

Canadian educators denounce deadly reopening of schools amid COVID-19 pandemic

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Although the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage across the country, schools in virtually all parts of Canada will be providing in-class instruction as of next Tuesday. That is when schools in Toronto and the adjacent York and Peel Regions are to reopen—the last to do so, since many provinces were forced to implement a temporary return to online instruction and/or extend the traditional Christmas/New Year’s break.

Just as it did at the end of last summer, Canada’s capitalist elite has pressed for the reopening of the schools, so that parents can be freed of childcare responsibilities and forced to return to work and churning out profits for big business.

This homicidal policy has been championed by the Trudeau Liberal government in Ottawa and implemented by provincial governments of all stripes, from John Horgan’s New Democrats in British Columbia to Doug Ford’s hard-right Progressive Conservatives in Ontario and Quebec’s CAQ government. Despite continuing high-rates of infection in wide swathes of the country and the rapid spread of newly-identified more infectious COVID-19 variants, nothing has been done to provide teachers and students with adequate protection as they return to packed, poorly-ventilated classrooms.

The unions, meanwhile, have suppressed the widespread opposition to the back-to-school drive. They have ruled out job action to protect the health and lives of educators, students, and their families with claims that it would be “illegal.”

Teachers from Ontario and Quebec who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their outrage over the reckless reopening of schools, which, if not prevented through the independent action of the working class, will sow the seeds for a “third wave” of the COVID-19 pandemic even more deadly than the first two.

A secondary school teacher from Montreal vividly described the life-threatening conditions prevailing in many schools. “The reopening of schools places students and staff in dangerous conditions,” she told the WSWS. “Indeed, the groups are very large, from 30 to 35 students. In order to achieve the 2-meter distance from the teacher, the students have to be pushed back and crammed on top of each other, as most of the premises are very small. As a result, the students are often placed in bubbles of 2-3 students with a space of 20-30 cm between each bubble.

“The plexiglass that arrived after a month, is now often broken. We have to beg for disinfectant. Many classrooms do not have windows ... or it’s too cold to open them.

“The students do not respect the bubbles. They meet outside (talking, pulling at each other, some smoking vape) and wait in the hallways during breaks and lunch. The supervisors and teachers who supervise do their utmost, but it’s not enough.

“In class, many students take off their masks to drink water during class or simply because they are teenagers. Those who want to protect themselves are glued to those who don’t want to.

“When a group is isolated, the siblings of the isolating students continue to be in class in their respective groups.

“In the teachers’ rooms, we all eat at the same time, and then several teachers don’t put their masks back on to teach. There are skeptics everywhere, especially with a government that takes school safety so lightly.”

A teacher from Toronto agreed that the decision to reopen schools is placing the lives of teachers and students at risk.

“The decision to reopen schools goes beyond recklessness and blind neglect,” he wrote. “We have a year of evidence showing that this is a policy of social murder. The uncertainty and ineffectual zigzagging policy

of token, ad-hoc semi-lockdowns by all levels of governments across the country, even while they keep non-essential workplaces and schools open, makes it next to impossible to find safe, stable work.”

A secondary school teacher in Ontario agreed, commenting, “A lot of us are torn with this decision. Working from home is not a picnic, but thinking about going back into our old building scares me to death. My thinking was that they would keep us home a few more weeks at least. This decision does not feel right. I don’t believe that the government’s stated measures will be adequate or even implemented.”

Scientific studies have demonstrated that schools are major vectors in the transmission of COVID-19 in the community, and among all age groups. A Montreal study carried out last fall showed that the increase in infections throughout the general population in October and November was preceded by a rise in the number of infections in schools. This indicates students and teachers attending in-person classes played a critical role in triggering the deadly second wave of the pandemic.

This evidence has been willfully ignored by the political establishment. It has justified its push to reopen schools with the baseless claim that they can be reopened “safely” amid the pandemic and cynical claims of concern for the welfare of “our kids.” As a contract music teacher at a southern Ontario school put it, “Whatever the capitalist politicians and the corporate media say, it is a fact that scientific studies have shown that schools are one of the primary vectors of transmission for the virus.”

Another teacher from Montreal, referring to the pressure campaign of the ruling elite, added, “Teachers work with a lot of tension, knowing the moral thing to do would be to walk off the job. However, they stay on the job due to finances, a sense of obligation to our students and a love for our work.

“Schools should be closed to save lives. I often hear ‘the numbers are lower today’ but until they are down to zero, no one is safe. To get down to zero, schools must close.”

She added that to enforce this program, workers “need to be united and refuse to go back. Don’t wait until it’s too late. Quebec teachers sounded the alarm back in August about the dangers of reopening and were ignored. Organizing efforts were very small and disjointed and when teachers returned, I’m not sure we had a full understanding of what lay ahead.

“Resist the messaging that low transmission is acceptable in schools, it’s not.”

The Ontario music teacher stressed the role played by the trade unions in suppressing opposition to the reopening of the schools. “I think the feckless unions share a large part of the blame,” he stated. “Last fall the unions played a major role in herding teachers and students back to schools so that their parents could be herded back to work to produce profits for the capitalists. The unions have been instrumental in smothering any independent initiative on the part of the teachers that would keep schools closed, such as at Glamorgan Junior Public School in Scarborough last November or Beverley School in Toronto last month. Closing the schools is the only way to save the lives of teachers, students, and their families and halt the spread of the virus.”

The Ontario high school teacher added, “It doesn’t seem like our union is taking this seriously. Many of us are anxious and we don’t know what to do. It’s like we have no choice but to go back to work and just hope for the best. My stress level is already rising thinking about going back.”

The Toronto teacher criticized the unions for being “willing accomplices in the reopening campaign,” before going on to call for teachers to turn to broader sections of working people to wage a political struggle against the ruling elite’s prioritizing of profits over human lives. “To defend the health and safety of the public, workers in Canada should join the initiative launched by educators, autoworkers in the US and internationally by forming rank-and-file safety committees in every school, neighborhood and workplace to fight for a complete lockdown of all non-essential workplaces until the pandemic is contained,” he said.

This call was reiterated by the music teacher, who cited the inspirational example of the brave stand taken by teachers in Chicago. “What has become clear to me is that the collective bargaining perspective of the unions only ends up serving the interests of the profiteers and their capitalist state,” he said. “I think that teachers must take the initiative back from the big business politicians and their agents and form rank and file committees, just like teachers in Chicago have. It’s the only way to fight the virus and end the pandemic.”



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