Toronto threatens to lock out public health workers amid expanding coronavirus pandemic

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In a move that epitomizes the utter criminality of the ruling elite's response to the coronavirus, the City of Toronto is threatening to lock out 1,700 public health workers as early as today in a contract dispute. The news came as cases of the potentially deadly virus spiked in Toronto and across Canada, with even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau forced to go into two weeks' self-isolation after his wife, Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, tested positive for the disease.

The workers include nurses responsible for performing coronavirus testing, as well as other professionals working to contain the pandemic, including medical workers staffing helplines. Absurdly, the city, having declared a public health "emergency" Thursday, has asserted that losing 90 percent of its public health care staff would not impact its ability to cope with the disease. The city is determined to impose a concessions-laden contract on the health care workers, along with approximately 20,000 early childcare educators, cleaners, clerical staff and staff at Toronto's events facilities.

Dr. David Fisman of the University of Toronto's School of Public Health, a veteran of the 2003 SARS epidemic when at least 32 people died in the city, sharply criticized the city's actions. "To assert that a lockout of public health workers at this time would not endanger the public is, frankly, ridiculous," he told the *Toronto Star*.

The criminal disregard of city authorities for the health and well-being of local residents is but one expression of the ruling elite's indifference to the mass suffering threatened by the spread of the coronavirus. On Wednesday, after loudly proclaiming its intention to pull out all the stops to combat the disease, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government announced it was making available a paltry C$1 billion to fight the infection across the country. C$500 million was earmarked for the provinces, where many hospitals have already warned about severe shortages of medical supplies. This funding is a drop in the bucket, given that health care facilities are in most cases already running at or over capacity.

The government also unveiled a plan to waive the one-week waiting period for workers to obtain Employment Insurance if they test positive for COVID-19 or go into self-isolation. However, the vicious austerity measures of the past three decades mean that barely 40 percent of Canada's workforce is eligible for Employment Insurance. The vast majority of low-paid workers have no access to sick pay and cannot afford to miss a day or two of work without pay, never mind two weeks.

At the provincial level, steps have been taken in a haphazard manner. Schools are being closed in Ontario and Quebec, and gatherings of 250 people or more have been ordered canceled in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. Federal government figures on Friday showed 152 confirmed infections nationally, but figures from provincial authorities indicate at least 175 people have contracted COVID-19.

Government inaction at all levels has prompted some medical professionals to sound the alarm bells. Timothy Sly, an epidemiologist at Ryerson University who was involved in managing the 2003 SARS outbreak, wrote in an article for *Maclean's* magazine that the current pandemic threatens to reach the same scale as the 1918-1919 Spanish flu pandemic. The outbreak of Spanish flu under conditions of the social devastation produced by the First World War led to between 50 million and 100 million deaths globally.

Sly sketched a possible scenario for the coming year, saying it is likely that between 40 and 70 percent of the global population could be infected with the coronavirus if no serious measures are taken to curb its spread. At

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least 1 percent of these cases would result in death, he adds. His description of the impact on hospitals is worth quoting at length:

"A large hospital may have 1,000 nursing staff. Now consider, hypothetically, the prospect of 300 (30 per cent) of the nursing staff unable to come into work due to an outbreak of acute viral respiratory sickness, and another 100 (10 per cent) who are staying home because they are quarantined due to being contacts of family members who are ill, all during a one-month period at the peak of the outbreak. Anything even remotely resembling 'normal' will be a distant memory, with 40 per cent of staff missing. Wards, units and entire departments may have to close.

"It gets worse. On a daily basis, a formidable surge of anxious citizens will be heading toward the hospital with sick family members in tow. With a possible incidence rate in the community of at least 30 per cent (possibly much more), worried crowds will be lined up outside the ER entrance, banging on the door, trying to find someone to attend to their elderly family members who are already turning slightly blue as their cough becomes worse and pneumonia sets in."

The Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians issued a statement Thursday warning of a looming crisis for hospitals, which have little to no surge capacity. Dr. Robert Fowler, a critical care physician and chief of the Tory Trauma Program at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, commented, "Even though only a minority get critically ill, that may still overwhelm our system, even on a good day. We operate our system with very slim margins of capacity. If Ontario happens in the same way as Europe, we could quickly exceed our capacity."

In British Columbia, reports are already emerging of doctors turning patients away from their offices due to a lack of protective equipment. One doctor told CTV News she was forced to tell 20 patients to call the 811 helpline, which is hopelessly overburdened. Doctors of B.C., a doctors' association, expressed concern that face masks in particular are running out, and no timetable is in place for new supplies.

The threat confronting the tens of thousands of homeless people across Canada is severe. At Oppenheimer Park on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where hundreds of homeless people live, self-isolation for anyone who contracts the coronavirus is "just not possible," according to camp liaison worker Chrissy Brett. "There are two (shared) bathroom stalls currently and one with a urinal," she added.

Although campaigners have been calling for basic measures to improve public hygiene, including the installation of hand sanitizers and temporary bathroom facilities, nothing has yet been done.

It appears only a matter of time before the disease hits the homeless community. B.C. has reported a significant rise of cases over the past two days, including the first case of community transmission. On Friday, the total confirmed cases for the province rose to 64.

Ontario has also seen a major spike in coronavirus cases. They rose by 19 to 59 over a 24-hour period ending Thursday evening, and then to 79 by Friday afternoon. On Thursday evening, Ontario's right-wing populist Doug Ford-led government announced the closure of all public schools till April 6. The move marked a sudden change of course, coming just hours after the premier had reassured families to go off and enjoy their weeklong March break.

School closures are undoubtedly a necessary measure to stem the spread of the disease. However, it is clear that the provincial government's decision has an ulterior motive, as it tries to ram through concessions contracts on 200,000 teachers and education support staff. The two-week closure will undoubtedly be used to further intensify pressure on teachers to accept real-terms wage cuts and reductions in funding, or to justify the introduction of legislation outlawing strikes on the grounds that the completion of the school year is in jeopardy.

The Ford government's actions only underscore the need for working people to advance their own independent response to the coronavirus crisis. If the necessary measures to combat its spread, such as school closures, quarantines, and social distancing, are left to the capitalist politicians to oversee, they will be used to accelerate the decades-long onslaught on the working class that has prepared the conditions for the coronavirus to have such a devastating impact.

An indication of the mounting anger among the working class was provided early Thursday, when about a dozen transit workers in Toronto refused to work due to safety concerns. Citing their legal right to refuse work they consider to be unsafe, the workers refused to continue cleaning the streetcar fleet until better protection was provided, delaying its rollout Thursday morning.

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