

Canadian authorities covering up workplace COVID-19 outbreaks to justify keeping economy and schools open

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Canada's Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland claimed in her fiscal update speech last week that the ruling class has learned how to "keep most of our economy ... operating safely, even while the virus is still circulating in our communities."

This is a lie. COVID-19 is running rampant in workplaces and schools. The ruling elite and their political hirelings are concealing this fact because they are adamant that nothing be allowed to get in the way of raking in profits amid a raging pandemic.

The reckless back-to-work campaign spearheaded by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government and provincial governments of all political stripes, and supported by the corporatist trade unions, has led to a surge in workplace COVID-19 infections and deaths, especially among low income, highly-exploited industrial and logistics workers.

Those working in manual labour jobs without the option of working from home are catching COVID-19 while at work at alarming rates. In Quebec, workplaces now account for 40 percent of all infections, and these figures, which come from the government's *Institut national de santé publique*, do not include infections at schools, hospitals and long-term care facilities.

In mid-October, the provincial government agency in charge of occupational health and safety ordered a COVID-19 "inspection blitz," but the public health institute's data show that this has utterly failed to arrest the growth in workplace infections. For 11 consecutive weeks, ending only last week when there was a small decline, the number of workplace outbreaks rose to a new high.

Ontario's Peel Region, which neighbours Metro Toronto and includes the largely working-class cities of Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon, is one of Canada's largest warehouse and distribution hubs. Businesses in the region employ many immigrants and members of multigenerational households. Peel Region has the highest cumulative rate of COVID-19 cases in Ontario, at a staggering 1,200 cases per 100,000 people. As of December 1, there had been 116 total workplace outbreaks, more than the number that have occurred in long-term care homes and schools combined.

Peel Region's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Lawrence Loh, acknowledged that the surge in workplace infections is linked to the fact that many workers are so poorly paid they have no choice but to go to work, even when they display COVID-19 symptoms. "In protecting workers, we know that the absence of worker protections and paid sick leave does result in outbreaks because, people will show up because they're choosing between their livelihood and their lives," he remarked.

According to data analysis of the first week of November by the Toronto-based non-profit ICES, the northeast corner of Brampton had a 19 percent COVID-19 test positivity rate, a rate double that in the United States. Peel as a whole is recording a 9.8 percent test positivity rate, the highest in the Greater Toronto Area, while northwestern Toronto, Scarborough, and the southern York Region are also reporting sky-high rates.

Underscoring that the surge in on-the-job infections is the direct product of the provincial government's criminal drive to reopen the economy at all costs, more than 25 percent of all cases linked to workplace outbreaks in Peel have been reported in the past two months. Manufacturing and industrial facilities account for 34 percent of workplace outbreaks, while retail and food processing make up 14 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

The workplace outbreaks have led to rapid household and community spread. In September, the region experienced its largest workplace outbreak, when 61 workers tested positive at a business in Mississauga. Despite the major threat posed to the community, public health officials refused to identify the employer or explain how the virus spread. The outbreak led to at least 49 additional infections among family members and close contacts.

Information released by Peel Public Health points to the utter contempt shown towards workers by employers and governments, many of whom have done little to nothing to implement even the most basic workplace protections and safeguards. The agency noted that a lack of physical distancing in lunch rooms and other common areas, improper mask use, carpooling with other employees and the failure to conduct on-

site screening to prevent symptomatic workers from entering a facility are the leading causes of infection in workplaces.

Even Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown, a former leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives, felt compelled to comment on the disgraceful treatment of workers. “If there’s even a single case in a school or in a long-term care facility, they tell the public,” Brown said. “But in Mississauga we had a factory with more than 60 cases and we still didn’t release the name because of Public Health Ontario guidelines.”

Brown added, “We’re seeing transmission in industrial settings and essential workplaces, and there were a number of outbreaks in food processing and transportation and logistics. ... While many people are sitting in the comfort of their homes and going to grocery stores, it’s an Amazon worker, a trucker in Brampton, or someone in a food processing plant that made sure they had their food.”

Brown has remained a lone voice in the wilderness within the political establishment. Federal and provincial agencies, as his comments highlight, are intentionally downplaying and outright suppressing news of workplace outbreaks, leaving the public in the dark about where the virus is spreading.

An Ontario Health Coalition report on outbreaks in non-health care workplaces released on October 20 documented a 68 percent increase in workplace outbreaks across the province during the previous three weeks. “This increase is disconcerting as we have yet to see any kind of coherent plan or regulations from the Ford Government and the few directives and regulations released have been arbitrary, lacking in detailed instructions for workplace safety procedures and implemented in an ad hoc manner,” wrote the authors. “Workplace outbreaks are poorly reported and are not broken down by industry in a way that is transparent. Since the approach to managing the pandemic is to keep everything possible open, rather than shutting down, it is more vital than ever that the public understands where and how COVID-19 is spreading. Currently this is not happening. Shielding business names with outbreaks is not serving the public interest.”

Workers infected on the job who have sought redress by filing compensation claims with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) are routinely seeing their claims denied. A Canadian Press report in mid-November noted that Ontario’s WSIB has tossed out over 1,400 workers’ claims related to COVID-19, including hundreds from health care workers and other frontline occupations.

Similarly, the Ontario Ministry of Labour has issued only 37 COVID-19-related stop work orders, which are used when there is an immediate risk of worker injury. The reluctance to issue such orders is undoubtedly because it requires the business to halt operations until the risk is addressed.

The criminal indifference of the capitalist politicians and their state institutions for the lives of workers and their families is shared by the union bureaucrats. The unions bear responsibility for the dangerous conditions in workplaces across Canada,

because they have collaborated with the Trudeau Liberals and provincial governments to reopen the economy and schools. As early as April, union bureaucrats held closed-door meetings with government officials and business lobby groups, following which they described getting everyone back to work quickly as “a challenge that we must meet.”

Whenever worker opposition to this homicidal course breaks out, the unions intervene to suppress it and divert demands for prioritizing worker safety into the straitjacket of the provincial labour relations system—the same system that is dismissing workers’ compensation claims and refusing to hold employers accountable for putting workers’ lives at risk. Two of the most egregious examples of this were the unions’ bitter hostility to job action by Alberta meat packing workers at Cargill’s High River plant following a massive outbreak that ultimately killed four people, and by teachers across Canada opposed to the reckless reopening of schools.

To stop the ruling elite’s criminal policy of mass infections and death, workers must take the defence of workplace safety and their very lives into their own hands. What is necessary is the shutdown of schools and all nonessential production with full compensation for all workers affected until the pandemic is brought under control, and the investment of hundreds of billions of dollars in health care and social services to ensure everyone receives the care and support they require. The resources exist for such a program, but they must be expropriated from the financial oligarchy, which has enriched itself massively over recent months at the expense of the working class. To conduct this struggle, workers must establish rank-and-file safety committees independent of the corporatist unions in every workplace, and take up a political fight against the capitalist profit system with the aim of placing human needs ahead of private profit.



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