

Ontario accelerates “reopening” of the economy as COVID-19 cases rise

Matthew Richter
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In spite of a steady increase in coronavirus cases, Ontario has entered the second phase of its three phase reopening of the economy.

The second phase includes barbers, salons, restaurants, swimming pools, campgrounds, tattoo parlors, and other businesses.

The reopenings are proceeding in spite of significant daily increases in COVID-19 cases. While lockdown measures have helped bring down the number of infections from a high of more than 500 per day, well over 100 infections continue to be recorded daily. On Saturday, 160 new infections were reported and on Sunday, 178.

The criminal disregard of Ontario’s Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government for workers’ lives was underscored by its announcement last week that people who test positive for COVID-19 can be forced to return to work immediately if they show no symptoms. This policy, cynically described as “work self-isolation,” effectively guarantees that workplaces will become centres of mass infection.

The Ford government’s reckless strategy of reopening the economy is being fully supported by the federal Liberal government, which declared decisions about lifting lockdown restrictions a provincial affair. More recently, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberals have initiated a campaign to force workers off the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program and back to their jobs. This includes bringing forward legislation that would threaten workers who use the CERB to shield themselves from being forced back to work in unsafe conditions with onerous fines, even jail time. (See : **Canadian government threatens fines and jail time to force workers back to work**)

The federal and provincial governments are violating all of the World Health Organization’s recommendations by forcing workers back to their jobs amid a raging pandemic. Even Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, felt compelled to warn earlier this month that the number of COVID-19 cases could rise dramatically if the

reopening is mishandled.

The breakneck speed at which the reopening has occurred will have dire consequences for the poorest and most vulnerable members of the working class, and those unable to work from home or socially distance. Arizona, California, Florida, and Texas have all seen a sharp rise in the number of cases since their reopening, helping push the number of new infections in the United States to a record high. The fact that the back-to-work drive is proceeding nonetheless has triggered mounting opposition among American workers, as shown by the work stoppages by Fiat Chrysler workers at the Jefferson North and Sterling Heights assembly plants in Detroit.

Ontario, the economic engine of Canada, has a population of 14.5 million. However, it only has the ability to test 20,000 people a day, and most large and congested workplaces are failing to provide testing for their employees. With the virtually non-existent implementation of contact tracing, it is logical to assume that Ontario will follow in the footsteps of the American states that reopened prematurely.

At least three Mexican migrant farm workers in Ontario have died as a result of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus. At-risk workers across the province are being forced back to work, having been given the choice by employers between unemployment and risking their lives on the job. A report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives estimates that at least 1.7 million workers across Canada will have to choose between their health or a paycheck as the federal government looks to overhaul the CERB.

Governments at all levels have been under intense pressure from businesses to reopen as quickly as possible, regardless of the health consequences. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce, which represents over 200,000 businesses, has persistently and loudly lobbied for a reopening of the economy since the crisis began. One of its more vocal initiatives is the recent founding of the Canadian Business Resilience Network in partnership with the Government of Canada, which aims to “develop business-led labour market

strategies” and “help businesses be ready to sustain operations through the crisis, and a potential second wave.”

Perrin Beatty, the president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (CCC) since 2007, personifies the revolving door that exists between the executive committee of the capitalists in government and big business. Having served as a Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament from 1972 to 1993 and a minister in Brian Mulroney’s cabinet for a decade, he headed the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters association, another business lobby group for eight years ending in 2007.

Beatty currently serves on the federal government’s 17-member Canadian COVID-19 Supply Council, which is responsible for advising the government on the procurement of PPE (personal protective equipment). The supposed “diverse” membership of the supply council includes the CEOs of various businesses and business lobby groups and François Laporte, the president of Teamsters Canada.

While the trade unions are collaborating with the corporate bosses and governments to reopen the economy, the oppositional mood among workers towards this homicidal course continues to grow. Workers have filed at least 5,700 COVID-19 related complaints about unsafe working conditions in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, with at least three-quarters of those complaints coming from Ontario, according to official government statistics.

Legally, workers have the right to refuse unsafe work under Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA). But of the 265 work refusals between February and the end of May, only one was deemed acceptable. While Ontario’s Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development conducted over 8,600 field inspections, more than half of those inspections were carried out remotely. The Ministry conducted similar remote inspections of long-term care facilities in April and May. Over 7,000 residents and staff were infected and more than 1,950 died in the long-term care homes, most of them at for-profit facilities plagued by PPE and staff shortages. (See: **Ontario calls military into another for-profit long-term care facility ravaged by COVID-19**)

The denial of worker complaints is a deliberate policy on the part of the right-wing Ford government. Ontario’s Ministry of Labour set up an internal advisory committee dubbed the Work Refusal Advisory Committee and subsequently renamed the COVID-19 Advisory Team. The membership of the committee has not been made public. According to Warren “Smokey” Thomas, the president of the Ontario Public Sector Employees Union (OPSEU), the union that represents the inspectors, senior ministry personnel have intervened to vet inspectors’ reports. “Inspectors,” said Thomas, “are being told to send their

reports and orders to lawyers and managers within the Ministry. This is not normal.”

OPSEU is an affiliate of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), which represents 54 unions and over one million Ontario workers. It has worked with the government and employers to force workers back on the job amid the pandemic, while making phoney statements about ensuring safety at the workplace. Earlier this month, the OFL issued a pathetic statement that pleaded to the notoriously pro-business Ford government to respect the OHSA. “The (Labour) ministry is disturbingly inactive when workers call on them for assistance, especially at this time when aggressive protections are needed for workers,” bleated OFL President Patty Coates. “This must change.”

Far from organizing job action to prevent workers from being forced to work under unsafe conditions, the unions have responded to the pandemic and the biggest job losses since the Great Depression of the 1930s by deepening their anti-worker partnership with the federal Liberal government and big business. In May, CLC President Hassan Yussuff issued a joint statement with Perrin Beatty of the Chamber of Commerce advocating a long-term corporatist alliance between the unions, big business and government in the form of a “national economic task force,” that would help maintain the competitive position of Canadian capitalism, in the face of “substantial new public and private debt,” and “transformational changes.”

To defend their lives and livelihoods, workers will have to take matters into their own hands, through the building of rank-and-file safety committees in every factory and workplace independent of the pro-capitalist unions. These committees must fight for safety measures—including full access to protective equipment and regular testing, and the power to halt work to guarantee safe conditions—in opposition to management and the subordination of workers’ lives to capitalist profit.



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