

Canadian medical experts provide ideological justification for homicidal back-to-work drive

Laurent Lafrance
25 July 2020

Eighteen Canadian “health experts” issued an open letter earlier this month to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the 13 provincial and territorial premiers to demand a quick and total “reopening” of the economy, schools and daycares in the name of “public health.” Exploiting their professional medical qualifications to give their reactionary arguments unwarranted credibility, the authors express their full-throated endorsement of the corporate elite’s dictum: “The cure cannot be worse than the disease.”

In their open letter and an accompanying statement entitled “Dealing with COVID-19: a balanced response,” the health officials advance a series of outright criminal arguments to justify the Trudeau Liberal government’s back-to-work drive, which has already led to an increase in infections. Their core contention, in their own words, is that “the societal costs” of maintaining even limited restrictions, including social distancing, the closure of schools and restrictions on business operations, are “too high.” It is therefore necessary to strike a new “balance,” by abandoning all efforts to contain the pandemic and instead relying on “personal responsibility” to somewhat slow the virus’ spread, so that everyone can return to “normal.”

There is nothing “balanced” about the response they advocate. Instead, the authors are using their medical credentials to provide ideological support for a homicidal policy of “herd immunity” that will lead to thousands, even tens of thousands, of additional deaths.

The binary alternative offered up by the experts between health care and “society” is false to the core. This line of argumentation has been used since the outset of the pandemic by the most powerful sections of the ruling elite to demand that workers return to work so they can start generating profits again for the major corporations and financial oligarchy. A more honest presentation of their argument would state that the drain on corporate profits that has been produced by the totally inadequate public health measures adopted by the federal and provincial governments is too great. Offered the choice between the further enrichment of the corporate elite and the protection of human life, they effectively declare, “We choose corporate profits, and to hell with the consequences!”

The health experts who signed the open letter include: Gregory Taylor, Theresa Tam’s immediate predecessor as Canada’s chief public health officer; David Butler-Jones, the country’s first chief public health officer; Bob Bell, Ontario’s former deputy health minister; Onye Nnorom, president of the Black Physicians’ Association of Ontario; and Vivek Goel, former president of Public Health Ontario.

Dr. Howard Njoo, Canada’s current deputy chief public health officer, has welcomed the letter, and the Public Health Agency of Canada has acknowledged that the issues raised in it are already being discussed with governments and “other stakeholders,” i.e., big business representatives.

The letter and statement are striking for their blinkered nationalism. The authors pay scant attention to the fact that the pandemic is raging across the globe, with well over 200,000 new infections recorded every day. Just

across the border in the United States, over 70,000 cases are being registered daily.

Back-to-work and reopening schools: A policy of “herd immunity” in all but name

The signatories’ push for a return to school and a return to work en masse as soon as possible. They call for social distancing to be all but abandoned. To the extent that they appeal for the maintenance of basic hygiene measures, including handwashing and the wearing of masks in some enclosed spaces, these are seen as a means of somewhat slowing the virus’ spread through the population to prevent another total, or even partial, shutdown of the economy that would harm corporate interests.

The unstated policy behind these arguments is “herd immunity.” This concept, which in the absence of a vaccine proposes to let the pandemic run its course until 60 or 70 percent of the population get infected, is a homicidal policy that would result in millions more deaths internationally, including tens of thousands or more just in Canada. Even though health experts, including Canada’s public health officer Theresa Tam, have criticized the anti-scientific and medically perverse character of “herd immunity,” governments the world over have silently adopted it when “reopening” their economy.

The homicidal character of this policy was revealed most clearly by Dr. Neil Rau, an infectious disease physician and medical microbiologist at the University of Toronto who signed the letter. Rau applauded the criminal decision of Quebec’s right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) to open schools, day cares and workplaces in most parts of the province even as the pandemic raged. Hailing Quebec Premier François Legault for showing “guts,” Rau told CBC, “I actually think Quebec may be the best.”

Legault’s decision to prematurely “reopen” the economy—at a pace even faster than in the US—was not only irresponsible, but deadly. At the beginning of July, Quebec was still proportionally one of the world’s jurisdictions hardest hit by COVID-19. With 650 deaths per million, the province is only surpassed by Belgium in terms of its death rate. More people have died in Quebec per head of population than in the UK, Spain, Sweden and the US (see: “Quebec government threatens thousands of lives with precipitous return to work”).

In April Legault had been forced to appeal to the federal government to deploy more than 1,000 Canadian Armed Forces personnel to cover the staff shortages caused by previous massive job cuts and the mass infection of health care workers. The premier recently declared that in the event of a “second wave” of infections, any business shutdowns will be very “targeted,” i.e., nothing will be done. Schools and various workplaces like construction sites will not be closed.

Deliberately minimizing the dangers of the virus, the experts bitterly complain about the “fear” Canadians have developed of COVID-19. For them, Canadians have to learn “how to deal with this disease, while getting on with their lives—back to work, back to school, and back to healthy lives and vibrant, active communities across this country.” In a passage that would enjoy the support of the far right—which claims that protective measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, closing non-essential businesses, etc., represent an attack on individual liberties—the signatories assert, “COVID-19 control must be balanced with basic human rights. People need to be empowered to make informed choices about their own lives and the level of risk they are prepared to accept.”

The signatories adopt a totally defeatist attitude towards the possibility of fighting the pandemic. They claim, “We need to shift from a mindset of attempting to eradicate this disease, which is not feasible and will lead to continued devastation of our society, to a new goal.” This new goal is “to focus on preventing deaths and serious illness by protecting the vulnerable while allowing society to function.” This position echoes *Foreign Affairs*, the leading journal of the US foreign policy establishment, which claimed in May, “Efforts to contain the virus are doomed to fail in many countries, and a large percentage of people will be infected in the end.”

This reactionary idea, which articulates the interests of the financial aristocracy in the US, Canada and elsewhere, is invariably tied to the notion that workers have to adapt to the “new normal,” i.e., massive and continuous deaths from COVID-19. The open letter asserts, “Aiming to prevent or contain every case of COVID-19 is simply no longer sustainable at this stage in the pandemic. We need to accept that COVID-19 will be with us for some time and to find ways to deal with it... We need to accept that there will be cases and outbreaks of COVID-19.”

The reality is that rigorous public health and hygiene measures were never seriously applied in Canada. This is shown by the near 9,000 deaths from COVID-19, including a massive death toll among the elderly in nursing homes, as well as the mass infection of health workers resulting from the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE).

It was recently disclosed to Parliament that Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan was briefed as early as January 17 by military intelligence on the rapid spread of coronavirus and the threat it posed. However, refusing to adopt any preventive measures that would impinge on the oligarchy’s drive for profit, Trudeau and his provincial counterparts took no action for almost two months afterwards. It was only on March 10 that the federal government wrote to the provinces to inquire about potential shortages of medical gear, including ventilators and PPE.

The result was that nurses, doctors, and other medical professionals working in a health care system devastated by years of austerity had to contend with a raging pandemic without the necessary protective equipment. There was nothing inevitable about this state of affairs, because the pandemic was both foreseeable and foreseen. Following the SARS epidemic in Toronto in 2003, a comprehensive inquiry and a series of policy reports were produced explaining in detail the steps that needed to be taken to prepare Canada’s health care system for the next pandemic. These measures were systematically ignored by successive provincial and federal governments in favour of providing massive tax handouts to the super-rich and big corporations, and huge spending increases for the military (see: “The 2003 SARS epidemic: how Canada’s elite squandered the chance to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic”).

While the ruling elite’s preparations for the health disaster provoked by the pandemic were catastrophic, the government, big business, and the unions wasted no time in conniving behind the scenes to engineer an unprecedented bailout of the financial elite totalling more than \$650 billion. As the banks and financial oligarchy received virtually unlimited support, the government placed workers on meagre and makeshift rations. The \$2,000 per month provided by the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) barely covers the rent of a modest apartment in major

Canadian cities. Access to the benefit, which for many will expire next month, is being restricted so as to force workers back on the job.

The experts’ claim that the virus can no longer be eradicated flies in the face of World Health Organization (WHO) advice. Serious scientific and medical professionals have insisted that a comprehensive program of testing, contact tracing and isolating infected people can bring the pandemic under control. Yet none of the provincial governments nor the federal government has mounted a systematic effort to implement these measures.

Prioritizing corporate profits over human lives

The return to work serves definite class interests. The Canadian oligarchy is champing at the bit to make the working class pay, through intensified exploitation, for the massive looting of the public treasury it carried out via the state bailout. When the authors of the open letter claim that “the societal costs of maintaining (comprehensive preventive) public health measures, even with some gradual relaxation, are too high,” they are paraphrasing *New York Times*’ columnist Thomas Friedman’s comment, subsequently taken up by the fascistic US President Donald Trump, that “the cure can’t be worse than the disease.”

To hide the real class motives of the ruling elite, the signatories resort to all sorts of hypocritical pretexts. They write in their statement, for instance, that the current pace of school and business’ reopening “carries significant risks to overall population health and threatens to increase inequities across the country,” including among “lower income groups, Black and other racialized groups...” It adds: “Education is compromised. There are increases in domestic violence, alcohol and drug intake, and food insecurity. The economic consequences are huge. This leads to increased unemployment which is related to increased deaths. And the toll on mental health is just beginning to be felt.”

Such cynical hand-wringing is designed to provide what is a viciously anti-worker policy with some “progressive” cover. Children’s “well-being” is a pretext invoked by governments and public health officials to justify the reopening of schools so that their parents can be forced back to work amid the pandemic. The fact that the welfare of children is the last thing on the minds of the advocates of this reckless policy is shown by their complicity in decades of sweeping cuts to education budgets and teachers’ working conditions implemented by governments of all political stripes. This has resulted in a situation in which schools are desperately underfunded, overcrowded and unsafe. Needless to say, they never ask: How it will help the “mental health” and “education” of children to be herded back to school under these conditions, especially when the infection and death of fellow students, teachers, parents and other education workers is only a matter of time?

Domestic violence, drug abuse and food insecurity are not the result of the closing of non-essential businesses and schools. Rather they are social symptoms of the capitalist crisis that were present well before the pandemic. The medical experts present joblessness as some inevitable and unavoidable product of the measures taken to combat the spread of coronavirus, rather than the outcome of big business’ decision, supported by their political hirelings and union lackeys, to lay off millions of workers to protect share values and the wealth of the super-rich.

Not lockdowns, but the ruling elite’s decades-long austerity measures, its negligent initial response to the pandemic and its refusal to use society’s plentiful resources to protect workers’ incomes during the pandemic are responsible for the increase in anxiety, insecurity and inequality. While the stock market is booming once again thanks to the virtually unlimited injection of public funds by the Trudeau government

and the Bank of Canada, millions of Canadians are struggling to make ends meet, as shown by the spike in food bank use.

The recommendations presented by the authors at the end of their statement make clear that corporate profits are to be prioritized over human lives. Governments should “carefully reopen schools, businesses and health care. Allow gatherings of friends and family,” “develop clear control plans for future outbreaks or resurgence of disease that are risk-based and focused so [that] further universal lockdowns are not necessary,” and “assess the appropriateness of recommendations for physical distancing from a risk benefit perspective. Where risk of community transmission is very low, the absolute benefits of physical separation are negligible.”

In opposition to the lying propaganda of the political establishment, workers must advance their own class solution to the catastrophic social, economic and health crisis produced by COVID-19. What is demonstrated by the callous response of the ruling elite to the pandemic, which is summed up so brutally in the positions advanced by the 18 “health experts,” is that there exists no progressive solution to the crisis triggered by the danger pandemic within capitalism, an outmoded system based on private property, production for profit and rival nation-states.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote in its recent statement, “For international working class action against the COVID-19 pandemic”:

Control over the response to the pandemic must be taken out of the hands of the capitalist class. Mass action by the working class, coordinated on an international scale, is necessary to bring the pandemic under control and save millions of lives that are now at risk. The fight against the pandemic is not only, or even primarily, a medical issue. It is, above all, a matter of social and political struggle.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)