuts for big business and the rich; the effective abrogation of workers’ right to strike; and the diversion of massive resources from meeting social needs to funding Canadian imperialism’s participation in a long series of predatory US-led wars and a massive rearmament program.

The unions’ plea to “work together” with the bankers and bosses who have cashed in with hundreds of billions of dollars in bailout funds is, as they themselves admit, focused on helping businesses “come roaring back.” That is helping them corral workers back on the job amid the pandemic and to step up the exploitation of their workforces so as to produce bumper profits for investors and shareholders.

Workers must reject this course with the contempt it deserves. They must advance their own class program to deal with the crisis—a program aimed at meeting the health and social needs of the vast majority, not bolstering corporate profits. All nonessential production must be shut down until the pandemic is contained, and all workers laid off or unable to work must be provided full pay. Society’s resources must be mobilized to strengthen the health care system and ensure that health care and other essential workers have personal protective equipment and all else that is needed to ensure their safety. To finance this program, the vast sums of wealth hoarded by the banks and major corporations must be seized and directed toward meeting social needs.

These necessary demands will only be realized through a political struggle—the mobilization of the working class against the capitalist profit system and its institutions, and the fight, alongside workers in the US and around the world, for a workers government committed to socialist policies.

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