

Canadian medical experts warn COVID-19 will spike due to back-to-work push

By Roger Jordan
25 May 2020

All Canada's provinces—including those where widespread community transmission of COVID-19 continues—are now well on the way to lifting the lockdown measures that helped slow the pandemic's spread. This despite COVID-19 having already exacted a terrible toll, including 6,424 deaths.

The government back-to-work drive is being implemented in flagrant disregard of repeated World Health Organization (WHO) warnings that mass-testing and contact-tracing capabilities need to be developed and health-care systems significantly strengthened before any relaxation of restrictions on normal economic and social life.

In Quebec, the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada, construction and manufacturing activities have been up and running for at least two weeks. Schools and daycares outside of Montreal reopened May 11, along with retail stores. Retail businesses in Montreal are scheduled to reopen today, and daycares on June 1.

In neighbouring Ontario, retail stores with a street entrance were allowed to reopen as of May 19, the same day all remaining restrictions on the construction industry were lifted.

Many of Ontario's manufacturing facilities and mines stayed open throughout the lockdown, due to the provincial government's extremely broad definition of what constitutes an "essential service." Although Premier Doug Ford had wanted to reopen schools at the end of May, the rapid spread of the virus and public opposition forced the government to announce last week that public schools will not reopen during the current school year.

In Alberta, where the United Conservative Party government allowed oil and most other production facilities to remain open during the province's lockdown, the limit for outdoor gatherings has been increased to 50 people. On May 14, stores, restaurants and hair salons reopened across the province. Premier Jason Kenney has indicated that cinemas and spas will be allowed to open in mid-June.

British Columbia's New Democratic Party government allowed businesses and retail stores to reopen last Tuesday,

and has pledged to lift bans on hotels and resorts in June. Parents will also be given the "voluntary" option of sending their children to school as of June 1.

The reckless character of the reopening drive is underscored by the continued rapid spread of the pandemic, with more than 1,000 new cases and 100 deaths being reported daily.

With more than 84,650 confirmed COVID-19 cases, Canada has now surpassed China, where the virus first emerged, both in terms of total infections and fatalities. Canada, with a population approximately one-tenth that of the United States, had one fatality for every 25 total US COVID-19 deaths in mid-April. But, in a further indication of the virus' spread across Canada, this ratio has now declined to just one for every 15.

Under these conditions, leading Canadian medical experts have spoken out forcefully against the premature lifting of restrictions.

"We're gambling by reopening," Dr. Sandy Buchman, president of the Canadian Medical Association, told the Senate Social Affairs Committee last Wednesday. He pointed to a lack of testing and contact-tracing infrastructure before adding, "We're scrambling. In my opinion, we're not fully prepared for a second wave."

Figures show that Canada is not even using half of its extremely modest test capacity of 60,000 per day. Roughly 28,000 COVID-19 tests are being performed each day, far below the targets that the provincial governments have themselves set. Ford vowed that by the end of April the province would be performing 16,000 tests, but last Tuesday it managed just 7,300.

Buchman stressed that the failure to carry out widespread testing means that authorities are in the dark as to where and how the virus is spreading.

He also took up the chronic shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers. In Ontario alone, over 4,000 health care staff are infected, and as of May 19 nine had died. "We'd never permit a firefighter to go into a burning building without adequate protection. We can't

expect our front line health care workers to put themselves in harm's way," remarked Buchman.

Local health officials in Ontario are also sounding the alarm about easing lockdown measures as the virus continues to run rampant. Dr. Michael Gardam, a veteran of the 2003 SARS epidemic and an infectious disease specialist at Toronto's Humber River Hospital told CBC, "It's scary. There's a large sense of unknown there. And there's no way around the fact that this is uncomfortable."

Dr. Lawrence Loh, chief medical officer for the Greater Toronto area's Peel Region, publicly called for a delay to the lifting of lockdown restrictions due to the high number of new infections. "We have seen our new cases starting to plateau, but we have just not seen a decline in line with the province's own framework for reopening at this point," said Loh.

These warnings are of no concern to federal and provincial authorities, which are determined to enforce the ruling elite's criminally irresponsible back-to-work policy. After implementing bailout measures for the big banks, financial markets, and major corporations worth over \$650 billion, the ruling class wants to send workers back to unsafe workplaces to resume extracting profit through the ruthless exploitation of their labour.

While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau blustered Friday about the need for "strong collaborative action" between the federal government and provinces to "expand testing and contact tracing," he provided no details on how these basic measures, which the WHO has been calling for since the early days of the pandemic, would be implemented. The reality is that Trudeau's Liberals have overseen a calamitous response to COVID-19 in spite of repeated warnings of the threat of a pandemic and Canada's own experience with SARS in 2003. (See: The 2003 SARS epidemic: how Canada's elite squandered the chance to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic)

Moreover, by declaring decisions on reopening the economy a "provincial matter," Trudeau has already given the greenlight to Quebec and Ontario's hard-right governments to send hundreds of thousands of workers back to their jobs without the implementation of basic safety measures.

Trudeau and the rest of the political establishment in Canada may choose their words more carefully than Trump, but the reality is that Canadian authorities are embracing the same reactionary "herd immunity" policy. This is shown by the remarks of Bonnie Henry, the chief medical officer for the NDP government in BC. "We'll be looking at what were the measures that worked best to prevent transmission," said Henry, as she conceded that the "reopening" of the economy likely makes a second wave of

infections "inevitable," "and if we start to see increases in COVID, those are the things that we can put in place rather than the blanket shut everything down as we did before."

In Ontario, where Unifor, Canada's largest industrial union, has worked hand-in-glove with the major automakers to send autoworkers back into unsafe plants to work elbow-to-elbow on assembly lines, the ruling elite is also accepting that large portions of workers and their families will get infected. Kristen Dziczek, vice president for industry, economy and labour at the Centre for Automotive Research, a key industry think-tank that assisted the Big Three in reopening their facilities in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, bluntly told CBC, "I think we're going to see hotspots keep popping up and that's going to be one of the disruption factors in auto production."

The opposition in the working class to this policy of placing private profit ahead of human lives is growing. Last Tuesday, Quebec's largest nurses' union felt compelled to call a protest outside the office of Premier Francois Legault, who last month openly declared his government's support for a policy of "herd immunity," so as to draw attention to the government's violation of nurses' rights. These violations have included forcing nurses to work in COVID-19 wards without adequate PPE and a punishing regime of forced overtime. (See: Quebec government threatens thousands of lives with precipitous return to work)

In remarks summing up the contemptuous attitude of the entire ruling class to working people, Legault, who has made a political career out of imposing savage attacks on workers and enforcing austerity, lectured the protesters, "That disappoints me. I don't think it's time to be on the street in front of my office."

The indifference towards the lives of working people within the ruling class has also been displayed by its callous disregard for the fate of meatpackers and health care workers. In Ontario, close to 250 coronavirus-related complaints filed by workers to the province's Labour Relations Board have produced not one single ruling in the workers' favour. (See: Canada: Ontario government ignored workers' complaints at poultry plant hit by fatal COVID-19 outbreak)

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