

Canadian workers launch work-safety job actions amid rapid spread of coronavirus

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A series of job actions in Canada over the past week has pointed to mounting anger among workers over the unsafe working conditions they are being forced to confront by the ruling elite amid the rapid spread of the coronavirus crisis.

Late last Wednesday, Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) afternoon-shift workers assigned to clean streetcars at the city's Roncesvalles Yard refused to carry out their duties. They cited the employer's failure to "maintain reasonable precautions to protect workers" from the spread of the potentially lethal virus. As a result of their action, a number of streetcars due to deploy Thursday for morning rush hour were delayed and buses were pressed into contingency service.

For several weeks, TTC workers have been demanding that management waive strict uniform requirements to allow transit drivers, ticket booth employees and others to wear personal protective equipment. They have also pressed for increased access to hand sanitizing stations while on the job. Until the work stoppage forced management's hand, the TTC had refused to move on this basic health and safety issue.

When pressed further on the matter after the job action, TTC spokesperson Stuart Green acknowledged that the Commission's contingency plans included scenarios to alter transit schedules should more broad-based worker actions ensue.

In neighbouring Mississauga, a city of 800,000 people, seven bus drivers and 21 cleaners were potentially exposed to the virus after an infected commuter travelled on their vehicles over a three-day period. The city has refused demands that the endangered workers be paid for any necessary quarantine period.

As the affected Toronto streetcars were returning to

the streets Thursday, afternoon shift workers at the giant Windsor, Ontario Fiat Chrysler assembly plant stopped work over concerns about the spread of the coronavirus at their plant. Production did not start up again until Friday afternoon after the federal Ministry of Labour with the Unifor union intervened to review health and safety issues and declare the plant "safe." Windsor Assembly is the largest FCA plant in Canada employing 6,000 workers, currently in a three-shift operation.

The action taken by the Windsor workers echoes that of their brothers and sisters at Fiat Chrysler's Italian plants. A burgeoning strike wave in Italy began Tuesday at Fiat Chrysler's Pomigliano plant in Naples, which also employs 6,000 workers. Autoworkers, kept on the line to produce luxury Alfa-Romeo cars for the super-rich, walked out spontaneously, protesting unsafe conditions. As disruptions spread, FCA announced Wednesday the closure of the Pomigliano plant, along with facilities in Melfi, Atessa and Cassino, until at least Saturday.

On Friday morning, Canada Post workers in Peterborough, Ontario, invoked their right to refuse unsafe work, delaying mail delivery in the city. The workers refused to enter their postal station due to concerns about a manager who had recently returned from an overseas coronavirus "hot spot" and had reportedly exhibited some signs and symptoms of infection.

Over the weekend, the plight of millions of low-wage and part-time workers was highlighted when attendants at Tim Horton's, Canada's largest coffee house chain, participated in a social media campaign. It highlighted that many Tim Horton's franchise owners were still requiring doctor's sick notes before workers could book-off work sick, although public health authorities

were instructing anyone who was sick or feared they had come into contact with a potential coronavirus victim to self-quarantine.

In most provinces, workers can be forced to pay out-of-pocket for sick notes from their physicians, and those who book-off sick without such a note can be disciplined.

Most of the approximately 80,000 employees of Tim Horton's Canadian operation are allowed no more than five days per year of unpaid medical leave under conditions where any loss of pay can severely impact basic needs. Well before the coronavirus outbreak, the Canadian Medical Association had characterized the sick note requirement "an unnecessary public health risk."

The anger among workers across Canada, which has been replicated around the world in job actions by British postal workers and French private bus drivers, is entirely justified. The coronavirus is a highly infectious disease which has spread rapidly and can be deadly. Experts have repeatedly warned that combatting it requires strict quarantining measures for those infected, a dramatic reduction of social contact, a comprehensive program of testing, and high quality and well-funded health care systems.

Canada's ruling elite has no intention of ensuring any of this. On the contrary, the corporate executives and shareholders view the pandemic primarily as a market event. The preeminent concern has always been the impact of this disease on the value of stock portfolios and shares.

While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced a meagre \$1 billion for the government's COVID-19 Response Fund last week, including just \$500 million for emergency front-line health care, Finance Minister Bill Morneau unveiled a program 10 times larger to provide loans to businesses. The Bank of Canada added to the bonanza of cheap money for the financial elite by slashing interest rates by another half a percent to 0.75 percent—the second half percent cut in the last two weeks. Additional funds were also allocated to buy up "bankers' acceptances"—an instrument banks use to provide loans to small and medium-sized businesses—and the amount of capital that the country's banks are required to hold as insurance against a financial collapse has been lowered.

The Liberal government's reaction to last week's

market volatility has been, as it was under Stephen Harper and his Conservatives during the 2008-09 financial crash, a massive infusion of money into Bay Street. The Canadian response has echoed US President Trump's announcement of a \$1.5 trillion bailout of the financial system, a figure twice as large as the original size of the 2008 US bank bailout and over a thousand times larger than the emergency coronavirus funding the World Health Organization pleaded for last Friday.

The malign neglect displayed by the Trudeau government and the entire ruling elite towards working people in the coronavirus pandemic must serve as a summons to action. Workers can only protect themselves and their families from this deadly virus by taking up a struggle for urgent measures to combat the coronavirus on a global scale. These should include:

- Accessible and universal testing! No expense can be spared in making available free testing to all those who show symptoms.
- Free high-quality treatment and equality of care! The most advanced medical care must be made available to everyone, regardless of income or insurance coverage.
- Paid sick leave for all workers! No one must be forced to work if they are sick or have been exposed to the coronavirus, endangering themselves and others.
- Protect refugees, prisoners and the homeless! Everyone must have access to high-quality and clean living conditions to prevent the spread of the disease.
- Safe working conditions! All workers must have a safe work environment and be protected against the spread of the virus. Where there is a danger, workplaces and schools must be closed and full compensation paid by the employers and the state. Health care and other essential workers must be provided all the equipment and resources necessary to protect them from the coronavirus.



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