Who bears responsibility for the Canadian ruling elite's catastrophic handling of the COVID-19 pandemic?

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1 November 2020

Canada is in the midst of a disastrous second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. New COVID-19 infections are surging in Quebec, Ontario, and the West—that is in regions that are home to more than 90 percent of the Canadian population.

Late last month, Canada's COVID-19 death toll surpassed 10,000 and currently stands at 10,179. While the death-to-infection rate is presently significantly lower than at the crest of the first wave in late May, medical experts have issued dire warnings about the imminent prospect of hospitals being overwhelmed by an influx of patients. On Friday, the federal government admitted its epidemiological projections show that unless Canadians' social interactions are further curbed the daily new COVID-19 case count could surpass 8,000 in December.

There is no shortage of political responsibility to go around for this horrendous state of affairs. A resurgence of the virus was made inevitable by the refusal of governments at all levels to provide adequate resources for the health care system, and by their collaboration with big business and the trade unions in enforcing a reckless, premature "reopening" of the economy aimed at ensuring corporate profits continue to pour in.

Even now, Prime Minster Justin Trudeau, Quebec Premier Francois Legault and Ontario's Doug Ford, to name only the most conspicuous culprits, are adamant that a return to general lockdown measures must be avoided.

If the pandemic is to be contained and the lives of working people protected, the working class must intervene based on a clear understanding of the political forces and organizations responsible for the adoption of what is in effect a homicidal "herd immunity" policy.

That understanding will most assuredly not be obtained from the parliamentary inquiry into the coronavirus pandemic, which was voted into being last week by the opposition Conservatives, Bloc Quebecois, New Democrats, and Greens. Last Monday's vote to order the House of Commons Health Committee to examine the Liberal government's handling of the pandemic since mid-March was motivated by factional conflicts within the ruling elite, not the desire to save lives by pursuing a scientifically-guided response to the pandemic.

The campaign for this inquiry was led by the right-wing Conservative Party. For months, the Conservatives have attacked the Liberal government for its handling of the pandemic, but not for its criminal disregard for workers' lives in prematurely reopening the economy or its failure to ensure adequate testing, contact-tracing and a vast expansion of health-care resources.

Rather, taking their cue from Trump, the Conservatives have attacked the government for supposedly being over-reliant on World Health Organization (WHO) advice and for not criticizing China strongly enough. Like Trump and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Conservatives and their new leader Erin O'Toole want to scapegoat China for the ruinous response of North American capitalism to the pandemic, and make it grist in the US-led, Canada-supported military-strategic offensive against Beijing.

That the Conservatives have taken center-stage in the official debate over the handling of the pandemic is due to the treacherous role played by the trade unions and the ostensibly "left" New Democratic Party. They have strengthened their anti-worker alliance with the big business minority Trudeau government during the pandemic. This includes giving full support to the federal government-led campaign to prioritize corporate profits over human lives, by "reopening" the economy, amid the pandemic and without heeding WHO guidelines.

Putting profits before human lives

From the moment the novel coronavirus was detected, the response of the Liberal government and the ruling elite as a whole was focused on protecting the interests of big business and Canadian imperialism. Although documents show that Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan was briefed on the virus as early as mid-January, the government continued to downplay the risk posed by the pandemic throughout February and into March. No additional financial resources were made available for Canada's dilapidated health care system, either by Ottawa or by the provincial governments. Only on March 10 did the federal government even bother to write the provinces to inquire about potential shortages of personal protective equipment and other critical medical gear, like ventilators.

This tardy and disorganized response was all the more criminal because Canada had been the country outside of Asia hardest hit by the 2003 SARS epidemic, with more than 40 deaths in the Toronto area. A public inquiry was held and numerous recommendations made on how a future epidemic could be better managed, but successive governments at the federal and provincial levels refused to implement them, and even those steps that were taken soon fell victim to fresh rounds of austerity. While Ontario allowed a massive stockpile of personal protective equipment (PPE) to expire, the Trudeau government reoriented its Public Health Information Unit away from providing early warning assessments on emerging global diseases just months before the pandemic erupted.

The governments' failure to prepare and their delayed response were all the more damaging since even before the pandemic Canada's health care system was in crisis. In Ontario, for example, a large percentage of the province's hospitals ran over capacity during 2019, with so-called "hallway medicine" a widespread problem under "normal" conditions.

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This was the product of decades of cuts to health care and social services implemented by all the political parties, including the NDP. After coming to power in 2015, the Trudeau Liberals picked up from where the Tories left off by limiting the annual increase in health transfers to the provinces to a mere 3 percent per year. This translates into a substantial funding cut when inflation, population growth, and the impact of an aging population are taken into account.

It was only after protests erupted at auto plants in Canada and the United States and other industrial settings that the provincial governments, in close consultation with the federal Trudeau government, felt compelled to order temporary lockdowns in mid-March. But this period was not used to strengthen the health care system.

Instead, the Trudeau government, working hand-in-hand with business lobby groups and the trade unions and NDP, rushed to funnel more than $650 billion into the banks, financial markets and corporate coffers in order to bail out the rich and ultra-rich. The unions and the New Democrats did everything in their power to distract public attention away from this unprecedented transfer of public funds to the financial oligarchy. Meanwhile, they portrayed the Liberals as a "generous," worker-friendly government because they provided a miserly $2,000 per month to laid-off workers through the makeshift and now-terminated Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

Following the completion of the bailout of the financial elite, which helped Canada's 20 richest billionaires experience a $37 billion increase in their wealth in the first five months of the pandemic, the government and its union lackeys turned to the task of abandoning public health restrictions and getting workers back on the job.

In one document released by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) in early May, Canada's largest union body described the task of forcing millions to return to their jobs as a "challenge we must meet." One week later, CLC President Hassan Yussuff published a joint article with Perrin Beatty, head of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, in which the pair warned about the need to manage "substantial new public and private debt" and guarantee the "competitiveness" of Canadian capitalism on the global stage. Calling for the creation of a corporatist national economic task force to subordinate the jobs and livelihoods of working people even more to the needs of corporate Canada, Yussuff and Beatty enthused that this would "stop stakeholders going off in different directions," i.e., block working class opposition to the ruling elite's class war agenda.

The unions' role in enforcing the back-to-work, back-to-school drive

This policy has been put into practice by the corporatist trade unions. When workers at a Cargill meatpacking plant in Alberta were ordered by the company to return to work after a massive COVID-19 outbreak that had already caused two deaths, the United Food and Commercial Workers opposed any job action, denouncing a potential strike by workers to protect their lives and those of their loved ones as "illegal."

When teachers in Ontario and British Columbia pressed for action against the orders issued, respectively, by the right-wing Tory Doug Ford and the John Horgan-led NDP government to reopen schools without elementary safety measures, the teachers' unions similarly opposed any and all job action as "illegal." Instead, they filed cases with the pro-employer labour relations boards, which have served time and again to impose the dictates of big business on striking or protesting workers. After dallying for a month, the Ontario Labour Relations Board refused to even hear the unions' case, citing a technicality. The BC board is similarly dragging out the process, meaning teachers and students are being crowded in classrooms every day with the consent of the BC Teachers' Federation.

The well-heeled union bureaucracies are more interested in upholding the institutions of the capitalist state and their partnership with big business than defending the health and lives of the workers they purport to represent. They bear central responsibility, alongside corporate Canada, the Trudeau Liberals and all provincial governments, for the resurgent pandemic.

This is the true not only in Canada. The same contempt for workers' lives and focus on protecting corporate profits have characterized the response of the ruling elites in every country to the pandemic. In Europe, the trade unions explicitly endorsed the multi-trillion-euro bailout package organized by the European Union's right-wing governments and are complicit in forcing workers back to their jobs, and teachers and students into schools. The result has been a dramatic surge in infections and deaths, with well over 2,000 Europeans now dying from COVID-19 each day.

In the United States, the "herd immunity" policy pursued by Trump and the Democrats enjoys the full backing of the unions, who work hand-in-glove with major corporate players like Fiat Chrysler and school districts to cover up infections and deaths.

If the looming catastrophe is to be averted and the virus brought under control, workers must draw and act upon the political lessons of the pandemic. First and foremost, nothing will be achieved unless the working class acts independently of the establishment parties, unions and institutions and advances its own program to resolve the crisis, based on putting the needs of working people before the profits and class interests of big business.

This should include the closure of schools for in-person teaching and all non-essential businesses until the pandemic is under control, full wages for all workers so they can shelter at home, and tens of billions of dollars for the health care system so as to expand testing and contact tracing, hire more medical staff, and purchase equipment.

All of these urgently needed measures come into direct conflict with the capitalist profit system, which subordinates everything to investor profits, and hence they will be bitterly resisted by the ruling class. That is why workers must mount an independent political struggle against the Liberal government and their allies in the trade unions and NDP, and demand the seizure of the hundreds of billions of dollars illegitimately given to the super-rich so that these resources can be invested in health care and other critical social services. This can be achieved only as part of the mass mobilization of working people in a struggle for a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

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