

Canadian government's fiscal update intensifies criminal drive to keep "economy open" as pandemic rages

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With Canada in the grips of a "second wave" of the COVID-19 pandemic far larger than the first, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government presented its fall 2020 fiscal update to parliament on Monday. The update was aimed at reassuring corporate Canada of two things—that the federal government is determined to keep the economy "open" so as to ensure their profit-making continues unimpeded and that it will provide them with tens of billions in state funds in 2021 and 2022 to boost the global "competitiveness" of Canadian capitalism.

On a day which saw over 6,100 new infections across Canada and 98 further deaths, not a single measure was introduced to curb the spread of the deadly virus. Even as government ministers and opposition politicians alike enthused over the news that mass distribution of vaccines is only a few months away, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland insisted that everything must be done to avoid lockdowns, regardless of the cost in human life.

Implicitly acknowledging that the ruling elite has fully embraced the homicidal policy of allowing the virus to spread unchecked through the population, Freeland told parliament, "We know how to keep most of our economy—from manufacturing, to mining, to jobs that can be done remotely—operating safely, even while the virus is still circulating in our communities. We have learned how to keep many of our children in school."

There is nothing "safe" about how Canada's economy is "operating." While the country's richest 20 billionaires have increased their obscene levels of wealth by more than \$37 billion since the onset of the pandemic, infections and deaths among workers continue to grow at a rapid pace. Just last week, a report revealed that over 26,000 workers have filed workers' compensation claims because they were infected by COVID-19 at work.

Freeland's mantra, shared by the entire ruling class, of keeping the economy "operating safely" while the virus runs rampant has led to mass infections and death. In Quebec,

more than half of all new infections are work-related, according to the province's public health authority. In Ontario's Peel Region, which is dominated by overwhelmingly working class cities like Brampton, the infection rate over the past seven days has reached a staggering 1,200 per 100,000 inhabitants. There have been 116 workplace outbreaks in Peel, which lies directly west and north-west of Metro Toronto, predominantly among low-paid workers in large warehouses and distribution centres.

Schools have also emerged as major vectors for the spread of the virus. Two weeks ago, the dangerous conditions created by the reopening of schools led to the death of a 67-year-old child and youth support worker at a Toronto-area school. Nevertheless, governments at all levels are insisting schools remain open so that parents are available to go to work to generate profits for big business.

As intensive care units across the country approach capacity, the Trudeau government has no intention of changing course. Spurning calls for extra funding for health care, Freeland announced no increases in federal health transfers to the provinces, which have been significantly cut in real terms since the Trudeau government came to power in 2015, and have been falling as a proportion of total state health expenditure for decades.

Instead, the Trudeau government, to use Freeland's words, is focussed on how to "bring our economy roaring back, once this pandemic is beaten." The centrepiece of this agenda is a \$70-100 billion stimulus program that the government claims will establish a "greener, more inclusive, more innovative and competitive economy."

What Trudeau and Freeland are planning is to provide massive subsidies to the corporate oligarchy, while relying on their close ties with the trade union bureaucracy to restructure class relations to the detriment of working people. A foretaste of what they intend has been provided by the recent negotiations between Unifor, the country's largest industrial union, and the Detroit Three automakers. After

months of backroom talks involving the automakers, Unifor, government representatives, and other corporate interests, the federal Liberal and Ontario Conservative governments agreed to hand Ford and Fiat-Chrysler close to \$1 billion in subsidies to convert some of their facilities to electric vehicle production. To consolidate the companies' "business case for the conversion," i.e., ensure that it will result in bumper profits and lavish shareholder payouts, Unifor agreed to the gutting of work rules and to allow the automakers to flood their plants with low-paid two-tier and temporary workers.

Similar plans for other sectors of the economy are undoubtedly already being negotiated behind the scenes, following on from the close tri-partite collaboration the Trudeau government established with business lobby groups and the trade union bureaucracy at the beginning of the pandemic.

The unions supported the Trudeau government's \$650 billion bailout of the banks, big business and the financial oligarchy and its makeshift ration-style assistance for those unable to work during the pandemic. Then in early April, they began conspiring with Ottawa and the corporate elite on forcing workers back on the job amid the raging pandemic. In May, Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff and Canadian Chamber of Commerce head Perrin Beatty issued a joint call for the creation of a national economic task force to discuss how to confront "transformational changes," including high levels of public debt and a rollback of economic globalization, and "avoid stakeholders going off in different directions," i.e., stop the emergence of working class opposition. (See: Canadian unions cement anti-worker corporatist alliance with government and big business)

Since then, the unions have collaborated with business and governments of all political stripes to reopen the economy and schools, and suppress all working class opposition. This criminal back-to-work drive has also been backed by the unions' New Democratic Party allies. The NDP has repeatedly propped up the Liberal minority government in parliament, including by voting for its September throne speech. For its part, British Columbia's NDP government has presided over one of the most comprehensive reopening campaigns, creating conditions for a dramatic resurgence of the pandemic. In the six weeks since Oct. 20, BC's seven-day rolling average of daily new cases has risen from 160 to 750, hospitalizations have risen five-fold, and deaths almost doubled.

A critical element in the Trudeau government's plan to "revive" the economy, and one that enjoys the full support of business organizations and the union bureaucracy, is the provision of "affordable childcare" across the country. This

has absolutely nothing to do with ensuring the social and pedagogical well-being of young children and their families, which would require the investment of tens of billions of dollars in public education and social services to make up for decades of austerity and the devastating impact of the pandemic.

"Affordable childcare" is a euphemism for the creation of low-cost holding pens for the children of working-class parents staffed by precariously employed workers earning poverty wages. Its chief purpose, openly admitted by Freeland and business organizations, is to force working parents to return to their low-paid jobs as quickly as possible.

"Canada will not be truly competitive," declared Freeland Monday, "until all Canadian women have access to the affordable child care we need to support our participation in our country's workforce." The Business Council of Canada responded with enthusiasm to her announcement, noting that it has been advocating just such a policy "for many months."

The Liberals and their trade union allies are attempting to dress up their anti-worker agenda with propaganda about more "inclusiveness" and "numerous commitments towards workers." A typical example of "inclusion" was the creation of a \$93 million Black Entrepreneurship Program to provide "equitable access" to government procurement programs for "black business owners," a measure that will no doubt meet with approval among the identity politics-obsessed sections of the privileged middle class.

The CLC—whose website is emblazoned with the heading "In Canada, we've weathered the pandemic by sticking together and supporting each other"—waxed lyrical about how the Liberals' fiscal update gave workers "assurances that their government will help them make ends meet and safeguard their health and wellbeing."

To the extent that there was any criticism within the political establishment of the Liberals' pro-corporate agenda, it came from the right. The Conservatives and the Business Council of Canada complained that too much government spending is being planned, and said that a "fiscal anchor" is required to impose spending cuts over the long-term. Underscoring that the disagreement revolves purely around the timing of austerity measures, the Liberals stressed in response that as soon as employment levels rebound, Canada will return to "fiscal responsibility."



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