

As COVID-19 cases surge across Canada, governments press forward with “reopening” of the economy

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COVID-19 infections are surging out of control across Canada. New cases have surpassed 4,000 every day this week, almost double their peak during the pandemic’s “first wave” last spring.

The surge in infections that began with the reopening of schools at the end of August—total cases have more than doubled from 129,000 on August 31 to over 275,000 some 10 weeks later—has become an avalanche.

Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta have all set daily new COVID-19 case records during the past seven days. Yet the country’s provincial governments, who have the primary responsibility for tackling the pandemic, have responded by doubling down on their drive to keep the economy and schools open, regardless of the impact on health and lives. In this they have big business support, with the reactionary arguments in favour of “herd immunity” advocated in the Great Barrington Declaration increasingly being publicly promoted.

Yesterday, Ontario reported 1,426 new COVID-19 cases, a record number for the fourth time in five days, and the seven-day daily average of new cases rose to 1,217. In Manitoba, the Conservative provincial government has been forced to order gyms and hairdressers closed as of today and has restricted non-essential businesses to kerb-side collection, after the infection rate skyrocketed to over 230 per day per million inhabitants. Major outbreaks are under way at more than 20 long-term care facilities, including Parkview Place (23 deaths) and Maples (175 infections).

In Quebec, over 600 deaths have been recorded since schools reopened in late August and new cases are averaging more than 1,000 per day. Alberta is recording a daily infection rate of 210 per 1 million inhabitants, prompting doctors to issue an open letter warning of a looming catastrophe. “If this rate of increase continues

unabated, our acute care health system will be overrun in the near future,” wrote the physicians, who included many intensive care specialists. “Hard experience elsewhere in Europe and the US has shown that when these resources are overwhelmed, mortality rates from COVID-19 and other treatable conditions increase dramatically.”

The depth of the crisis was underscored Tuesday when even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau felt compelled to issue a cautious rebuke to provincial governments over their reluctance to impose restrictions on some economic activity. “We’re seeing record spikes,” Trudeau declared. “I urge premiers and mayors to do the right thing. Act now to protect public health.”

Notwithstanding his pose of concern, the reality is that Trudeau and his Liberal government have overseen and facilitated the reckless reopening of schools and businesses that has led to the present health and social disaster. With the support of its trade union and New Democratic Party allies, the Liberals provided billions of dollars to the provinces that it claimed would make the reopening of schools and the economy safe. In fact, even the most rudimentary safety measures—from speedy, systematic contact tracing and mass testing, to the provision of proper PPE (personal protective equipment) to all health care workers—have not been carried out.

In its September 23 Throne Speech, the Trudeau government insisted that any shutdowns in response to a rise in infections should be “short-term” and conducted at the “local level” (see: Canadian PM Trudeau provides political cover for criminal back-to-work drive).

The reopening of the schools, which was facilitated in every province by the unions’ smothering of all opposition from teachers, has proven critical in provoking the current uncontrolled spread of COVID-19. According

to the latest figures from Public Health Canada, schools and childcare centres accounted for the highest number of coronavirus outbreaks in September and were second only to long-term care facilities in October. Kim Lavoie, Canada Research Chair in behavioural medicine at the Université de Québec à Montréal, said, “It’s really the school-aged kids, primarily the 10-to-19 age group, that are counting for the highest number of cases now in Quebec.”

Andre Picard, the *Globe and Mail*’s award-winning senior medical reporter, acknowledged Monday that Canada has adopted the “herd immunity” policy laid out in the Great Barrington Declaration—i.e., let the virus rip through the population unchecked. “Fasten your seatbelts folks (voluntarily of course, no rules required),” wrote Picard. “Because much of Canada is now barreling down the Barrington Highway. What the Great Barrington Declaration says, when you cut through the pomposity, is that profits matter more than people, that we should let the coronavirus run wild and, if the vulnerable die in service of economic growth, so be it.”

This finds particularly stark expression in Ontario, where the hard-right Ford government has tossed almost all public health restrictions overboard even as new infections surge out of control. Last week, Ontario Premier Ford presented a new multi-tier “reopening plan” that effectively allows all businesses to restart operations and with only extremely limited restrictions. Restaurants and bars were given the go-ahead to restart indoor dining with up to 50 guests, under what Ford cynically described as a framework aimed at striking a “happy balance.”

The plan also imposed extremely strict controls on the enforcement of new restrictions by local public health officials. For example, in the City of Toronto, new cases would have to rise above 3,000 per week for an extended period before the re-imposition of a ban on indoor dining would even be considered. Needless to say, the new plan calls for schools to remain open, which the ruling class views as essential because parents can then be compelled to work amid the pandemic.

The far-right *Toronto Sun*, a pro-Trump rag, responded to the Ontario government’s new even less restrictive COVID-19 policy with exaltations of joy. After weeks of promoting the Great Barrington Declaration on its editorial pages, the *Sun* crowed that it had finally gotten “action” from Ford.

Medical experts have reacted with dismay, warning that the abandonment of any effort to contain the spread of the virus risks producing a health disaster. Brooks Fallis, head

of critical care for the William Osler Health System, which serves Brampton and western Toronto, wrote in the *Globe*, “In Canada, provinces are mainly accepting significant viral activity to minimize economic disruption—learn to live with (COVID-19). Investment has been made in public health, but not enough to target suppression. A trade-off is being made between mortality, morbidity and strain on health care resources, and a perceived improvement in short-term economic prospects.”

The only concerted opposition to the ruling elite’s criminal drive to reopen the economy as the virus runs rampant is coming from the working class. Last week, teachers and support staff refused to work at a Toronto-area school after education authorities, supported by the Ford government, insisted on keeping it open in spite of a major COVID-19 outbreak. In British Columbia, more than 800 parents participated in a one-day school strike late last month, keeping their kids at home to protest the lack of protection measures and the refusal of the NDP government to disclose infection numbers in schools (see: Teachers at Toronto school walk off the job after COVID-19 outbreak).

To prevent a dramatic worsening of the COVID-19 catastrophe, working people must develop these isolated protests into an organized political struggle to fight for the shutdown of all non-essential production, an end to in-person learning in schools, full wages for all workers forced to shelter at home, and the provision of tens of billions of dollars to the health care system to provide everyone with treatment and PPE. To wage such a struggle, rank-and-file safety committees must be formed in every workplace, school and neighbourhood to organize opposition and prepare for a political general strike to place the protection of human life above the defence of corporate profit.



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