

Canadian educators must mount a political struggle to oppose school reopenings and save lives

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Even as the COVID-19 pandemic rages out of control across the country, pushing health care systems to the brink of collapse, the ruling elite is determined to reopen schools for in-class instruction as quickly as possible. Their main concern in so doing is to free up parents from childcare responsibilities so that they can return to work and churning out profits for big business.

Schools reopened in Quebec, Alberta and northern Ontario on January 11. Other regions of Ontario will reopen on January 25, while schools in Toronto, Peel Region, Hamilton and Windsor-Essex will remain closed for in-person learning until February 10. In British Columbia, the New Democratic Party government began reopening schools January 4 in the face of widespread public opposition, including a petition that obtained over 40,000 signatures demanding a lengthening of the winter holiday break.

Whatever the specific timetables of the various provincial governments, it is clear that they are all determined to force educators, students and support staff back into unsafe school buildings as soon as possible. Under conditions of widespread community transmission of the highly infectious coronavirus, the arrival of new, more infectious strains of the virus, and the cold winter months forcing everyone indoors, the reopening of schools will inevitably lead to a further explosion of COVID-19 cases and deaths. This has been the experience in the United States and Europe, where the ruling elites have pursued the same ruinous policy.

To prevent this outcome, everything depends on teachers waging a political struggle to close all schools until the pandemic is brought under control. This fight is inseparable from the struggle to mobilize the entire working class to shut down all non-essential production with full financial compensation for all workers. Such a struggle must incorporate the vital lessons learned over the past year in opposing the ruling elite's criminal policy of "herd immunity," which has allowed the virus to spread unchecked through the population while safeguarding the wealth of the corporate elite.

At this stage, the science surrounding the necessity of halting in-person learning to combat the novel coronavirus is clear and uncontested. Indoor teaching in close quarters with potentially asymptomatic carriers is fraught with risk for spreading the virus. One tally of cases in schools found that across Canada, nearly 7,000 schools have reported cases as of January 5, 2021. The recent testing of asymptomatic students at a Toronto elementary school, which uncovered over two dozen infections, demonstrates the near certainty that this nationwide tally understates the true positivity rate.

School closures have proven to be among the most effective

measures at reducing transmission. Studies show that last spring's school closures are estimated to have reduced fatalities due to COVID-19 by upward of 60 percent in the United States, and that children and adolescents are more likely to spread the disease than other age groups.

The initial shutdowns by governments across the world, it must be added, were motivated not by concern for their citizens, but rather by the need to prevent an eruption of uncontrollable popular opposition among workers, who had already begun to take matters into their own hands by walking off the job at large production facilities. A stop work-action by autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler's Windsor Assembly Plant triggered a wave of similar protests across North America that forced the temporary shutdown of auto production and governments to impose lockdown measures.

Working with the big banks and the industry lobbies, Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took the opportunity to orchestrate a transfer of more than \$650 billion of public funds into the coffers of the corporate elite in response. In this, he had the backing of all of the establishment parties, from the Conservatives to the NDP and Greens, and crucially, the trade union officialdom.

The prospect that cooler temperatures would force people indoors in the fall and winter months and contribute to a resurgence of the pandemic was anticipated by epidemiologists. But the principal cause of the "second wave," and the overriding reason it has become far larger and will prove even more deadly than the first, is the ruling elite's rush to reopen workplaces, and since September, schools. Claiming that the "cure must not be worse than the disease," big business, their political hirelings and trade union accomplices demanded, starting from as early as last April, that the economy be reopened.

Government officials have tried to justify their drive to reopen schools with claims of concern for the psychological and educational welfare of students, and by emphasizing the many benefits of in-person schooling. This is a sham, coming from governments that have slashed social spending for health care and education for decades, and have demonstrated with their drive for the reopening of nonessential businesses that they prioritize the flow of corporate profits over the health and lives of working people.

Quebec Premier Francois Legault and the province's public health director, Dr. Horacia Arruda, have been among the most forthright in arguing that school infections are a price worth paying to keep the economy "open." "If we want the schools to work, the virus will circulate," declared Arruda.

Government data shows a close connection between the beginning of the “second wave” at the end of August and the reopening of the schools and increased employment at nonessential workplaces. While labour participation rates declined again in November and December, they haven’t approached the totals from last spring. The recent so-called “circuit-breaker” lockdowns have purposely left out many nonessential businesses, especially in the manufacturing, construction and natural resource sectors. Despite appeals from epidemiologists and other health experts, temporary suspensions of in-class schooling were invariably postponed to the scheduled start of the Christmas holidays.

As the chief medical officer of the Windsor-Essex public health unit explained in December, “It’s not truly a lockdown. In the first wave of the pandemic, nearly everything was closed and there were few people on the roads.”

Aware of the widespread opposition to in-person learning amid the pandemic, provinces have routinely changed testing requirements and isolation guidelines with the twin aims of creating mass confusion and downplaying the true extent of COVID-19’s spread. In British Columbia, the NDP government has tried to obscure the extent of cases in schools by divulging where an outbreak occurred, but not the numbers of students and staff who have tested positive. In Alberta, the government in December ended the requirement that those who were in a classroom with someone who tested positive would have to quarantine for two weeks. The Ontario government has eased testing requirements, as backlogs in processing test samples increased.

Mass death, illness and social misery are of no great concern for the ruling elite who have done splendidly during the last 10 months. In addition to the government’s direct relief and quantitative easing, they’ve taken advantage of the wage subsidy program to enrich themselves and their shareholders as companies amass record profits despite mass unemployment. This has produced a windfall, with the country’s billionaires adding another \$50 billion to their unseemly piles of wealth during the pandemic. Their lackeys in public office meanwhile, sojourn on tropical resorts away from the ravages of the disease.

How have the teacher unions responded to this calamity? Ontario’s unions observed that the back-to-school campaign violated the province’s occupational health and safety act, but only asked to meet with the same right-wing government that has imposed austerity on education budgets and is determined to put teachers in harm’s way. The head of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), Harvey Bischof, dismissed questions over whether the union would organize strikes to prevent unsafe school reopenings saying, “The answer is a flat no.”

Instead, the OSSTF and Ontario’s three other teacher unions submitted to the lengthy bureaucratic process of tabling a complaint to the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board. It responded by unceremoniously tossing out the unions’ objections on a technicality one month later without even examining their content. In the meantime, teachers had been back in the classroom for weeks at the orders of their unions, helping schools emerge as one of the most significant sources of COVID-19 infections in the province during September and October.

In B.C., the British Columbia Teacher’s Federation (BCTF) similarly ruled out strikes against school reopenings as “illegal.”

Teachers have defied the government and union bureaucrats by walking off the job at multiple Ontario schools when outbreaks were detected. The unions, however, have worked to isolate these strikes by

straitjacketing them within the framework of the provincial government’s “work refusal” process. No effort is made to build support for the walkouts among teachers at other schools, let alone the broader working class. Instead, the handful of courageous employees who take the initiative to refuse work are told to sit tight and do nothing until government officials from the Labour Ministry arrive to invariably determine that all safety precautions have been followed and no action is needed.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the inevitability of mass deaths this winter and calls for the immediate end to in-person teaching for the duration of the pandemic. To ensure the safety of students, teachers and the communities in which they work, transmission must be halted through the use of online learning. Funds must be appropriated from the rich and super-rich to provide all students with the adequate resources to ensure a healthy learning environment; pay parents a living wage so they can stay home with their kids; and enable teachers to safely work from home until the public health emergency passes. With vaccines now available and being delivered, it is unacceptable that more Canadians are sacrificed for profits even as a resolution to the crisis remains tantalizingly within reach.

In a statement last February, as teachers were mobilizing for a province-wide strike against the Ontario Conservative government’s austerity agenda, we wrote:

“Teachers must recognize that their struggle is at heart a political struggle and this for two reasons. First, the struggle to defend public education is a struggle over how society’s resources are to be distributed. The claim that there is ‘no money’ for essential public services is a lie. But to mobilize the necessary resources requires a systematic assault on the wealth of the capitalist elite and the reorganization of socioeconomic life in order to make fulfilling social needs, not private profit, the animating principle. Second, big business is enforcing its class war agenda through its hirelings in government, and its courts and police.”

The pandemic has brought these dynamics into even sharper relief. Teachers must make a clean political and organizational break from the pro-capitalist union apparatuses by forming rank-and-file safety committees. Through their support of the NDP, their touting of the government’s pandemic response and their opposition to strike action, the union bureaucrats have torpedoed efforts to challenge the drive to open schools. Educator rank-and-file committees must combine the demand for an end to in-person learning with the call to stop all non-essential production with full pay for all workers until the spread of the virus is contained and the population has been vaccinated. We strongly urge all educators and workers who agree with this perspective to contact the WSWs and SEP today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact