

# Canada's Trudeau spearheads reckless back-to-work drive in alliance with hard-right provincial governments

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Canada's 13 provincial and territorial premiers agreed at an on-line first ministers meeting last Friday to draw up national guidelines to reopen the services and economic sectors that were shut down in March to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The announcement underscores that Trudeau's federal Liberal government—in conjunction with the hard-right premiers of Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Alberta—is leading a precipitous “reopening” of the economy that will precipitate a rapid escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, causing tens of thousands more deaths.

Infections across the country are already rising rapidly with social distancing measures in place. The total number of coronavirus cases has passed 48,500, with over 2,700 deaths.

Speaking at his daily press conference Friday, Trudeau declared, “In the coming months we will be able to loosen a number of the restrictions and rules that we have right now on personal mobility, in certain sectors [and] on the economy.” Two days earlier, he added that his government recognizes “that different provinces will make different decisions about how and where to start restarting and opening their economies.”

In other words, the Trudeau government is giving a blank cheque to Quebec's Francois Legault, Ontario's Doug Ford, Alberta's Jason Kenney, and Saskatchewan's Scott Moe, who are pushing to reopen their economies with criminal disregard for the lives of working people and their families. Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island have already presented plans to roll back social distancing measures and allow businesses to reopen.

This was certainly the message received by Legault, who felt emboldened last Thursday to bluster about his

government's adoption of a “herd immunity” policy, which would result in skyrocketing deaths. “It may sound frightening, but when Quebecers understand the concept of herd immunity, they will see it is the best way out of the current pandemic,” remarked Legault. “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.”

Making good on his statements, Legault presented a plan yesterday to reopen schools and childcare facilities across the province, starting on May 11.

This plan, which is overwhelmingly motivated by a desire to facilitate the sending of parents back to unsafe workplaces, threatens the lives of students, teachers, support staff, and their families. Quebec has recorded just under 25,000 COVID-19 cases. Deaths have surpassed 1,590.

In neighbouring Ontario, right-wing populist Premier Ford ensured that most of the manufacturing sector could remain open throughout the lockdown by declaring it an “essential service.” This resulted in the absurd situation of even luxury items, such as hot tubs, being produced amid a rampaging pandemic. The province's major auto plants, which collectively employ tens of thousands of workers, are set to begin reopening next week.

Meanwhile, the pandemic continues to spread largely unchecked. On Sunday, infections in the province surged past 14,400. With 24 new deaths, the number of fatalities rose to 835. The failure to get the virus under control compelled Education Minister Stephen Lecce to announce later in the day that the province's public school system will remain closed until at least May 31.

Both Ontario and Quebec have also been forced to call on the support of almost 1,500 Canadian Armed Forces

personnel to help with the catastrophic conditions in longterm care facilities.

But Ford and his right-wing henchmen are not about to allow a raging pandemic to get in the way of corporate profits. On Friday Ford stated that he will present a plan this week for “reopening Ontario’s economy.” Underscoring that his chief concern will be boosting corporate profits, he added, “Businesses across Ontario are paying a heavy, heavy price to put their people and their communities first.”

His cynical attempt to pose as a defender of small businesses struggling due to the shutdown is a fraud. The reality is that working people and small business owners are struggling to make ends meet not due to the lockdown, but because the ruling elite has pursued an economic policy aimed at bailing out the banks and superrich, placing everyone else on rations.

The federal government, with the support of all the opposition parties including the NDP, has funnelled at least \$650 billion into the coffers of the banks and financial markets, while only a tiny fraction of that sum has been set aside for financial relief for workers and their families. The government’s headline bailout measure, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, is already close to running out of funds less than two months into its existence as applications surpass seven million.

The policies pursued by the provincial governments have the same essential content. Jason Kenney’s United Conservative government in Alberta has provided billions in support to the province’s big oil and energy companies, while small businesses and workers struggle to survive. In remarks to a Facebook Live broadcast last Thursday, Kenney, who has imposed billions of dollars in austerity measures to fund a four percentage-point corporate tax cut, cynically declared, “[T]here is not enough fiscal power in the government in Alberta to insulate everyone from the economic adversity we are going through.”

The determination by Trudeau, Legault, Ford, and company to push ahead with reopening the economy has nothing to do with medical or scientific advice. In fact, virtually all experts agree that easing social distancing and allowing businesses to reopen will trigger an upsurge in infections, which Canada’s already overstretched health care system will struggle to deal with. Instead, the push is motivated by a desire to allow the corporate elite to intensify the exploitation of the working class so as to place the burden of the multibillion dollar bailout of the banks and big business squarely on their backs.

The criminally irresponsible character of the back-to-work drive was underscored Saturday, when even the federal government’s top doctor, chief medical officer Theresa Tam, felt compelled to issue a warning about easing lockdowns. “The idea of ... generating natural immunity is actually not something that should be undertaken.” Referring to Legault’s contention that low-risk population groups could be allowed to get infected so “herd immunity” is reached, Tam added, “Even a young person might get severely sick or get into the ICU, so it’s not a concept that should be supported.”

Tam’s remarks reflect mounting tensions between medical professionals and the rapacious demands of Canadian big business. Like their counterparts in every country, Canada’s political and financial elites are prioritizing corporate profits and the wealth of the superrich over human life.

Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious disease physician at Toronto General Hospital, spoke out over the weekend against the claim that people who have recovered from COVID-19 could be issued with immunity passports. This suggestion is frequently cited by proponents of reopening social and economic life as part of a “herd immunity” strategy. “With the data that we have today, it’s just not responsible to think that if you have an antibody test, that means you’re immune and you can safely reintegrate at a place of work or in a place where people congregate together,” commented Bogoch. The World Health Organization (WHO), has repeatedly warned that evidence is lacking as to whether people have immunity after recovering from a COVID-19 infection, or how long that immunity may last.

Workplaces that have remained open have become distribution centres for the virus, as shown by mass outbreaks among workers at longterm care facilities, meatpacking and poultry plants in Alberta and British Columbia, and oil work camps in Alberta. Nonetheless, the trade unions, led by Unifor in the auto industry, are working hand in glove to help the major corporations get workers back on the job as soon as possible.



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