

As Canada's ruling class lets pandemic run rampant, workers must fight to shut down nonessential production and schools

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20 November 2020

Thursday's announcement by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) that daily new coronavirus cases could reach 60,000 by the end of the year if contacts between people rise during the coming weeks is a damning indictment of the policy of mass infection and death embraced by the entire political establishment.

Even the agency's more conservative projections point to the gravity of the situation and the urgency of shutting down nonessential businesses and in-person schooling. The PHAC expects there will be 20,000 daily COVID-19 cases by the end of December—the equivalent of 200,000 per day in the United States—if social contacts remain at current levels. Were authorities to impose limited additional control measures, something Canada's governments and establishment parties continue to oppose, the PHAC's modeling shows COVID-19 cases increasing by as much as 10,000 per day by the end of 2020.

New infections and deaths are already at horrifying levels across Canada. One hundred new deaths were reported Wednesday, followed by an additional 79 on Thursday, bringing the COVID-19 death toll to 11,265. New infections on both days were over 4,600, more than double the daily average just one month ago. Public Health Officer Theresa Tam underscored how dire the situation is when she warned on November 13, the last previous time she presented COVID-19 projections, "Fires are burning in so many different areas."

If the ruling elite continues to determine how the pandemic is handled, there is every reason to believe that the more drastic of the PHAC's projections for daily new infections will be realized—leading to a massive and totally unnecessary loss of life.

There is irrefutable evidence that industrial and educational settings are serving as major vectors for the spread of COVID-19. But despite rapidly rising cases across all provinces outside the so-called "Atlantic bubble," premiers of all political stripes are determined to keep nonessential businesses—especially manufacturing, construction and the resource sector—operating, and to force children to attend school in-person so that their parents can be kept on the job.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford, who loosened most of the limited restrictions on business and recreational activity even as coronavirus cases skyrocketed in recent weeks, made clear at a Thursday press conference that his government plans to intensify its reckless reopening of the economy. "The safest place for children right now [is] actually in the schools," Ford asserted. This is contradicted by the fact that recent PHAC figures showed that schools were the location for the largest number of infections in September, and they were second in October only to long-term care facilities.

Ontario's health care system is on the verge of collapse. If new infections grow at a rate of 5 percent, it is estimated that more than 400 patients could need intensive care within the next six weeks. According to the provincial government, the health care system will find it difficult to support non-COVID-19 care if an additional 150 patients require intensive care treatment. Once the figure exceeds 350, the health care system will not be able to cope.

Quebec is still the worst-hit province, with more than 125,000 cases and 6,650 deaths. The virus is once again spreading through nursing homes, where most of the deaths occurred during the pandemic's first wave and thousands of health workers became infected. More than half of the province's 3,100 schools have recorded at least one case, with thousands of students and staff having caught the virus since September. Meanwhile, Premier François Legault has refused to close schools on the pretext that the situation is "under control."

The sabotaging of any comprehensive effort to contain the pandemic and save lives is not the product of misguided politicians or quarrels between the federal and provincial governments. Rather, the ruling elite has agreed on a murderous strategy predicated on the mass infection of the population with the aim of reaching "herd immunity." Award-winning *Globe and Mail* health correspondent André Picard recently noted that Canadian provinces have embraced the anti-scientific herd immunity policy laid out in the Great Barrington Declaration. Picard bluntly stated that "when you cut through the pomposity," what the declaration asserts "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.”

The political establishment is well aware that protecting the wealth and profits of the super-rich will mean accepting substantially higher levels of death as health care systems become overwhelmed. In a meeting with the provincial premiers last week Prime Minister Justin Trudeau acknowledged that the pandemic might spiral out of control to a point where infections are so high that many of the severely ill will not receive medical treatment. “There is a threshold,” warned Trudeau, “beyond which when the cases spike too much, we might have to make really difficult choices about where to deploy the limited resources we have.”

Tacitly admitting that his government will not provide the financial support necessary to combat the pandemic, he reminded the premiers that “resources are not infinite at the federal government, whether it comes to support on contact tracing, extra support on [personal protective equipment], support through the military or the Red Cross.”

These are contemptible lies that must be decisively rejected by working people. The experience of the pandemic’s first 10 months has demonstrated that more than enough resources exist within Canada to combat COVID-19. However, they are monopolized by a fabulously wealthy elite that has no intention of allowing things like life-saving health care and financial support for families on the edge of destitution to get in the way of amassing profits and enriching shareholders.

Millions of workers have suffered substantial losses in income due to the pandemic, which did not even come close to being offset by the ration-style \$2,000 per month provided under the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. By contrast, the super-rich have never had it so good. Canada’s richest 20 billionaires have seen their fortunes grow by \$37 billion since March. This was the direct product of the Trudeau government and Bank of Canada’s provision of over \$650 billion to the big banks and financial oligarchy with virtually no strings attached. On the other hand, the government, with the support of the trade unions and New Democrats, has already rolled back financial assistance for workers as part of their back-to-work campaign, which is the main driver of the catastrophic second wave of infections.

The chief obstacles workers need to overcome in fighting the pandemic are political, not medical. If the vast resources that exist are to be deployed in a scientific and humane manner to close down all nonessential production and vastly strengthen the health care system to save lives, they must be confiscated from the ruling elite. This can be accomplished only if the working class intervenes as an independent political force into the present health and social crisis. Its demands for a rational, scientific response to the pandemic must be connected with a broader political struggle for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.

Shutdowns of nonessential production sites and a halt to in-

person teaching in schools can be effective only if workers and parents forced to stay home receive full compensation for the duration of the pandemic. Billions of dollars must also be invested in the education system to guarantee high-quality online learning for every student and ensure they can access the necessary social and mental health care during these difficult times. All essential workers, including health care staff and food distribution workers, require the best available protective gear to prevent infection, not an unpredictable supply of masks and protective clothing of varying quality and limited usefulness.

Workers need their own independent organizations to fight for these demands. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and school across Canada to take forward this struggle. These committees must be built independently of and in opposition to the trade unions, which have aided and abetted the capitalist elite’s back-to-work/back-to-school campaign and supported the Liberal government’s massive handouts to the banks and corporations.

The unions have declared strikes and protests against unsafe working conditions by teachers, meatpackers and others to be “illegal.” They insist that workers’ well-being and lives must be subordinated to the generation of corporate profits.

Teachers, industrial workers, health care employees and other sections of workers across Canada should build a network of rank-and-file safety committees to coordinate their struggle for a response to the pandemic that prioritizes the saving of human lives over the accumulation of private profit. This must include the impounding of the vast fortunes hoarded by the super-rich to fund critical health and public services and the reorganization of economic life along socialist lines. In fighting for these policies, workers in Canada must unify their struggle with working people in the United States, Europe and Latin America, where working people confront the same criminal disregard for human life on the part of the ruling elites.



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