

# As Canada's COVID-19 cases surge, unions and NDP expand their support for Trudeau's reckless back-to-work campaign

Roger Jordan  
8 October 2020

In Quebec and Ontario, Canada's two most populous provinces, the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading largely out of control. With new national, Quebec and Ontario daily infection records having been set this past week, health authorities acknowledge that they have been overwhelmed by the surge in novel coronavirus cases. Yet the entire political establishment is doubling down on its criminal back-to-work, back-to-school drive.

The crisis is expressed most sharply in Quebec, where the province's health minister, Christian Dubé, felt compelled Tuesday to urge everyone to stay at home except for work-related or other necessary travel. Quebec recorded 1,364 cases that day, the fifth day in a row that new daily infections in the province exceeded 1,000. In Quebec City, infections have exploded, from about 100 per week just a month ago to more than 1,000 per week.

In contrast to the spring, when the virus spread chiefly in Montreal and in long-term care facilities, infections are now occurring throughout the province. According to Dr. Matthew Oughton, a specialist for infectious diseases at Montreal's Jewish General Hospital, approximately 6 percent of all coronavirus tests are coming back positive. Generally, any rate above 5 percent is seen as an indicator that the virus is spreading out of control.

"This time is totally different, totally different," Dubé said of the pandemic's second wave. "It is very difficult to say where you got it."

In neighbouring Ontario, infections are also rising sharply, and without authorities having a clear idea as to the source of many of the new infections. The seven-day rolling average of infections for the province is currently above 600, compared to less than 100 in early August. Hot spots are emerging in Ottawa and Toronto, with infections especially high in poor, working-class districts.

Canada's health care system, which has been deliberately underfunded by all governments whatever their political stripe for decades, is buckling under the strain. Officials in Ottawa and Toronto admitted this week that contact tracing has largely collapsed, which will result in a further acceleration of

transmission. Responding to the Trudeau government's offer to provide a handful of federal officials to support local authorities in their contact tracing efforts, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Eileen de Villa, remarked, "To be frank, I expect we could have another 700 people added to the ranks and still not be able to contact trace with the same reach and results as when infection rates were lower. It's an indicator of how serious the spread of infection is."

Labs are also overstretched, resulting in long delays in obtaining test results. According to a CBC report Wednesday, labs in Ontario have a backlog of over 55,000 tests to process. Delays of more than a few days make the tests all but meaningless, since they make contact-tracing all but superfluous.

Painting a dire picture of the situation in Ottawa, the capital city's Public Health Unit declared in a tweet, "Our health care system is in crisis. Labs are working beyond capacity, causing dangerous backlogs, which affects our contact tracing & case management. Hospitals are nearing capacity, and we're seeing more outbreaks in LTC (long-term care) homes. Our system can't handle much more of this."

The catastrophic state of the health care system in the face of a second wave that all experts knew was inevitable is the responsibility of the entire political establishment. From the initial systematic downplaying of the threat posed by the pandemic by all levels of government to the refusal of the Trudeau Liberal government to take any steps to strengthen hospitals and other medical facilities during the critical months of January and February, the ruling class paved the way for a disastrous loss of life that has now risen above 9,500 people.

Even though the first wave of the pandemic starkly demonstrated the glaring inadequacies of the public health care system, virtually no funds were made available during the spring and summer months to expand and strengthen it in preparation for the pandemic's anticipated fall and winter "second wave." Instead, the federal Liberal government focussed on rescuing the investments of the financial oligarchy by funneling \$650 billion into the financial markets, banks and big business; and then on spearheading a criminal back-to-work

drive that is exposing workers and their families to the potentially deadly virus.

If the government has been able to press ahead with this mercenary agenda, it is above all due to the support provided by the trade unions and the social-democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP).

The unions have worked with the Liberal government and corporate Canada to enforce the back-to-work drive. This began with their endorsement of the state bailout of the big banks and financial oligarchy last March. Then, in a series of closed-door consultations with big business and the government in April and May, the leaders of the Canadian Labour Congress, the Quebec Federation of Labour, Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), Unifor and other unions gave their full support to the ruling class's drive to force workers back on the job, amid the pandemic, so that the process of profit extraction could be resumed.

Whenever worker opposition to this reckless course has emerged, the unions have worked to shut it down. Last month, as anger mounted to the Ontario Conservative government's dangerous reopening of the province's schools, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation President Harvey Bischof said that the union would respond with "a flat out no" to any call for a strike, which he denounced as "illegal job action." The OSSTF and other teacher unions then filed a complaint with the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board, telling teachers that this capitalist state institution could be entrusted to uphold workplace health and safety. The OLRB promptly displayed its contempt for the health and lives of teachers and students by refusing to even hear the case.

While the unions have smothered all working-class opposition, the NDP has cemented its de facto partnership with the pro-war Liberal government, by repeatedly providing the minority Trudeau government with the votes it needs to stay in office. Canada's social democrats have thus helped keep in power a government that during its five years in office has massively increased military spending, slashed transfers to the provinces for health care, collaborated with Trump in a vicious crackdown on immigrants and refugees, and further integrated Canada into Washington's military-strategic offensives against Russia and China.

On Tuesday, the New Democrats ensured passage of the Trudeau Liberal government's Sept. 23 Throne Speech, the principal purpose of which was to provide phony "progressive" political cover for the ruling class drive to force workers back on the job amidst the resurgent pandemic.

The Throne Speech spelled out the government's determination to avert lockdown measures like those imposed last spring. In line with the remarks of Business Council of Canada CEO Goldy Hyder, who recently railed against the "catastrophic" impact of a further lockdown, the Liberals declared that any future COVID-19 restrictions should be "short-term" and limited to the "local level. In a pre-emptive

slap on the wrist to any health care officials considering the prioritization of human lives over corporate profit, the speech declared that "local health officials know the devastating economic impact a lockdown order can have."

The Trudeau government and its trade union and NDP backers are thus telling workers: "Your lives are worth nothing when weighed against the well-being of corporate Canada.

Under conditions in which the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers are at risk, the pseudo-left organizations of the upper middle class are playing a particularly criminal political role. According to Fightback, which styles itself as a "Marxist" faction within the NDP, the question of whether the New Democrats voted for the Liberals' Throne Speech and facilitated the ruling class back-to-work drive is irrelevant. Writing ahead of last Tuesday's vote, Fightback leader Alex Grant bewailed the fact that "all the options in front of the NDP are terrible," before concluding that "it really doesn't matter" whether they get involved in "propping up the Liberals."

While workers across Canada are being forced to put their health and lives on the line by returning to unsafe workplaces as COVID-19 infection rates skyrocket, Fightback tells its readers that it is of no consequence whether the party of which it is a member plays a key role in abetting this murderous policy. Like the Democratic Socialists of America's *Jacobin* magazine, which recently lent its support to Trump's pursuit of "herd immunity," Fightback shrugs its shoulders with indifference at the prospect of the mass infection of working people.

If this disastrous outcome is to be averted, everything depends on the independent intervention of the working class. Rank-and-file safety committees must be urgently established in every workplace, school and neighbourhood to fight for basic health and safety measures to curb the spread of the virus. These should include the immediate shutdown of all non-essential production, the closure of schools for in-person teaching, and the provision of tens of billions of dollars to strengthen the overstretched health care system. The ill-gotten gains of the super-rich must be seized in order to fund a comprehensive program of financial and social assistance for working people, including full compensation for all those without work or unable to work due to the pandemic.

These necessary demands will only be realized through an unrelenting political struggle against the pro-capitalist unions, the NDP and their pseudo-left backers. Above all, they require the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force in the fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of socio-economic life.



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