

Who is responsible for Canada's second, deadlier, wave of COVID-19?

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The coronavirus pandemic continues to run rampant across Canada with an exponential increase in cases that has driven the health care system to the breaking point. Given that health experts warned, as early as last spring, of a second wave of COVID-19 that would potentially be even deadlier than the first, the question that must be posed is: How is it possible that this catastrophic scenario has now materialized?

The answer lies in the class policy of Canada's federal and provincial governments, which have worked to avoid all effective measures against the pandemic that are deemed harmful to the accumulation of profits.

Since the start of the second wave in September with the reopening of schools, the country has seen record numbers of infections and hospitalizations. If we compare the current figures with those of the first wave, which ended in early summer, the situation is more than alarming.

According to data provided by the Canadian government, there were more than 8,800 deaths in the country (including more than 5,600 in Quebec alone) and nearly 109,000 infections during the first wave, which effectively ended in early July. As of January 22, more than 18,700 people have died in Canada, while the number of infections now exceeds 730,000.

If one excludes Quebec, which was disproportionately impacted during the first wave, the number of deaths in the second wave exceeds the total of the first wave by a factor of three. There are on average six times as many cases across the country.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada's forecasts, the number of daily infections could reach 10,000 in February if the measures currently in place are maintained, and 30,000 if the situation deteriorates further.

The skyrocketing number of cases and deaths is clearly demonstrated by the federal government's own graphs, shown above.

In many parts of the country, the number of seriously ill COVID-19 patients is overwhelming the health system. In Quebec and Ontario, the two most populous provinces, and the provinces most affected by the COVID-19 crisis, there is no room for maneuver. There is a critical shortage of equipment, and critical care beds are running out.

In several large urban centers, such as the Greater Montreal Metropolitan Area or the Windsor, Ontario area, the forced transfer of patients to outlying areas has already begun, and authorities are reviewing plans for "triage" under which some patients are denied treatment and left to die, due to the lack of intensive care beds and other shortages.

Many hospitals are reporting occupancy rates of over 100 percent. In addition to the shortage of beds and equipment, there is a crying lack of health care personnel, who have been hard hit by the pandemic. Not only have thousands fallen ill, but the inordinate workload—nurses in Quebec have been denied their vacations and forced to work endless hours of overtime—has taken a heavy psychological toll. As a result, many hospitals cannot function at their normal capacity.

The severity of the crisis is not the consequence of the unexpected nature of the pandemic, which was both foreseeable and foreseen, but of the disastrous response of government authorities.

They have refused to funnel the requisite resources into a health care system that was already ravaged by decades of budget cuts, thus ensuring its inability to carry out systematic mass testing and contact tracing and massively expand medical infrastructure to combat the pandemic.

At the beginning of the first wave last spring, the federal government and the Bank of Canada focused on rescuing the financial and corporate elite, providing them some \$650 billion in bailout funds. The ruling class then turned to reopening the economy to make the working class pay—through increased exploitation in the workplace—for the monies they had just allocated to themselves. In this, they received the unstinting support of the trade unions, which demobilized working class opposition, and have helped reopen workplaces and schools. (See: Canadian unions cement anti-worker corporatist alliance with government and big business)

With criminal disregard for human life, provincial governments, with the blessing of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government, began in late April to reopen nonessential businesses, factories and schools even as the virus continued to run freely. This campaign was led by Quebec Premier François Legault, who in May reopened all industries and most of the province's schools (except in the

Greater Montreal region).

Instead of using August to strengthen the health care system for a potential resurgence of the pandemic as temperatures cooled and people were forced to spend more time indoors, the federal and provincial governments expended their energies on countering widespread public opposition to their push to force children and teenagers to return to in-class instruction at the beginning of September. Their aim in doing so, despite hypocritical claims of concerns about pupils' mental health and education, was to free parents from their childcare responsibilities so that they could be forced back to work and generating profits for big business. (See: **Canadian medical experts provide ideological justification for homicidal back-to-work drive**)

As the number of cases began to rise in September and October, government officials rushed to announce that there would be no lockdown in the face of a second wave. Instead, amid calls from epidemiologists and other health specialists for urgent action, they imposed only minimal and ineffective restrictions, such as the partial closure of restaurants that Quebec's government ordered in late October. They were particularly adamant in insisting that schools must remain open for in-class instruction, although they had emerged as a significant source of transmission.

Canada thus implemented the "herd immunity" policy adopted by governments across the US and Europe—and once openly advocated by Legault—of letting the virus spread throughout the population in order to keep the economy "open" and preserve the flow of profits.

Having rejected any serious measures to stem the pandemic, government officials are now adding insult to injury by scapegoating ordinary people for the spread of the virus. They are blaming private gatherings for the continuing rise in COVID-19 cases, while their own documents show that the majority of infections occur in workplaces, schools and long-term care facilities.

It is working people that are bearing the full weight of the coronavirus crisis. In addition to the staggering number of deaths, social misery and income inequality have dramatically increased across the country during the pandemic.

Unemployment has risen sharply, with hundreds of thousands of service sector jobs eliminated. In the spring, as hundreds of billions were handed out to big business, eligible workers received a meager \$2,000 per month under the CERB (Canada Emergency Response Benefit). While right-wing forces were denouncing the CERB for incentivizing "dependence" and recipients as potential cheats, companies that had received millions in wage subsidies were, as the *Financial Post* subsequently documented, using the money for executive bonuses and shareholder dividends. The real COVID-19 profiteers are the rich: this year alone, the country's top 20 billionaires increased their wealth by \$37 billion. (See: **Canada's pandemic wage subsidy: a slush fund for wealthy**

shareholders and corporate executives)

The ruling class' homicidal policy was orchestrated with the full backing of the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses, which have endorsed and implemented the back-to-work and back-to-school drive. For decades, the unions have served as watchdogs for the ruling elite, suppressing workers' struggles and imposing the big business assault on jobs, wages and public services. The coronavirus crisis has provided them with an opportunity to collaborate even more closely with big business and its governments, in complete disregard for the health and lives of the workers they purport to represent.

A similar sharp turn to the right was carried out by pseudo-left organizations such as Québec Solidaire, which has come under criticism even from its own members for its open collaboration with Legault and endorsement of his government's disastrous handling of the pandemic.

To halt the spread of the virus and prevent a massive loss of life, emergency measures must be taken now! The availability of vaccines makes it all the more urgent that a full lockdown be put in place across the country until the bulk of the population is vaccinated.

Schools must be closed, and millions invested in e-learning. All non-essential economic activity must be shut down. PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) must be made available to all those workers who must stay on the job for essential production and services. And full financial compensation must be provided to all workers and small businesses affected by lockdown measures.

The resources to finance such measures exist in abundance, but they are monopolized by the billionaires and multimillionaires, whose grip on society can only be broken by the independent political mobilization of the working class.

To fight for these demands, workers must build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions. This must be combined with a broader political struggle on a socialist perspective, for the bringing to power of a workers' government and the reorganization of economic life to meet the social needs of all, not the profit interests of a tiny minority.



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