

Spike in Canada's COVID-19 infections exposes criminality of back-to-work, back-to-school drive

By Roger Jordan
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Over the past two weeks, COVID-19 infections have surged across Canada. The dramatic rise in cases, which in some provinces are now more than three times higher than in August, is the direct product of the ruling elite's criminal back-to-work and back-to-school policies, which are aimed at guaranteeing corporate profits regardless of the cost in human lives.

Ontario, Canada's most populous province, recorded 425 cases on Monday, its highest daily tally in three-and-a-half months. This followed over 400 cases being registered on both Friday and Saturday. Reflecting the fact that the virus is now spreading out of control, authorities in Ontario have conceded repeatedly for several weeks that they are unable to determine the origin of around 50 percent of the new infections.

Around two thirds of current infections are among those under the age of 40, confirming that the government's reopening of the economy is chiefly to blame. Over 400 people under the age of 20 are currently infected, many of whom are no doubt school children. Two Ontario schools have already been forced to shut down in-person classes, less than two weeks after they reopened for the first time in six months.

The virus is also reaching into the political establishment, with both Conservative leader Erin O'Toole and Bloc Quebecois leader Yves-Francois Blanchet testing positive in recent days.

Responding to the rapidly deteriorating situation, Ontario's right-wing premier, Doug Ford, held a press conference Saturday, where he sought to blame the population at large for the looming disaster. He complained about "wild parties" and lax adherence to social distancing regulations, as he announced that private gatherings will henceforth be limited to 10 people indoors and 25 people outside. However, the government remains adamant that it will not limit school class-sizes or the number of workers in factories and other congested workplaces.

Neighbouring Quebec, which was the epicentre of the pandemic last spring with over 5,500 of Canada's 9,200 deaths, is also experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases, with 587 new infections announced Monday. More than 400 infections were recorded on both Saturday and Sunday, forcing the province's right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec government to announce new restrictions on gatherings in Montreal and Quebec City.

Quebec's director of public health, Horacio Arruda, who played a leading role in enforcing the reopening of schools in late August,

said Monday, "We are in the second wave. The situation is serious. The virus is everywhere in Quebec."

But like the Ontario Conservative government, Quebec Premier Francois Legault and his CAQ government are determined to press forward with their reckless drive to "reopen" the economy, and especially the schools, so that parents can be forced to return to the job and resume producing profits for big business.

The politicians' claim that the resurgence of cases is the result of irresponsible behaviour on the part of the population is a slanderous lie. While a small minority of people disregard social distancing and other public health measures, they are akin to petty thieves when compared to the real criminals in the political establishment, who early on declared their support for a premature reopening of the economy and a policy of effectively letting the virus run rampant.

In late April, for example, Legault asserted that "herd immunity," i.e. allowing the virus to infect 70 percent or more of the population, is "the best way out of the current pandemic." Federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu had earlier told Canadian Press that pursuing a policy of "herd immunity" is not necessarily a bad thing (see: "Canada's Health Minister promotes "herd immunity," after admitting government's coronavirus failure").

Canada's chronically under-resourced public health system, which has been ravaged by decades of savage austerity, is proving totally inadequate to cope with the rise in cases. Test centres across the country, but especially in Ontario, have been overwhelmed, with wait times routinely extending to six and even eight hours.

Back in July, the federal government set a target of 200,000 tests per day. Two months later, the provinces have failed to get even a third of the way there, with only between 60,000 and 65,000 tests currently being administered daily.

The threat of a dramatic rise in deaths is made all the more likely by the fact that nothing has been done by the political establishment to prepare Canada's dilapidated hospitals and provide overstretched health care workers with the additional resources that they need to successfully combat the pandemic. Yesterday, for example, the *Globe and Mail* reported the Ontario government has failed to act on the recommendations that infectious-disease specialist made in a June report "to build infection prevention and control measures inside the province's

long-term care facilities.”

Medical professionals have borne the brunt of this callous and calamitous handling of the pandemic. The Canadian Institute for Health Information revealed in a report released earlier this month that as of late July, almost 20 percent of coronavirus infections in Canada were among health care workers, well above the international average.

The crisis in health care is also creating serious problems in the treatment of other health issues. On Saturday, the pediatric section of the Ontario Medical Association launched a petition protesting the lack of any preparation to ensure the distribution of flu vaccines to children ahead of the onset of the flu season. “We ... would like to express our urgent concerns regarding an imminent crisis in influenza vaccination,” states the petition. “Right now, Public Health seems to expect the status quo from years past, when individual doctor’s offices and scattered flu clinics gave flu vaccines.”

While health and critical social services have been forced to get by on shoe-string budgets, Canada’s wealthy and super-rich have never had it so good. According to a recent study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Canada’s wealthiest 20 billionaires have seen their combined wealth rise by a staggering \$37 billion in the six months since the beginning of the pandemic. On the other hand, the latest labour force statistics showed that 1.1 million fewer Canadians were employed than prior to the pandemic, and a further 713,000 were still employed but have lost more than half of their income.

Galen Weston, who owns Canada’s largest grocery store chain, Loblaws, has seen his family’s wealth increase by \$1.6 billion to \$10.8 billion during the pandemic. This was no doubt helped by Weston’s decision in June to rob the mostly low-paid and part-time grocery store clerks of the \$2 per hour pandemic bonus instituted in late March.

Fourteen hundred workers at Dominion Foods, a subsidiary of Loblaws in Newfoundland, are about to enter their fifth week of strike action in pursuit of higher wage increases and job security. In a tentative contract, endorsed by Unifor, but decisively rejected by rank-and-file Dominion workers, Loblaws offered them a meager \$1 per hour wage increase stretched over three years.

The ever-deepening social chasm between the capitalist elite and the vast majority of the population is the outcome of the policies pursued by the entire political establishment. During March and April, the principal concern of the federal Liberal government and the entire opposition, from the Conservatives to the New Democrats, was to ensure an unprecedented bailout of the big banks and financial oligarchy. Under Trudeau’s supervision, over \$650 billion was funneled by the government, the Bank of Canada, and various Crown agencies into the financial markets, the banks, and big business to prop up the fortunes of the rich and super-rich.

As soon as the bailout was complete, a reckless campaign spearheaded by the Trudeau government and endorsed by the trade union bureaucracy and corporate-controlled media was unleashed to force working people back to unsafe working conditions. The social crisis created by the government’s miserly \$2,000-a-month Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) payments was exploited to this end, with many workers left with no choice but to

risk infecting themselves and their family members if they wished to avoid financial ruin.

A key plank of the back-to-work drive is the reopening of schools, which has already proven to be an accelerant in the pandemic’s resurgence. The goal of Trudeau’s Liberals, the right-wing provincial governments, and of the trade unions, which have refused to organize any opposition among teachers to the reopenings, is to ensure that children can return to the classroom so that their parents are “free” to be ruthlessly exploited to boost corporate profits.

The next stage in the reopening of the economy will begin with the Trudeau government’s Throne Speech tomorrow, which will outline a series of pro-corporate measures designed to boost the “competitiveness” of Canadian capitalism. Newly installed Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, fresh from slashing financial aid to laid-off workers last month by 20 percent, has spent recent weeks consulting with Canada’s six large banks and trade unions to craft the ruling elite’s class war agenda (see: “Trade unions confer with big business Liberals on how to revive Canadian capitalism”).

While Trudeau initially made public declarations about his government taking an “entirely different direction” to promote social equality and fight climate change, this inevitably proved to be hollow “progressive” spin. Faced with a sustained campaign by the banks, big business, and corporate media demanding his government rein in social spending and ensure any economic stimulus measures focus on boosting “growth” and “competitiveness,” Trudeau and Freeland have bent over backwards to demonstrate they have gotten the message. Freeland has boasted of her consultations with former Liberal Finance Minister and Prime Minister Paul Martin, who presided over the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history during the 1990s. Asked at a press conference last week what her approach would be on spending, Freeland declared, “We understand the value of wise and prudent fiscal management. Canada has benefited from that approach in the past.”

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