

As pandemic resurges, Canada's governments press forward with reckless back-to-work drive

By Roger Jordan
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The coronavirus pandemic is surging across most of Canada, with total new daily infections rapidly approaching 2,000—or more than four times the average just six weeks ago—and hospitalizations and deaths on track to experience a parallel spike in coming days.

Yet the federal Liberal and provincial governments are pressing forward with their homicidal back-to-work, back-to-school drive, which prioritizes big-business profit over human lives.

Quebec's right-wing CAQ premier, Francois Legault, has ordered the Greater Montreal and Quebec City areas and the Chaudieres-Appalaches region, or more than 5.5 million people, into partial "lockdown." Theatres, bars and restaurants in these "red zones" have been ordered closed from October 1 to 28, and residents instructed not to socialize with anyone outside of their households. In contrast to the strict controls on social gatherings, Legault and other government officials insist that schools and businesses will remain open.

Legault, who has previously publicly advocated for "herd immunity," that is letting the virus rip through the population, declared Monday, "Our goal is to protect our health system, our schools and the work of as many workers as possible."

Yesterday, Quebec reported 933 new COVID-19 cases, the highest number since early May, 16 deaths and 13 new hospitalizations.

In neighbouring Ontario, a further 538 infections were reported Wednesday, with the majority, as has been the case over the past two weeks, coming from Toronto, Ottawa and the Peel Region. Worryingly, the province has reported outbreaks at 46 long-term care facilities. Residents of long-term care facilities and seniors' homes accounted for well over three-quarters of the more than 5,000 Canadians who died during the first wave of the pandemic between March and June.

Earlier this week, Ontario Health Minister Christine Elliott reported that 62 percent of the province's new infections are among people aged 40 or under, a damning indictment of the push of the entire political establishment for the reopening of businesses and schools with virtually no restrictions.

On Monday, Ontario reported over 700 new COVID-19 cases, its highest one-day increase since the pandemic began. This development prompted the Ontario Hospital Association to request that Ontario's Doug Ford-led Conservative government move certain regions of the province back to Stage 2 of its reopening plan, which would reimpose restrictions on certain businesses.

Such a step has been all but ruled out by governments at all levels. Last week, a leaked Ontario government planning document revealed that even in its worst-case scenario for the pandemic's second wave, only "targeted action," singling out specific workplaces, schools or localities, is envisaged. "The return to an earlier stage of provincial reopening, or even regional approaches to tightening would be avoided in favour of

organization-specific or localized change," stated the document.

Federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu has struck a similar tone, stressing that unlike the lockdowns forced on governments by popular pressure earlier this year, future public health measures should be "surgical." In its September 23 Throne Speech, the Trudeau government similarly insisted shutdowns should be "short-term" and limited to the "local" level.

Who is responsible for the resurgent pandemic?

The reckless drive to keep schools and businesses open that all levels of government are now pursuing is motivated by the demands of corporate Canada and the financial oligarchy for their profit-making to be intensified, regardless of the cost in human life.

This is having a particularly disastrous impact on schools, whose reopening was uniformly pressed for by the federal Liberal government, the hard-right governments of Ontario, Quebec and Alberta, and British Columbia's NDP government, because only if children were herded back to class could parents be freely available to generate profits once again for the corporate elite.

As of Tuesday, Ontario has reported 308 infections in schools among students and staff. A further 126 cases have been recorded at childcare facilities, leading to the closure of 36 centres and 176 homes. In Quebec, the Gerard-Filion High School on Montreal's south shore was forced earlier this week to close for two weeks after positive tests were recorded among 26 students and seven staff members. Overall, provincial figures released a week ago revealed 1,163 cases at 489 schools.

These catastrophic numbers, which will inevitably produce a surge in fatalities in the weeks ahead, are the direct product of conscious policies pursued by the political establishment.

Faced with the looming health disaster produced by their embrace of "herd immunity," political leaders are rejecting all responsibility and instead blaming the population. "I know it's difficult, I was young myself, I remember what we wanted to do is go out with our friends and have fun," stated Legault at a press conference Tuesday.

This slanderous attempt to blame young people for the resurgent virus is aimed at shifting attention away from the total failure of government policies to contain the pandemic. To the extent that infection rates are raging among younger people, this is above all because they have been forced back to unsafe schools, or because a greater proportion of them work in poorly paid, customer-facing service jobs that bring them into regular contact with large numbers of people.

The back-to-work drive was orchestrated in a conspiracy involving the federal and provincial governments, the trade unions and big business. Its first stage involved the Trudeau government funneling \$650 billion in March into the bailout of the banks, big business and the financial markets so as to assure the wealth and investments of the rich and super-rich.

Then, in a series of closed-door consultations beginning in April, they began planning how the economy could be reopened and future lockdowns averted. In a joint statement published by the federal Labour Ministry, leading business lobby groups, the Canadian Labour Congress and Unifor on April 15, policies were called for that would “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.”

Three weeks later, on May 8, the CLC took upon itself the task of justifying a reckless reopening of the economy, declaring in a statement that there was no alternative. Forcing millions back to unsafe workplaces would be “a monumental challenge in the era of COVID-19,” declared the union bureaucrats. “But it is a challenge that we must meet.”

As the back-to-work, back-to-school drive got under way, the unions ensured that no organized opposition from workers developed. All attempts by workers to protest or strike against unsafe conditions were sabotaged or declared “illegal.” The union bureaucracy’s indifference and contempt towards the lives of the workers they purport to represent was summed up bluntly by the comments of Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation President Harvey Bischof. He declared just days prior to the reopening of the schools, “If the question is whether we are planning some illegal job action, the answer is a flat-out no.”

Only a working class-led movement can stop the pandemic, save lives and protect workers’ incomes

If this homicidal policy is to be stopped, working people must take matters into their own hands and intervene into the growing health and socioeconomic crisis as an independent political force. The first step in this process should be the building of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, school and neighbourhood to fight for the shutdown of all nonessential sectors of the economy until the pandemic is contained; full income security for all jobless workers; and the provision of proper personal protective equipment (PPE) for all essential workers. The building of such committees will require a relentless political struggle against the NDP and pro-capitalist trade unions.

The urgency of such a struggle has been underscored by the political events of the past week. The NDP, led by Jagmeet Singh, has made clear that it once again intends to prop up the minority Liberal government, this time by backing its pro-corporate Throne Speech in parliament. The policies outlined in the speech will, if implemented, ensure the further acceleration of the reopening of the economy, which will have deadly consequences for working people. According to a recent projection by the US-based Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, Canada’s COVID-19 death toll could reach 16,000 by the end of the year if current public health policies remain in place.

Early Wednesday morning, the NDP joined with the Liberals and other opposition parties to ensure rapid passage of the government’s latest spending bill. The main component of this is the transfer of the approximately 2.8 million workers still receiving the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) onto Employment Insurance (EI) or a number of newly created, makeshift benefits designed for the self-employed and individuals responsible for providing care to relatives. The stricter requirements attached to EI and to the Canada Recovery Benefit, including to “actively seek work” and accept “any reasonable job offer,” mean that in practice the vast majority of workers will be pushed off these programs as soon as possible. They will be forced into taking low-wage, insecure jobs, putting their own health and lives, not to mention those of their families, at risk amid a dramatic resurgence of COVID-19.

Singh told HuffPost in a recent interview that his party was ready to back the Throne Speech and would be more than happy to back the Trudeau government for another three years until the next federal election is due. The NDP leader justified this position by touting a temporary sick leave benefit agreed to by the Liberals that will give workers a grand total

of two weeks of sick pay, claiming this is something that will “help millions of Canadians.”

The truth is that the NDP has desperately been seeking to cooperate with the Liberals for over a year. Prior to the 2019 federal election, Singh repeatedly offered the NDP’s services as a coalition partner to Trudeau. Throughout the pandemic, the NDP has supported the government on all critical votes, including its anti-democratic decision to shut down regular sittings of parliament for four months at the end of May.

The NDP’s latest decision to back the pro-war, big business Liberals was fully endorsed by the unions, which in response to the greatest capitalist crisis since the Great Depression have dramatically expanded their corporatist collaboration with government and big business. In early September, CLC President Hassan Yussuff gave Singh and the NDP their marching orders, telling CBC Radio’s “The House” that the social democrats have “an obligation” to work with the Trudeau Liberal government.

Should Singh and the NDP get their way, the Liberals and their backers from big business and the union bureaucracy will press ahead with reopening the economy at a cost of thousands more deaths. They will continue with their planned increase in military spending by over 70 percent from 2017 levels by 2026. And they will press ahead with their ever-closer integration of the Canadian military with US-imperialist aggression around the world, including against Russia and China.

The alternative to this disastrous course is the development of a worker-led counteroffensive against austerity and war, and for a policy aimed at containing and eradicating COVID-19. Under conditions of increasing strikes and protests among workers in Canada and internationally, and the discrediting of the entire political establishment through their complicity in the enforcement of policies that are leading to mass death, the objective conditions for the organization of a mass movement in opposition to the capitalist profit system are extremely favourable. What is now required is the building of a mass socialist party—the Socialist Equality Party—to provide the struggles of the working class with the conscious revolutionary leadership that the present situation so urgently demands.

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