

# COVID-19 death of Ontario youth worker—a tragic outcome of the ruling elite’s criminal school reopening policy

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News broke in Toronto last week of the first school worker to die from COVID-19 in the province of Ontario. Ingrid Salt, aged 67, was employed as a child and youth worker at St. Francis De Sales Catholic School, part of the publicly-funded Catholic school system. Salt succumbed to the disease a week after testing positive.

According to media reports, she arrived at school one morning with trouble breathing. Colleagues recognized the symptoms as resembling COVID-19 and called for an ambulance. All of the staff members who attended to her, including the school’s principal, are now having to self-isolate, as are a group of students she worked with.

Warm tributes have flowed from her coworkers and the parents of the young pupils with whom she worked. They describe her as someone who “had a huge heart” and was the “backbone of the school.” Ingrid Salt had long been employed in local schools. One parent interviewed by CP24 remembered her as “very energetic, always making jokes, always ready to help, always ready to even give you feedback as to what to do and what to expect.”

The location of St. Francis De Sales points to the degree to which the pandemic is primarily impacting the city’s working class. It sits in the northwest corner of Toronto, which is home to a large population, most of whom live below the median income. Unlike more affluent professionals, who can often work from home, residents largely work in jobs that can’t be done remotely and are reliant on an underserviced transit network that forces them on crowded bus routes during their daily commutes. They also are more likely to live in crowded homes and apartment blocks, further heightening the risk of contracting the virus. Residents have higher rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes that dramatically increase the risks presented by COVID-19.

Salt’s tragic death lays bare the risks inherent in the

homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school policies being forced upon workers by governments at all levels and their trade union accomplices in the midst of the pandemic. Schools across Ontario have reported more than 4,000 infections in less than two months, with hundreds of staff members among those infected. If the political establishment continues to have its way, further deaths among teachers and education staff are only a matter of time.

The anger over Salt’s death has been visceral. After Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce tweeted condolences, teachers and others replied angrily, noting the minister’s role in forcing educators back on the job. “That blood is on your hands,” one response read. Another quoted Lecce’s words that we must “do everything we can to reduce Covid19 in our communities,” before adding, “So then close the schools! ... and after that we could #FireLecce!”

Lecce’s boss, Conservative Premier Doug Ford, was quick to deflect responsibility for Salt’s death from its logical and rightful place—his government and that of the federal Liberals, who have strongly supported Ontario’s push for in-class schooling—by trying to place the blame for the resurgent pandemic on the population at large. He said he was “tired” of “anti-maskers,” who, notwithstanding the risk they represent to efforts at COVID-19 mitigation, in truth constitute only a small fraction of the population. That Ford’s comments are a self-serving evasion is underscored by a recent Public Health Agency of Canada analysis. It showed schools have been one of the main sources of infections since their re-opening in September.

Barely moments after news of Salt’s death broke, Lecce announced the government would not extend the coming holiday break for students. Lecce’s office had announced

the government was considering extending the approximately two-week break before dismissing it as “not necessary at this time.” Ford chimed in, asserting that the “safest place for kids is in schools.” Bluster aside, the real reason Ford and Lecce adamantly oppose any closure of schools is because this would prevent parents from going to work and generating profits for big business and the super-rich.

The trade unions are equally complicit in creating the deadly conditions in Ontario’s schools. In response to Salt’s death, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) wrote that they were “deeply saddened” one of their members had succumbed to COVID-19. But the reality is that CUPE and the teachers unions have suppressed all worker opposition to the reckless back-to-school drive, while appealing for talks with the government to push for essentially cosmetic changes to the government plan. In September, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation President Harvey Bischof emphatically dismissed any suggestion his organization would support “illegal job action.”

Last month’s walkout by teachers and support staff to protest the unsafe working conditions that had led to a major COVID-19 outbreak at a Scarborough elementary school is indicative of growing opposition to the government’s back-to-school policy. The critical task facing educators and their supporters is to give this opposition an organized form and a fighting perspective by establishing rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the corporatist unions, to fight for the closure of all in-class schooling until the pandemic is brought under control. These committees should also demand full compensation for all workers forced to stay home due to childcare responsibilities or layoff, and billions of dollars in investments to provide quality online learning and guarantee safe work and study conditions in schools and all other educational institutions.



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