

As pandemic rages out of control, Canada's governments insist on keeping economy "open" to protect corporate profits

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The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly accelerating across Canada, as a direct result of the ruling elite's reckless and criminal reopening of the economy and schools.

There were 5,707 new coronavirus infections on Monday, setting a new daily record for the second time in three days.

Daily new infections are now averaging well over 5,000 per day, more than twice as high as at the peak of the pandemic's first wave last spring. Deaths are also rising sharply. COVID-19 killed more than 507 people last week, the highest number of fatalities since early June.

Unless the working class intervenes to force a shutdown of all nonessential production with full pay for all workers affected, many thousands of people will lose their lives in the weeks and months ahead.

Total infections have skyrocketed almost threefold since schools were reopened over the widespread objections of teachers and parents at the beginning of September. Total confirmed COVID-19 infections surpassed 340,000 on Monday, up from less than 130,000 at the end of August.

The surge in cases is only expected to accelerate. Last Friday, the Public Health Agency of Canada estimated that if current levels of social contact are maintained, there will be 20,000 cases per day by the end of the year (see: "As Canada's ruling class lets pandemic run rampant, workers must fight to shut down nonessential production and schools").

Epidemiologists, acute-care doctors and other medical specialists have issued repeated warnings that health care systems will soon be overwhelmed. Yet the federal Liberal and provincial governments, irrespective of political stripe, are refusing to take the measures needed to contain the virus's spread, beginning with a shutdown of all nonessential businesses. What limited restrictions they have announced in recent days have one overriding goal: allowing most of the economy—especially manufacturing, construction, energy, mining and other resource sectors—to continue unhindered so that profits keep flowing to the corporate elite, regardless of the cost in human lives. A key element in this strategy is forcing children to attend in-class schooling so that their parents are free to generate corporate profit.

Globe and Mail reported late Monday that there ~~had~~ been 36,476 additional confirmed COVID-19 infections in the previous seven days, an increase of 13 percent from the week before. Currently there are more than 56,500 active COVID-19 cases across Canada, although even this is likely a vast underestimate, since contact tracing has collapsed in many of the worst impacted areas, including Toronto, Manitoba, and Alberta.

The virus is running rampant across the country, including in areas that were relatively unscathed by the initial wave. Manitoba now has the highest infection rate by far of all the provinces, with, as of Monday evening, 616 active cases per 100,000 inhabitants. Alberta is second, with 298 active cases per 100,000 inhabitants.

The so-called "Atlantic bubble," which was established between Prince Edward Island (PEI), New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nova Scotia in July after the first wave crested, and which permitted travel within the region, has burst. PEI and Newfoundland withdrew at the beginning of this week in response to a spike of cases in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Even the remote territory of Nunavut in Canada's far north, which managed not to record a single infection until early November, now confronts a major outbreak.

In Ontario, which broke its daily record with 1,589 new cases on Monday and 19 additional deaths, Premier Doug Ford imposed limited restrictions on public life in Toronto and the neighbouring Peel Region last Friday. Cases have spiked especially sharply in Peel, which includes the city of Brampton, due to major workplace outbreaks. Delivery and distribution centres, which employ low-paid and highly exploited staff, have been particularly hard hit.

Ford's announcement, presented as a "lockdown," offered nothing to workers labouring under dangerous conditions. Predictably, the premier, who last week claimed schools to be "the safest place for children [to be] right now," also refused to shut down in-class schooling or daycares.

Instead, small businesses, including retail outlets, restaurants, barbers, gyms, and nail salons, are bearing the brunt of the lockdown, with the government ordering them to close in-

person service for 28 days as of last Monday. Nonessential retailers are allowed to offer kerbside pickup and restaurants takeout. Indoor public events and social gatherings are prohibited, apart from those limited to members of one household. Outdoor gatherings are capped at 10. Taken as a whole, the measures are a boon to large retailers like Walmart, Costco, and Canadian Tire, which can stay open because they sell groceries or hardware or operate pharmacies. On the other hand, the many small businesses forced to close have been left to fend for themselves with no financial support.

The Ontario government has placed no additional restrictions on major manufacturing or industrial sites, even though it is becoming increasingly clear that they are major vectors for spreading the virus. A recent CBC report noted that since the beginning of the pandemic, over 26,000 people have applied for workers' compensation because they contracted the virus at their place of work.

Flouting the scientific and medical evidence, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sought at his press conference last Friday to blame the population for triggering the resurgence of the pandemic due by failing to follow social distancing regulations. Describing the situation as "frustrating," Trudeau declared, "I know we've all heard stories of people who've thrown up their hands and are not doing their part anymore. People who have stopped wearing masks or people who are going out more than they should. And it's tempting for all of us to say, okay, well, maybe I can loosen up a bit more, too. But the reality is we need to go in the opposite direction."

If there is anyone who has "thrown up their hands" and given up on combatting the pandemic, it is Canada's federal and provincial governments. They have enforced a reckless policy of reopening the economy and returning to in-person learning in schools, ignoring the warnings of public health experts and the concerns of workers and families. Motivating this homicidal agenda is their determination to make working people pay for the more than C\$650 billion bailout of investors and big business that the Trudeau government and Bank of Canada orchestrated last March.

This policy of placing corporate profits ahead of human life is expressed most starkly in Alberta, where Jason Kenney and his United Conservative Party (UCP) government waited until yesterday to unveil limited social distancing measures despite an exponential growth in cases. With a population of just 4.4 million, the province has consistently registered more than 1,500 infections per day in recent days. The official figures do not even come close to indicating the actual state of the pandemic, since the province's contact tracing system has collapsed. According to the *Globe*, the source of 90 percent of new infections can no longer be traced.

As of last Saturday, 56 people were being treated in intensive care beds in the province. Just 70 intensive care beds have been set aside for COVID-19 patients, meaning that hospitals will soon reach capacity. Dr. Lynora Saxinger, an infectious disease

expert at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, wrote on Twitter, "In case anyone is wondering, we're really in deep trouble in hospitals. This can't continue. This is a deadly pandemic, but we will be looking at excess deaths because of failure to take appropriate measures."

Well aware that opposition to the ruling elite's disastrous handling of the pandemic is mounting among working people, the Alberta Federation of Labour issued a lengthy resolution over the weekend making a number of policy demands. These included a "circuit breaker" lockdown to get infections under control, funding for schools and health care to hire additional staff, more regular inspections of workplaces, and the adoption of a "zero COVID" strategy. That the union bureaucrats who backed this resolution have no intention of fighting for any of its demands is highlighted by their decision to address it as an appeal to the Alberta government. That is to the very same UCP government that has ravaged public spending, laid off education and health care staff, attacked workers' rights (including the right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions), and kept Alberta's tar sands oil operations and most other industrial workplaces, including meatpackers, operating throughout the pandemic, even amid major local outbreaks.

Like the unions across Canada, Alberta's unions blocked all working class opposition to the unsafe return to work and school after the initial lockdown in the spring. Their opposition to any independent struggle waged by workers against the dangerous working conditions produced by the pandemic was underscored last month, when they prevailed on workers to obey a reactionary labour board order outlawing a wildcat strike by health care workers against privatization and job cuts.

The calamitous conditions that have been produced across Canada by the ruling elite's ruinous policies can only be countered through independent working class action to force the adoption of the radical measures needed to halt the spread of COVID-19. These should include the shutdown of all nonessential businesses with full pay for all workers affected, a halt to in-person learning in schools, and the provision of billions of dollars to the health care system to guarantee high-quality treatment for all. To fight for these demands, workers must establish rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and school independent of the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses.



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