

Canada's callous and calamitous response to COVID-19

Keith Jones
11 May 2020

The following speech was delivered by Keith Jones, National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Canada, to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally, held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the brutal reality of capitalism and the irreconcilable antagonism between the capitalist drive for profit and the lives and livelihoods of working people. This is as true for Canada as for every other country.

The manner and bearing of the Canadian ruling class' current political leader and front-man, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, may be less brutish than that of the fascist-minded billionaire in the White House. But Canadian capitalism's response to the pandemic has been no less callous and calamitous.

Outside of East Asia, Canada was the country hardest hit by the 2002–2003 SARs outbreak. Yet Canada was entirely unprepared for COVID-19—that is, for a pandemic that was both foreseeable and foreseen, including in Canadian government documents dating back to at least 2006.

For decades, Canada's health care system, like other essential public services, has been dying the death of a thousand cuts. Moreover, Canada's governments, fixated as they were on the "health" of the financial markets and pushing through new oil and gas pipelines over popular opposition, did nothing for some two months to mobilize resources to fight the pandemic. Only on March 10, just three days before large swathes of the country were ordered into lockdown, did the federal government even write to the provinces to enquire about their inventories of essential medical equipment and potential shortages.

Yet virtually overnight, in mid-March, the Trudeau

Liberal government and the Bank of Canada funneled \$650 billion to the banks and big business to prop up the financial markets and guarantee the profits and investments of the rich and super-rich.

Meanwhile, the 7 million workers who have now lost their jobs—representing more than a third of the country's labour force—are being offered rations, through makeshift, temporary, emergency relief programs. These include programs such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, that are already running out of funds, and that the ruling elite is now moving to take away through a precipitous, premature return to work.

With Trudeau's support, Quebec's rightwing populist Coalition Avenir Quebec government has announced a "reopening" of schools, daycares, shops, factories and building sites over the next three weeks, under conditions where even frontline medical workers are not being provided Personal Protective Equipment and there are no provisions for systematic mass-testing and contract-tracing.

A "risky bet"—that is how Quebec's Director of Public Health officer describes this criminal policy, even as he urges the population to embrace it and to embrace death, blithely declaring, "I hope not too many people will die."

Blurting out what government and business leaders across Canada are saying in private, Quebec Premier Francois Legault has proclaimed the need for "herd immunity," and repeatedly touted the lie that those under sixty are not at serious risk from COVID-19—all so that big business can quickly relaunch the extraction of profit from the working class.

Quebec and its metropolis, Montreal, it need be emphasized, are the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, with more than half of the 55,000

confirmed COVID-19 cases and just under 60 percent of the 3,200 deaths.

There is massive and mounting working class opposition in Quebec and across Canada to the capitalist elite's criminal back-to-work policy.

"We are being sent out to babysit," one Montreal teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "so that business can make profits on the backs of working people.... And we know that these big bosses, they won't catch anything in their ivory towers."

This opposition finds expression only outside the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses and the social-democratic NDP, and can only develop through a political and organizational break with them.

The unions and NDP have responded to the pandemic and the ensuing economic collapse by strengthening their longstanding partnership with the federal Liberal government. As the pandemic erupted in early March, the Canadian Labour Congress formed what its president has dubbed a "collaborative front" with big business.

Now the unions are working hand-in-glove with the employers to force a return-to-work, with the Quebec Federation of Labour lauding what it calls Legault's "economic recovery plan." At the same time, Unifor, which was rattled by the work-stoppages of Canadian and US autoworkers protesting unsafe working conditions in early March, is now conspiring with the Detroit Three automakers to corral workers back into the plants.

The unions and NDP and, for that matter, Quebec Solidaire, the sister pseudo-left party of Greece's Syriza, are entirely silent on the Canadian state's looting of the Treasury on behalf of the financial and corporate elite—silent because they are an integral part of Canadian capitalism and feed on its crumbs.

Similarly, these organizations seek to pull wool over the eyes of working people about Canadian imperialism's ever deeper integration into Washington's military-strategic offensives against nuclear-armed China and Russia, in the oil-rich Middle East, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, where Canadian banks and mining companies have tens of billions in investments.

The struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent political force, advancing its own solution to the manifest failure of capitalism, requires an

unrelenting political struggle against the twin reactionary ideologies of Canada's ruling elite, Canadian and Quebec nationalism. For decades the unions and NDP, and their pseudo-left hangers-on, have promoted the lie that Canadian capitalism and its state are "kinder and gentler" than the rapacious dollar republic to the south.

This has gone hand in hand with a systematic campaign to denigrate and deny the traditions of joint struggle between Canadian and US workers, from the Knights of Labour and IWW, to the sit-down strikes of the 1930s and the mass social struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

These traditions must be revived and leavened with a socialist internationalist perspective. To defeat Canadian imperialism, workers in Canada must coordinate their struggles with workers in the US, Mexico and around the world in a global offensive against capitalism.

Working people cannot and will not accept the nightmare of 21st century capitalism—mass immiseration, imperialist war, authoritarian rule, pandemics, and environmental destruction. The challenge is to imbue the growing rebellion of the international working class with an understanding that its logic lies in world socialist revolution—the reorganization of society by and for the working class. This requires the building of a vanguard party of the working class—the International Committee of the Fourth International—to direct and prosecute this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact