

As coronavirus cases surge in Canada, Trudeau prioritizes tougher border controls

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau held a press conference yesterday to announce tougher border controls. All but returning Canadian residents, their immediate family members, US citizens, diplomats, and airline crews are now barred from travelling to Canada.

Although the number of coronavirus cases is surging, with the number of confirmed cases more than doubling in the past two days to 425, Trudeau offered nothing in the way of additional assistance for the already overstretched health care system. And once again he fobbed off to another day providing any details about compensation for working people directly impacted by the disease, or who are laid off or whose hours are cut due to government-ordered closures or production-chain or other business disruptions.

Once again speaking from self-isolation at Rideau Cottage due to the positive diagnosis of his wife Sophie, Trudeau also announced that as of today international flights arriving in Canada will be restricted to just four airports in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver, so as to provide enhanced screening of all those arriving from overseas.

At a separate press conference, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said that all travellers arriving in Canada would be asked to self-isolate for 14 days. Exceptions will be made for essential workers, such as truck drivers and air crews.

The absence of any additional measures to assist the overstretched health care system exposes the Canadian ruling elite's policy of malign neglect towards the population as the coronavirus pandemic spreads at a staggering pace. As Trudeau spoke yesterday, warnings grew from medical experts that the virus is increasingly spreading out of control across the country, with new cases that have no contact to travel or previously registered COVID-19 infections springing up in Ontario and Alberta.

Canada's chief medical officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, warned, "Our window to flatten the curve of the epidemic is narrow."

With only 25,000 tests having been carried out across the country to date, it is widely acknowledged that the virus has

spread much more widely than the current 425 confirmed cases, with four fatalities.

Ottawa's medical health officer warned Monday that there may be around 1,000 unreported cases in Canada's capital city, and that community transmission appears to be widespread. In Calgary, authorities invoked a state of emergency following a spike in COVID-19 infections.

The growing problem of community transmission was underscored by the case figures for Ontario on Sunday. Of the 42 new cases reported that day, 37 had no connection to travel or a previously registered case of COVID-19.

Various medical experts have been warning for months about such a scenario and are now demanding more action. "It's expected that this would happen and the whole purpose was to get prepared for this scenario," said Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious disease physician at Toronto General Hospital. "The time is now to act so that we can mitigate the spread of this infection in Canada."

Yet instead of action, including a comprehensive testing program to identify the carriers of the disease and tens of billions of dollars to strengthen Canada's dilapidated health care system, the Trudeau government and the corporate media are concerned above all with securing the wealth of the super-rich and preserving Canadian imperialist interests. The Bank of Canada has cut interest rates by 0.5 percent twice in the past two weeks to pump more money into the financial markets, while Finance Minister Bill Morneau unveiled a major C\$10 billion package for business loans—10 times more than the federal government has made available for its COVID-19 Response fund.

Reporters' questions following Trudeau's remarks yesterday and a press conference given by his top ministers focused on the exemption given US citizens to enter Canada. Trudeau and especially Freeland emphasized that this was necessary to protect business and trade, and guarantee supply chains.

Left unsaid was the fact that the government and Canadian ruling elite clearly feared provoking a rift with the Trump administration, which would have undoubtedly occurred if

the Canadian government had taken a measure that would have effectively labelled the United States a high-risk country for the coronavirus.

Trudeau and his Liberals have been at pains to expand Canadian imperialism's three-quarters-of-a-century-old military-strategic partnership with Washington, and toward this end have increased Canada's participation in the major US military-strategic offensives around the world.

On Friday, the Trudeau government and all four opposition parties made sure that before parliament was shut down for five weeks due to the coronavirus they enacted the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The so-called NAFTA 2.0 agreement is aimed at consolidating North America as a US-dominated trade bloc that can wage trade war and military conflict against the major strategic rivals of the American and Canadian ruling elites, above all Russia and China.

In an interview with the CBC last Friday, Chief of the Defence Staff General Jonathan Vance said steps were being taken to ensure that the Canadian Armed Forces remained battle-ready and could counter any adversary that might seek to exploit the coronavirus crisis. Alleging that two Russian jets had come close to US air space near Alaska on March 9, Vance told the Canadian Press, "Part of the deterrence is...our ability to intercept those who would be approaching our airspace and tell them not to. Or if they enter our airspace and won't leave and try to attack Canada, we counterattack. We won't let that drop."

The concern and sharp-eyed focus Canada's governments and state institutions have shown in defending Canadian imperialism's economic and geostrategic interests, stands in striking contrast with the criminal indifference they have shown to the health of the general public.

Two vital months during which Ottawa could have worked with the provinces to mobilize personnel and resources to halt the spread of the disease and prepare for an influx of coronavirus victims were squandered.

Not until last week did Trudeau and Freeland, the minister charged with leading the government's response to the coronavirus, write the 10 premiers to ask about the readiness of their respective governments to combat the outbreak of COVID-19, and any potential supply shortages.

Ontario's Ministry of Health, it should be added, was still claiming last month that it was "too early" to tell whether there would be any additional costs involved in managing the COVID-19 outbreak.

Even today, there is no accurate census of vital medical supplies needed to fight the pandemic, such as ventilators. Although as many as 20 percent of COVID-19 patients may need the help of a ventilator to survive, nothing was done to augment Canada's estimated supply of just 5,000

ventilators.

The *Globe and Mail* noted last week that the cost of a ventilator is just \$10,000. Canada's shortage of ventilators, like the lack of any "surge capacity" in Canada's hospitals, attests to the extent to which decades of social spending cuts and austerity have ravaged the universal public health system.

The past five days have seen a flurry of improvised and largely uncoordinated announcements of school and other closures by Ottawa, the provinces and three territories. But little to nothing is being said about ensuring that workers who contract the virus, are forced into quarantine, or are laid off because of closures or supply-chain disruptions are fully compensated.

On the morning of Thursday, March 12, Ontario Premier Doug Ford urged Ontarians to travel and otherwise enjoy the week-long March school break set to begin Saturday. But just hours later, Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced a three-week shutdown of all the province's schools, at the urging of the province's chief medical officer.

Not coincidentally, it was only on Thursday that the federal Liberal government issued an emergency tender asking suppliers for such basic products for fighting an epidemic as surgical masks, gowns, and nitrile gloves.

On Friday, Ottawa announced that all persons returning from abroad would be screened for COVID-19 and asked to go into 14 days' self-quarantine. Yet this past weekend, there was no screening at major airports and no information about the self-quarantine program, and travellers were forced to wait in long lines in close quarters to go through Customs and Immigration.



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