

Canadian government sends military into care homes as it pushes for a premature return to work

Roger Jordan, Keith Jones
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Canada's two most populous provinces, Ontario and Quebec, have requested that the military be mobilized to help deal with the catastrophic conditions in longterm care facilities. Quebec has requested 1,000 troops, in addition to the 150 Canadian Armed Forces personnel already deployed there. Ontario is asking for the military's support at five especially hard-hit care homes.

The appeals for military intervention are being made even as the Quebec and Ontario governments, their counterparts across the country, and Canada's corporate elite are mounting an increasingly aggressive campaign for a premature return to work and the "reopening" of nonessential services and businesses.

During the past week, this campaign has shifted into high gear, while total coronavirus cases surged to more than 43,500, and COVID-19 deaths rose to 2,294. Residents of long-term care facilities account for more than half of the total deaths.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford's and Quebec Premier Francois Legault's pleas for military intervention are a tacit admission of the deplorable state of health and social care systems, which are on the verge of breakdown after decades of austerity. But regardless of the extent of the help provided by the armed forces, the ruling elite is not mobilizing the military with the aim of saving lives. Rather, it is part of a political offensive aimed at creating the impression that the governments are bringing the situation under control, so that the reckless back-to-work campaign, which risks the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers and their families and the total collapse of the health care system, can proceed in the face of mass opposition.

Although Ford formally announced Thursday that "nonessential" services in Ontario will remain closed until May 6, and a state of emergency will remain in force until May 12, huge swathes of the manufacturing sector that are deemed "essential" are preparing to reopen. Toyota and Fiat-Chrysler auto plants and Magna auto parts plants, which employ tens of thousands of workers combined, are set to reopen during the week of May 4. Other production facilities were never even closed due to the Ford government's lax definition of what constitutes an "essential service."

Governments push to reopen economy as pandemic rages unchecked

In neighbouring Quebec, Legault has already lifted a ban on residential construction work, which was only imposed after widespread worker protests. The right-wing populist premier has pledged to announce next week a comprehensive strategy to lift the remainder of the restrictions.

Similar conditions prevail in Alberta, where the oil and gas sectors have been allowed to continue operating unhindered in spite of the fact that large groups of workers live and work in close quarters.

In Saskatchewan, where important industries like oil and potash mining never closed down, the hard-right government of Scott Moe became the first provincial government Thursday to present a formal plan for reopening the economy. Some shuttered businesses will be allowed to open their doors on May 4 in a five-stage plan that Moe justified by saying that Saskatchewan has successfully "flattened the curve."

In a cynical attempt to provide his government's criminal policy with some cover, Moe sought to portray his strategy as careful and restrained, stating, "If we move too quickly, we risk increasing the spread of COVID-19. If we move too slowly, we risk permanent damage to the livelihoods of thousands of Saskatchewan people."

This is a false set of alternatives, motivated by the ruling elite's determination to begin extracting profits from working people as soon as possible without any regard for human life. It is not the ongoing lockdown that threatens the livelihoods of thousands of workers and small business owners in Saskatchewan and millions more across Canada. Rather, it is the policies of the ruling class. It failed to make any preparations for the pandemic. And since North America became the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, its political hirelings have focused on bailing out the banks and big business to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars.

The criminally irresponsible drive to reopen the economy under conditions in which virtually nothing has been done to strengthen Canada's dilapidated health care system, the inadequate levels of testing and contact-tracing represent a still greater threat to the livelihoods and well being of workers and their families.

This week Dr. Theresa Tam, the federal government's chief medical officer, stated that Canada's coronavirus testing capacity would need to be tripled to 60,000 tests per day in order to reopen the economy safely. Even such levels of testing, which the provinces show no signs of achieving, would mean that just 1.8 million Canadians, or a mere five percent of the population, could be tested each month.

Meanwhile, throughout the health care and longterm care sectors, brave and committed nurses, doctors, and other personnel are being forced to risk their lives due to the lack of basic personal protective equipment.

The disastrous health consequences that await millions of workers if they are forced back to their jobs under conditions of few to no health and safety protections can be seen at facilities where the virus has already spread. At the Cargill meatpacking plant near High River, Alberta, 440 employees have been infected, with a further 140 cases connected to the outbreak. A 60-year-old female worker has died, and her husband is in a serious condition in hospital.

At the JBS meat packing plant in Brooks, Alberta, 96 cases have been recorded, leading the company to reduce production to one shift. Two deaths have been linked to the outbreak.

At the Kerl Lake oil tar-sands work camp north of Fort McMurray, Alberta, at least 12 workers have contracted the disease. Major outbreaks of the virus have also been recorded at two poultry plants in British Columbia, among transit workers in Ontario, grocery store workers across the country, and health care workers.

Canada's ruling elite embraces "herd immunity"

Even as the virus runs rampant through a growing number of work sites that continue to operate, the ruling elite is pushing full steam ahead with a plan that will inevitably produce an explosion in the number of coronavirus cases as workers begin congregating in factories, offices, and crammed public transit across the country.

This amounts to a policy of "herd immunity." Workers are being ordered to accept mass infection and even death as a part of "normal" daily life. As Legault put it Thursday, "It may sound frightening, but once Quebecers understand the concept of herd immunity, they will see it is the best way out of the current pandemic. The concept of natural immunization does not mean we are going to use children as guinea pigs. What we are saying is people who are less at risk, people who are under 60, can get a natural immunization and impede the wave."

This is all lies. For one thing, every government that has openly pursued the "herd immunity" strategy, most notably Boris Johnson's in Britain, was forced to retreat in the face of widespread opposition from experts and skyrocketing death tolls. Moreover, there is not yet any firm scientific proof that people infected with COVID-19 obtain immunity. Even if they do, nobody knows how long it would last. Legault is thus effectively gambling with the lives of millions of workers and their families based on a hunch and a desire to ramp up corporate profits once again.

From the outset of the pandemic, the chief focus of Canada's ruling elite has been to safeguard the wealth and profits of the superrich while placing workers and the health care system on rations. While the federal Trudeau government and Bank of Canada proved able to collectively funnel over \$650 billion into the coffers of the big banks and corporations in a matter of days to prop up the financial markets and salvage investors, Ottawa criminally squandered two months before taking any action to support hospitals and medical staff. Only on March 10 did the federal government even write to the provinces to ask them about their medical supply needs.

No less striking is the contrast between the Trudeau government's support for big business and investors and the paltry and inadequate assistance being offered workers who have lost their jobs or are unable to work due to the pandemic. Under the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) they will receive the taxable sum of \$2,000 per month for a maximum of four months. Underscoring the economic devastation experienced by millions across the country, over 7.1 million people have applied for CERB to date.

Unions seek to smother rising working class opposition

The problem the ruling elite confronts in enforcing its reckless return to work agenda is that it is opposed by the vast majority of working people. In a poll in late March, 90 percent of respondents said lockdown measures

should stay in place until either a medical solution for the coronavirus, such as a vaccine, is available (44 percent), or the health care system is able to manage a patient surge (46 percent). Needless to say, neither of these conditions is even remotely close at this point in time.

Worker protests have also increased, with a series of work stoppages in Ontario being launched by transit workers, postal workers, and autoworkers to demand safe working practices. This is part of an international trend, with transit workers, and workers at Amazon and other delivery services in the US and Europe protesting the refusal of their employers to provide basic protections from the virus even as they accelerate production.

This necessary assertion of the most basic class interests of working people will only continue and strengthen if it is mounted in political opposition to the procapitalist unions and the NDP, which have responded to the pandemic by strengthening their corporatist alliance with the Liberal government and big business.

This week, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation became the last of the four provincial teacher unions to conclude a sellout three-year deal with the right-wing Ford government. The deal includes the real wage cut demanded by Ford in the form of pay hikes below the inflation rate in each of the next three years, and enshrines many of the government's education cuts. The four unions are in the final stages of sabotaging a months-long struggle by teachers and their supporters that saw the largest teacher strike in the province since the 1990s, and that could have become the spearhead of a mass working class challenge to the hated Ford government and the ruling elite and capitalist austerity as a whole.

The capitulation of the teacher unions has strengthened the hand of Ford. The hard-right premier is being lauded in the corporate media as a steady pair of hands during the coronavirus crisis. Even the "liberal" *Toronto Star* headlined a recent column, "Doug Ford has risen to the coronavirus challenge." The ruling elite hopes that he can use this political capital to force workers back to their jobs, despite the risk to their lives this poses.

Unifor, like the United Auto Workers in the US, is working hand in glove with the giant automakers to reopen their facilities as quickly as possible. "We will give the green light at the end of the day if our local union leadership feels comfortable with that," Unifor President Jerry Dias told *Automotive News Canada* on Thursday. "(A)s of now, we haven't heard this big outcry saying, 'Don't do it, it's too early.' We haven't heard any of that."

The unions' shameless collaboration with capitalist politicians and bosses to risk the lives of working people underscores the urgent necessity of the working class intervening to fight for its own demands to deal with the pandemic and its economic fallout. These must include: mass testing and contact tracing to bring the pandemic under control; the shutdown of all nonessential industries with full pay for all workers affected; and the provision of protective equipment and care to all workers in essential sectors. Instead of being made to pay for the crisis with their health and even their lives due to the ruling elite's criminal back-to-work policy, workers must initiate a political offensive for a workers' government and the transformation of the banks and major corporations into publicly-owned utilities under workers' control so that society's vast resources can serve human need, not private profit.



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