

Ontario's reckless reopening of workplaces and schools producing disastrous conditions in child care facilities

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Health authorities in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, reported record high new COVID-19 infections on successive days last weekend, with 978 new cases on Saturday and 1,042 Sunday.

The seven-day rolling average of new cases also stood at an all-time high Sunday of 857.

The dramatic resurgence of COVID-19 cases since the beginning of September is the direct result of the ruling class' homicidal policy of "reopening" the economy and schools, so as to step up the wringing of profits from the working class. This policy, which prioritizes profits over human lives, is backed by the entire political establishment, beginning with the federal Liberal and Ontario Conservative governments, and it is being enforced by the trade unions. They have repeatedly denounced worker job action against potentially life-threatening conditions in unsafe factories and schools as "illegal."

The resurgent pandemic is taking a particularly harsh toll on child care workers. This low-paid, highly exploited section of workers is being placed in extreme danger by the ruling elite's criminal policies. With virtually no safeguards to protect them from the virus, they come into close contact with large numbers of children, parents, and other relatives on a daily basis, exposing them to a high risk of infection.

Big business views the provision of child care for worker-parents as pivotal to its drive to corral workers back on the job amid a raging pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, the acute shortage of child care spaces and child care options was contributing to reduced employment participation rates. Statistics Canada found that in 2019, 7 percent of workers had reduced their hours due to the lack of affordable child care. Illustrating the scale of the demand for child care, nationally, nearly 1.5 million children were regularly receiving non-parental child care before the pandemic's outbreak.

Across Canada, most child care centres were closed when COVID-19 cases exploded in March and provincial governments were forced to order lockdowns. Parents were left at home with pre-K and other young children, some of whom began to attend school virtually. Some municipalities

established child care centres for essential workers, but those who could keep their children away from day cares due to concerns about the spread of the virus.

The refusal of the federal and provincial governments to offer adequate financial support to families left many parents to fend for themselves. The social, economic and psychological pressures, including food insecurity and outright hunger, that resulted from this governmental neglect were then exploited by this ruling class to promote a reckless return to work.

In this, as a leader of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce explained, "reopening" child care was among business' top priorities.

In last month's throne speech, whose principal purpose was to provide political cover for the back-to-work, back-to-school drive, the federal Liberal government announced new funding for child care and claimed that this was a down payment on establishing a national system of "affordable" child care in conjunction with the provinces. The New Democratic Party and trade unions, with the Canadian Labour Congress in the lead, trumpeted this announcement as proof of the Liberal government's "progressive" policies. At the unions' urging, the NDP subsequently voted, as it has repeatedly since last October's election, to prop up the pro-war, pro-austerity minority Liberal government.

In reality, to the extent that the Liberals' child care pledge is implemented, it will be from the standpoint of facilitating the exploitation of more workers, including low-paid child care workers, by big business. With children herded into overcrowded child care facilities, working class parents will face stepped up pressure to return to employment, while the larger, more established, private child care providers will cash in on handsome government subsidies.

Workers should be under no illusion about the intentions of the Liberals and their NDP and union backers. Over the past three decades politicians have repeatedly pledged to establish affordable child care, with few to no practical results. The Liberal Party campaigned for a national child care system under Jean Chretien, Paul Martin, and Michael Ignatieff. The first two of these Liberal leaders, upon taking power, quickly abandoned

their pledges to fund child care and offered parents and the working class as a whole vicious austerity instead.

This austerity, which has been embraced by governments of all political stripes for all areas of public spending and social services, has left child care and other front line workers ill-equipped to deal with the pandemic.

In Ontario, the hard-right government of Doug Ford targeted child care workers as critical to its reckless strategy of reopening the economy. Day cares were given the green light to reopen in the summer. By mid-August, half of licenced day cares had reopened, while restrictions on capacity were abolished.

A favourite argument of the supporters of reopening schools and child care facilities is that lockdowns take a severe toll on the health and social well-being of children. This deliberately ignores the fact that conditions for many working class children were already dire prior to the pandemic. A UNICEF report examining the conditions of children in wealthy countries before the pandemic hit found Canada ranked among the bottom in child mental and physical health.

Day care facilities run on thin margins, leaving many providers concerned about their ability to return to pre-pandemic operating conditions. The child care workforce, composed almost entirely of women, is severely underpaid. A survey by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit found that 88 percent of workers were concerned about the health ramifications of reopening and 85 percent were worried about their job security.

Many child care workers relied on the now ceased Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), which paid a meagre \$2,000 to laid-off workers each month. Underscoring how low the wages in the child care sector are, several employers admitted that for many child care workers the CERB constituted a pay increase.

With laid-off workers, including child care workers, now forced onto Employment Insurance, which has longstanding mechanisms to force workers into accepting inferior job offers, the government is hoping day cares can soon return to full capacity. However, many parents are still opting to keep their children home as long as possible.

The risk facing child care workers is underscored by statistics showing how the virus is increasingly infecting youth. Earlier in the pandemic, older age cohorts represented the bulk of infections with many long-term care homes devastated. However, as the back-to-work and back-to-school policies have taken hold, infection rates have risen among younger people. Once the schools reopened in September, there were more youth under the age of 19 coming down with COVID-19 than septuagenarians.

Sally, who runs her own small day care in Ontario, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that her income has been significantly reduced in comparison to the period before the pandemic, as parents are generally opting to keep their children

at home as long as possible. She explained that to minimize the risk of infections among herself and the children in her care, they increasingly spend their time outdoors. This is becoming more and more difficult as the weather cools and winter approaches. She concluded, “All we can do then is sanitize, wear our masks and hope for the best.”

It is clear that day cares operating at full capacity will accelerate the infection rates throughout the population. Many children attend day cares with children from other schools, creating the potential for mixing the virus across what were previously isolated social bubbles. In assessing the situation, a University of Toronto professor who specializes in paediatrics and infectious disease told Global News, “Children are going to get infected. That’s the reality. We can try to reduce the risk of spread to the daycare providers, but probably they are at risk of getting it.”

This risk has been increased further by modifications to public “health guidelines.” The government is now allowing children experiencing possible COVID-19 symptoms, such as a runny nose, to continue attending school or child care. If a child is forced to stay at home due to a COVID-19 infection, they no longer have to obtain a negative test in order to return. Instead, they only need to remain symptom-free for 24 hours.

The dangerous conditions facing child care workers demonstrates the ruling elite’s criminal disregard for their health and well-being. This also goes for the trade unions, which have collaborated with Ontario’s Conservative government, led by the right-wing populist and former Trump enthusiast Doug Ford, in imposing the back-to-work drive, including by suppressing opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools.

Child care workers should draw the lessons from these experiences and join with teachers, parents, and other sections of workers in the formation of rank-and-file safety committees to combat the pandemic and save lives. These committees should demand the suspension of all non-essential production until the virus is under control, an end to the normal operations of day care centres with full compensation for all child care workers so they can shelter at home, and the provision of funds to establish safe child care options for essential workers, like health care staff.



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