

Canada's governments exempt sections of industry from lockdowns, imperilling workers' lives

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Ontario and Quebec, Canada's two most populous provinces, have officially been under government-ordered shutdowns of all but essential services and businesses since midnight Tuesday, March 24, to prevent the spread of the highly contagious and potentially lethal coronavirus.

But the reality is very different. The two right-wing governments, led respectively by Ontario's Doug Ford and Quebec's Francois Legault, have promulgated an expansive, almost catch-all definition of what constitutes an essential business. This is so they can

continue to force hundreds of thousands of workers to stay on the job, putting their health and well-being and those of their families at risk, in order to churn out profits for big business.

Ontario has banned all gatherings of more than five people, and Quebec all gatherings of more than two, yet they continue to insist workers should congregate in large numbers to perform tasks that have nothing to do with providing healthcare, food, power, telecommunications, or other life necessities.

Making a mockery of its official proclamation of a lockdown, the Ford government released a list of essential services March 24 that included 74 types of business. The list included "businesses providing staffing services, including temporary help," and "businesses that extract, manufacture, process and distribute goods, products, equipment and materials, including businesses that manufacture inputs to other manufacturers (e.g. primary metal/steel, blow molding, component manufacturers, chemicals, etc. that feed the end-product manufacturer)." Even the liberal *Toronto Star* felt compelled, in unusually sharp language, to describe the government's policy as "window dressing."

The province's construction sector is also continuing to operate, even though workers have repeatedly complained about the absence of measures to ensure basic hygiene and workplace safety. The Carpenters District Council of Ontario, which represents 30,000 construction workers, was forced by the anger boiling among its members to issue an appeal to the government to shut down work sites.

Although Quebec's regulations are somewhat tighter, the government has allowed the mining sector and heavy industry,

including aluminum smelters, to continue operating with reduced staff levels.

A similar development is taking place in Alberta, where the hard-right United Conservative Party government of Jason Kenney is preparing to declare the huge oil and gas sector an "essential service." Making this policy all the more criminal, many of the sector's major operations are in remote areas, with regularly rotating groups of workers living at close quarters in work-camps—an ideal environment for the virus to spread like wildfire.

While Kenney is at pains to ensure the profits of Big Oil, his government has announced the layoff of more than 20,000 public school teaching assistants, janitors, and other support staff. This will result in teachers, who are still obliged to go to work to prepare lesson plans and packages for students to use at home, having to work in schools that are not being cleaned and without the necessary administrative support.

Governments and big business' criminal indifference towards workers' lives is provoking ever stronger opposition among the working class. Last month, autoworkers at the Fiat Chrysler assembly plant in Windsor, which employs 6,000 people, stopped work for 24 hours due to safety concerns. Similar protests swept across auto plants in the United States, forcing the "Big Three" Detroit automakers to partially shut down their operations.

In Quebec, where the government initially sought to keep construction workers on the job, the Legault government was forced to retreat in the face of widespread protests and has now ordered most building sites shut down.

In Ontario, hundreds of thousands of construction workers are being forced to continue to work under unsafe conditions even as a growing number of construction workers test positive for COVID-19. Seeking to contain the mounting anger, a business rep for LiUNA Local 183 produced a video—since widely circulated on social media—in which he says, "My wife is crying every time I go home because she doesn't know (if) I'm going to kill her (82 year-old) father," with whom they live. Subsequently, he addresses a group of workers in the video: "When you're in the work site there, you guys don't have six

feet around you. We're all breathing on each other. Where's your eating facilities? Are they sanitized? Do you have water to wash your hands when you eat your sandwiches?"

In an interview with CBC, construction worker Antonio Cruz emphasized his support for continuing work on urgently needed projects, but criticized the government's insistence that industrial, commercial, and residential projects of all kinds proceed. "If it's a hospital, you know, and medical facilities that we desperately needed, fine. I'm all for it. But residential, especially residential, it makes no sense."

In response to mounting criticism and fears workers would take matters into their own hands, the Ford government issued new toothless "guidelines" to construction companies on Monday that urged them to reduce the number of workers on site, including through staggered shifts, to improve on-site sanitation, and better communicate the need for social-distancing and other good health practices.

The way governments are treating frontline workers in the healthcare system is, if anything, even more scandalous. The Ford government has lifted the training requirements for personal support workers in long-term care facilities, clearing the way for for-profit facilities to hire untrained workers at the minimum wage, and even use volunteers in facilities where dozens of COVID-19 deaths have already been reported.

Nurses, doctors, and other healthcare staff across the country are already working with insufficient protective equipment and other medical supplies in hospitals that are hopelessly overcrowded. This is the direct product of government inaction in the three months since the coronavirus first emerged, and decades of austerity policies that have gutted funding for healthcare and social services.

Nurses speaking to the *Toronto Star* angrily denounced the authorities. "You want to help your fellow nurse and you want to do your job," commented one. "But at the same time, when you walk in and you see your entire worth as a human being is two masks in a brown paper bag—like, that's all you're worth to the hospital, that's all your health is worth, is two masks for a whole shift—you're like, what am I doing here?"

As the coronavirus pandemic has surged across Canada, the preoccupation of the federal Liberal and provincial governments of all stripes has been securing the profits and wealth of the corporate elite, not mobilizing society's resources to fight the pandemic. The Trudeau government has funnelled hundreds of billions of dollars into the coffers of the big banks and corporations, while offering a pittance for the overstretched healthcare system and the millions of workers who have lost jobs and income due to the pandemic.

Yesterday, with the Quebec government warning that it is three to seven days away from running out of N95 masks and other crucial supplies, Trudeau announced the federal government will spend \$2 billion on securing "made in Canada" personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators, bringing to just \$3 billion Ottawa's additional health care

spending.

While allowing wide swathes of industry, like manufacturing and construction, to operate as normal, the Ford government has passed a \$17 billion package of emergency measures to counter the pandemic and its economic fallout that is focused on providing billions in tax relief and credits to businesses. The measures, which were unanimously supported by the New Democratic Party, Green and Liberal opposition, include cuts to employer healthcare contributions, and a pitiful one-time \$200 payment to parents for each child aged 12 or under.

Underscoring the fact that the ruling elite has already accepted that tens if not hundreds of thousands will die, it was reported Sunday that health authorities in Ontario have drafted a "last resort" set of guidelines for hospitals. The policy will determine how healthcare is to be rationed when medical facilities find themselves forced into triage—that is when the lack of ICU beds and utterly inadequate stocks of ventilators compels doctors to decide who will live and who will be left to die. This follows announcements in British Columbia, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Quebec that so-called ethics committees are drafting guidelines to determine who will be denied life-saving care and who will get it under conditions where the health care system is overwhelmed by the influx of COVID-19 patients.

With media reports warning of a catastrophic situation emerging like that currently taking place in northern Italy and New York, Dr. Robert Fowler, a critical care physician at Sunnybrook Health Science Centre, said the public needs to prepare for a "worst case scenario" by having "difficult conversations" with loved ones about whether they would "even want ventilation or other invasive interventions" if they end up in an ICU ward.



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