

A tale of two pandemics: Ontario's finance minister holidays in the sun while workers get infected and die

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Last Thursday's forced resignation of Rod Phillips, the finance minister in Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government, demonstrated in equal measure the ruling elite's disdain towards the population and its hypocrisy over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The affair has blown a mile-wide hole in the Canadian ruling class' claims, amplified by the mainstream media and the trade unions, that "we're all in this together."

Premier Doug Ford was forced to accept Phillips' resignation after it became public that the finance minister spent over two weeks holidaying at a luxury resort for the ultra-wealthy in the Caribbean. This at the same time as his government was calling on everyone to stay at home during the holiday season to combat the virus' spread, and had to introduce new COVID-19 "lockdown measures."

Phillips, the former CEO of Shepell.fgi and chair of Postmedia, flew with his wife on December 13 to St. Barts, where the most expensive villas rent for \$50,000 per night. The Phillips family reportedly settled for a more humble abode at just over \$1,100 per night.

During his vacation, Phillips continued to tweet pictures of himself visiting small businesses in Ontario, and a Christmas Eve video in which he posed against a wintry background while praising the work of frontline health care workers during the pandemic.

The widespread public outrage at Phillips' behaviour is more than justified. During the 18 days he was living it up in St. Barts, Ontario recorded well over 40,000 new COVID-19 cases. Between December 13 and December 31, the day Phillips flew back to Toronto and tendered his resignation, 2,237 people died from the coronavirus across Canada according to official figures.

But it must be stressed, Phillips' actions are not an example of individual misjudgment, as he and all the media talking heads are claiming. Rather, it is an expression of the ruling class' contempt for the lives of working people amid the greatest health and social crisis in a century. As the

World Socialist Web Site wrote in August, under conditions where the stock markets are up, and the super-rich can purchase virtually instant COVID-19 tests privately and travel in comfort and safety on their own chartered jets, life has never been so good. "The coronavirus," we noted, "is a poor person's disease."

This applies fully to Phillips and his ilk in Canada. The country's 40 billionaires have gained over \$50 billion in wealth since the beginning of the pandemic. Major corporations, meanwhile, have used government bailout funds to pay for lavish shareholder payouts and executive bonuses even as they lay off workers and slash their hours. The vast transfer of wealth that has occurred was overseen by the Trudeau Liberal government, which funnelled over \$650 billion to the banks and financial oligarchy almost overnight last March. (See: Canada's pandemic wage subsidy: a slush fund for wealthy shareholders and corporate executives)

On the other side of the social divide, as of September 2020, one in seven Canadians—more than 5 million people—was experiencing food insecurity, i.e. lacked the resources to obtain three proper meals a day. According to the Bank of Canada employment among low-wage earners has dropped 20 percent since the beginning of the pandemic.

If there is anything more contemptible than Phillips' behaviour, it is Ford's efforts to distance himself from the scandal and pose as an ally of working people outraged at his former finance minister's extravagance. This is a fraud on many levels. First, Ford has acknowledged that he was aware of Phillips' luxury vacation in the sun around two weeks before the story broke. Yet he did not order his minister home, let alone discipline him. Only after Phillip's luxury vacation was publicly exposed did Ford, himself a multi-millionaire businessman, feign anger and wring his hands over Phillip's "letting down" the people of Ontario.

More fundamentally, Phillips' flagrant flouting of the Ford government's own public health recommendations and

regulation is of a piece with the government's criminal disregard for the well-being and lives of working people. Like their counterparts across Canada and internationally, Ontario's Conservative government has prioritized corporate profits over workers' lives throughout the pandemic.

After coming to power in 2018, the Ford government went on an austerity spree, cutting billions from health care, education and social services. This included gutting inspections of long-term care facilities and massive cuts to the public health agencies that have been in the forefront of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. These policies directly contributed to the catastrophic impact of the virus on the province's care-home residents, more than 2,700 of whom have perished from COVID-19.

During both the first and second waves of the pandemic, the Ford government implemented lockdowns with huge loopholes designed to ensure most manufacturing and industrial operations remained open and at full throttle. As a result, infection rates have surged in workplaces and working-class neighbourhoods.

Last spring, Ontario's initial lockdown included exemptions for at least 73 types of businesses deemed "essential," including auto assembly plants and jacuzzi manufacturers. So as to ensure Ontario is "open for business," to use one of Ford's favourite expressions, the government has barred public health authorities from releasing details of the locations of workplace COVID-19 outbreaks, even when there have been dozens of infections.

Daily infections are now more than double what they were at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic last spring, yet the second lockdown, announced by Ford on December 21, allows an even greater number of businesses to remain open. (See: **"The working conditions are hell" — Ontario allows COVID-19 to run rampant through workplaces**)

The Ford government's push to reopen schools has likewise proved disastrous. Ignoring the warnings of medical experts, the government ordered all elementary and secondary schools to reopen for in-class instruction after the summer holidays with virtually no health and safety precautions. This reckless move was seen as essential by the ruling elite, including the federal Liberal government, because it meant parents could be freed from childcare responsibilities and forced to return to work to generate profits for big business. If the government was able to impose this policy despite widespread apprehension and opposition among teachers and parents, it was above all due to the education trade unions, which rejected all job action as "illegal." The result was that in October and November, schools were one of the main sources of COVID-19 infection in Ontario and Canada.

While the Ford government's policies have led to misery and death for workers and their families, large sections of the Canadian ruling elite have welcomed them for protecting "the economy," i.e. corporate profits and the accumulation of wealth by the super-rich. The *Toronto Star* and other traditionally Liberal-aligned commentators have touted Ford's supposedly responsible response to the pandemic, favourably contrasting the actions of Ontario's right-wing populist premier and one-time Trump-enthusiast with the fascist-minded US president's ruinous mishandling of COVID-19.

The promotion of Ford is a key element in the Canadian bourgeoisie's preposterous claim that all Canadians pulled together in response to COVID-19, setting aside political quarrels for the common good, and that this proves the superiority of Canadian society and governance over the dysfunction to the south.

The trade union bureaucracy, in addition to its key role in enforcing the back-to-work campaign, has provided much of the ideological cement for this reactionary Canadian nationalist propaganda drive. The Canadian Labour Congress, the country's largest union federation, claims in a banner atop the front page of its website, "In Canada, we've weathered the pandemic by sticking together and supporting each other."

The Rod Phillips scandal has exposed the grim reality behind this bogus propaganda campaign: Canada, no less than the other major capitalist powers, is riven by explosive class divisions and dominated by a bloated financial elite that is utterly indifferent to the health and lives of working people. Any genuine plan to combat the pandemic must be based on the independent political mobilization of the working class to enforce a shutdown of all nonessential production with full pay for all workers until the pandemic is brought under control and to secure the investment of tens of billions of additional dollars in the chronically underfunded public health care system. The financial resources needed to pay for such a program are available in abundance, but they must be seized from the super-rich oligarchy and redirected to meet social needs.



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