

Infections in Ontario, Canada spike as Ford government rushes to reopen economy

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Even as confirmed COVID-19 cases continue to rise rapidly across Canada, surpassing 65,000, and the death toll approaches 4,600, the country's governments are recklessly rushing to "reopen" the economy.

In the absence of mass testing, systematic contact-tracing, and a massive injection of resources to strengthen the health care system, the ruling elite is risking the lives of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of workers and their loved ones to boost corporate profits.

In justifying Ontario's moves to relax and scrap COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the province's Progressive Conservative premier, Doug Ford, has bluntly declared that the "costs" to big business must be weighed against the purported "price" of saving human lives. "While further reductions in the spread (of the pandemic) are needed before we can begin reopening the province, we have the right framework and the right workplace guidelines in place to do so gradually and safely," claims Ford.

Ford's decision to allow many businesses to restart their operations beginning last Monday marked an abandonment of the vow he had made just days before that Ontario would begin to relax lockdown measures only after the province had recorded two weeks of steadily declining new infection numbers.

In recent days, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has been growing by around 2 to 2.5 percent per day. New case and death numbers tallied Friday afternoon showed that during the previous 48 hours there had been 916 new COVID-19 infections and 105 deaths, bringing the provincial totals to 20,948 cases and 1,648 fatalities. The devastating impact of the virus on long-term care and seniors facilities continues to expand, with nine new homes reporting outbreaks. Across Ontario, 234 long-term care facilities have recorded COVID-19 outbreaks.

The Ontario government began allowing select businesses to reopen on May 4. The main sector to benefit from this initial stage of rolled-back lockdown measures was the construction industry.

A ban on virtually all construction work in the province, it need be recalled, was only implemented in late March, after an outcry from workers. Now work has been resumed, although it remains all but impossible to practice social distancing on

building sites, and hygiene facilities are poor to non-existent.

As of next Monday, retail stores with a street entrance will be allowed to reopen for curbside pickup. Hardware stores, safety supply stores, garden centres and nurseries are also reopening.

The government's back-to-work push flies in the face of World Health Organization warnings about the need for robust testing and contact tracing, and the high transmissibility of the coronavirus in crowded public transit systems and cramped workplaces.

Provincial authorities continue to stress that social distancing should be observed and to urge Ontarians to stay home "as much as possible." This advice, which seems to contradict Ford's reopening policy, serves to provide political cover for the government. It allows it to posture as prudent, and, more importantly, to position it to blame the inevitable spike in cases on the public's insufficient observance of social distancing measures rather than the fact that workers are being forced back on the job under unsafe conditions.

Media commentators have noted that Greater Toronto, the Ontario region hardest hit by the pandemic, has seen a decline in the rate of increase in new coronavirus cases. However, this development is likely to be reversed once the public is outside in greater numbers. Contact tracing of proven and suspected cases remains inadequate, as illustrated by the recent admission of Toronto's chief medical officer that authorities had failed to trace the contacts of 52 positive cases.

An even greater problem is the lack of testing. Of Canada's four larger provinces, Ontario has performed far and away the fewest tests per capita. Last Tuesday, the province carried out little more than 10,000 tests, despite repeated claims that testing capacity was being ramped up. Yesterday, the government claimed it was on track to surpass 16,000 tests for the day, a daily target it initially claimed would be reached weeks ago.

The low-testing levels means authorities are largely functioning in the dark, without detailed knowledge of the spread of the pandemic.

Ford has himself repeatedly voiced frustration over the testing levels, going so far as to lambast health authorities for failing to do more. This is rich, to say the least, coming from a premier whose government has eviscerated the budgets of the province's Public Health Units, cut billions from health care

and other vital public services, and, as a CBC investigation has shown, effectively ended inspections of the province's seniors residences.

The decision to reopen the economy is being driven by big business. Ford himself has said that it is being implemented with advice from "key stakeholders" in addition to public health experts. The right-wing *Toronto Sun*, Ford's biggest media booster, has published a flurry of editorials and commentary arguing that the "fight" against COVID-19 must not be allowed to "kill" the economy, and pressing for an even faster reopening.

The capitalist class is determined to recoup through increased exploitation of the working class the hundreds of billions of dollars in bailout funds that the federal Liberal government, Bank of Canada and other state institutions have funnelled into the financial markets, banks, and big business in order to safeguard the investments of the rich and super-rich.

There are increasingly strident calls from business and the federal Conservative Party for the Liberal government to scale-back or halt the ration-style emergency relief being offered workers who have lost their jobs or are unable to work due to the pandemic, so as to intensify the pressure on workers to risk their health and lives in a premature return-to-work. Federal Conservative leader Andrew Scheer and Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister, among others, have denounced the government for "paying people not to work." This under conditions where the Liberal's Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) pays a meager \$2,000 a month, not enough to cover the average rent on a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto.

In the drive to force workers back to work, Ford enjoys broad support from all section of the ruling elite. The "liberal" *Toronto Star* has applauded Ford's handling of the crisis, comparing him favourably to US President Donald Trump. Meanwhile, the trade unions are working hand-in-glove with the corporations to quell workers' resistance to a precipitous return to work.

Unifor officials have been working closely with the Detroit Three automakers for weeks to prepare the political terrain for a joint push to reopen the plants. "The vice-presidents of Ford Motor Company. ... have put a tonne of work in making sure that we have everything in place to try and keep our workers as safe as possible," John D'Agnolo, president of Windsor-based Unifor Local 200 told CBC Thursday.

For its part, the federal Liberal government has given its stamp of approval to Ford's re-openings and the even more accelerated back-to-work drive being mounted by Quebec's CAQ government. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has declared that the provinces can best determine how to withdraw their lockdowns, and that all Canada's 13 provincial and territorial governments are committed to Ottawa's prudent, "science-based" guidelines for restarting the economy.

Ontario's most important export industry, auto assembly and auto parts, all its manufacturing and mining, including almost

two dozen gold mines, have been classified by the Ford government as "essential services" from the outset of the COVID-19 lockdown, meaning that they have been free to operate. If the auto sector has been shut down since early March, it is only because job actions by workers at the Fiat-Chrysler assembly plant in Windsor and various Detroit Three plants in the US forced the automakers' hands.

An indication of the extremely dangerous conditions workers will confront if they are forced back on the job while the pandemic rages is provided by those sectors that have continued to operate during the lockdown. In Ontario's long-term care homes, 1,700 personal support workers have tested positive for the virus.

Another hotbed for the virus has been food-processing facilities. This week it emerged that a COVID-19 outbreak at Maple Lodge Farms, a Brampton, Ontario-based poultry processing company, has resulted in 25 confirmed infections and at least one death. The single largest COVID-19 outbreak in Canada, and at any North American workplace, is at the Cargill meatpacking plant in High River, Alberta. Over 900 workers have been infected, as well as hundreds of their family and friends. Two people, a Cargill worker and the father of another, have died.

In the midst of such avoidable tragedies, the Ford government is exposing workers to even greater risk. On Friday, the Canadian Union of Public Employees revealed that the Ford government wants to scrap a provincial requirement, introduced only weeks ago, that all workers in long-term care homes be provided N95 masks, the only mask proven to protect wearers from COVID-19 infection. As it is, the requirement is not being adhered to because of a shortage of N95 masks. Consequently, workers are instead being forced to use surgical masks, which offer no protection from the potentially lethal virus.

At least two Ontario care workers died from COVID-19 this week.



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