Teacher walkout forces closure of Toronto-area school hit by COVID-19 outbreak

Omar Ali
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An elementary school in a heavily working-class Toronto neighbourhood was forced to close last Thursday following a teacher walkout triggered by a massive COVID-19 outbreak. Mass testing at Thorncliffe Park Public School, undertaken to locate asymptomatic carriers of the virus, had found 26 cases among staff and students.

Public health authorities initially refused to close the school, following directives from Ontario's hard-right Conservative government, which is determined to keep schools open so parents can go to work and generate profits for big business. After 19 positive tests were confirmed, 348 students and 27 of the school's 30 teachers were ordered to isolate at home. Even so, Toronto Public Health officials insisted that the cases were acquired outside the walls of the school. When the confirmed case count rose to 26 on Thursday, the three remaining teachers walked off the job, effectively forcing Toronto Public Health to order the school closed.

The pilot program of voluntary testing for those who are not showing symptoms was recently rolled out at schools in hard-hit neighbourhoods across the province. It has so far included hotspots in Ottawa, Toronto and the badly affected Peel Region in Toronto's western suburbs.

Provincial Education Minister Stephen Lecce, who has led the reckless school reopening drive of the Doug Ford-led provincial government, defended the refusal to close Thorncliffe Park Public School. "Ninety-nine percent of Ontario students are COVID-free," he cynically declared.

Lecce also pointed to the high community positive test rate of 16 percent, compared to the 4 percent found at the school, to claim that the Thorncliffe Park outbreak was not due to in-school transmission. Journalists felt compelled to point out the obvious, that the high positive test rate in the community was a result of greater testing among symptomatic individuals and those with whom they have been in close contact. Furthermore, high transmission in the broader community only underscores the criminality of keeping schools open while cases of the virus skyrocket all around.

The findings of the asymptomatic tests indicate the degree to which the number of infections is being underreported. On Sunday, just three days after the closure of Thorncliffe Park Public School, a second nearby school, the Fraser Mustard Elementary Learning Academy, was closed until December 14. Seven cases have been confirmed there.

Like the northwestern Toronto community in which a school worker died of COVID-19 last month, Thorncliffe Park PS sits in an area of the city with extremely high concentrations of positive cases. The neighbourhood is a concrete jungle of high-rise apartment buildings, largely populated by immigrants living on low incomes. Employed in essential industries or forced back to work by the meagre COVID-19 assistance being provided by the state, they work and live in the crowded conditions that are ideal for the virus' spread. The school is itself one of the largest elementary schools in the country, although much of the staff and many students have attended remotely during the pandemic.

In striking contrast with Thorncliffe, the wealthier community of Leaside that sits directly adjacent to it has reported one-third as many COVID-19 infections.

The temporary shutdown of Thorncliffe Park PS was due to the courageous independent action of rank-and-file teachers—those whom the trade unions are doing everything to muzzle. The Elementary Teachers of Toronto intervened in the dispute so as to confine it to the straitjacket of a "work refusal" as per Ontario's pro-employer Labour Relations Code.

After the school's closure, the vice president of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto (ETT) complacently declared, "[Toronto Public Health] still have the ability, under direction from the Ministry of Education, to make these kinds of decisions …we would have hoped that that

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would have happened several days ago, but nonetheless, better late than never."

What a contemptible fraud! The authorities' refusal to shut down the school for days despite evidence of a large-scale outbreak placed the lives of teachers, students and their parents at risk, and may yet prove to have grave, even fatal consequences. While it may be a matter of "better late than never" for the well-paid ETT bureaucrats, these are questions of life and death for teachers, students and their relatives, and not at just Thorncliffe Park PS, but at every school across Ontario and Canada. Illustrating this fact, a recent membership survey published by the ETT revealed that 62 percent of the more than 1,000 respondents can "never or rarely" social distance in their schools.

The smothering of the teachers' action by the ETT played directly into the hands of the Ford government, which has ordered Thorncliffe Park PS to reopen Wednesday, i.e., less than a week after its closure. There have been no reports of any precautionary measures to prevent a renewed eruption of the deadly virus.

The ETT's hostility to any genuine fight against the pandemic by teachers and other sections of workers is in keeping with the record of the education unions since the eruption of COVID-19. All of Ontario's education unions connived in September's homicidal school reopening, helping implement the Ford government's dangerous directives to force a return to in-class learning. In response to the government's refusal to address teachers' demands for smaller classes, better ventilation, smaller cohorts and mandatory mask-wearing, they emphatically ruled out a strike or any job action. Instead, they filed a legal challenge at the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB).

Predictably, the OLRB dragged its feet for almost a month before issuing a ruling. In the interim, teachers and students were crammed into overcrowded classrooms, and schools emerged as one of the main sources of new COVID-19 infections in Canada.

Ultimately, the OLRB sided with the government and tossed out the unions' complaint in early October, contemptuously stating that it had no jurisdiction to so much as consider its contents. The unions accepted this outrageous decision without a peep of opposition. In an absurd bureaucratic farce, the unions then followed the OLRB ruling to the letter—even though they themselves described it as "not a sensible approach to the problem of the pandemic." They have instructed their members to file individual complaints to the Labour Ministry based on specific situations at individual schools or even specific classrooms. In effect, the unions have told teachers to wait for virus outbreaks to occur, risking countless lives, before making a humble appeal to the same institutions of the capitalist state responsible for creating the dangerous conditions in the first place. (See Ontario Labour Relations Board refuses to hear case brought by unions on unsafe school reopenings)

The unions deployed these tactics to sabotage a teachers' walkout at a Scarborough elementary school in early November, and again in response to the latest walkout at Thorncliffe Park PS. In both cases, the result was that the authorities were free to reopen the school in a matter of days, with no additional protections being secured (See: **Teachers at Toronto school walk off the job after COVID-19 outbreak**)

The growth of teacher walkouts in Ontario in opposition to the ruling elite's criminal policy of keeping schools open is a welcome development. But the experiences so far confirm that if a genuine struggle is to be waged against the unsafe conditions in the schools, teachers must break free of the stifling grip of the trade unions and their subordination to the pro-employer labour relations system. What is required is a common struggle involving all teachers and education workers across Ontario and Canada to halt all in-person learning until the pandemic is brought under control; secure full pay for all parents forced to stay at home to care for their children; and ensure billions of dollars are poured into providing high-quality online learning, including free internet access and electronic devices for every student. There are more than enough resources available to pay for such a program, as shown by the fact that Canada's 20 richest billionaires have made more than $37 billion since the beginning of the pandemic.

To organize this fight, teachers should follow the example of their colleagues in the United States by building rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to make urgent preparations for a strike to close all schools, stop all nonessential production with full wages, and prioritize saving lives over capitalist profit.

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