

# Canadian authorities risk lives of staff and students by reopening Newfoundland schools despite spread of UK variant

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With the blessing of the Liberal provincial government of Newfoundland and Labrador, local authorities have recklessly started reopening schools amid a major outbreak of the highly-contagious B117 variant of the coronavirus. Like governments across Canada, their priority is safeguarding the profits of big business, not the health and lives of students and teachers.

All schools in Newfoundland and Labrador were closed on Feb. 12 due to the rapid spread of the B117 variant, first identified in the UK, in metro St. John's, the province's capital and largest city. The rapid spread of the variant was made possible by large outbreaks in schools and workplaces, and exacerbated by widespread poverty and cramped living conditions.

In the past week, the province has recorded 40 new cases. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 989 COVID-19 infections have been recorded in a population of 520,000. Of those cases, 565 are associated with the current St. John's area outbreak. Dr. Janice Fitzgerald, chief medical officer of health, said 88 of the samples tested have been identified as the B117 strain. "Everything we've sent up related to this recent cluster ... has come back positive for B117," she said. "Our assumption now is that anything that is coming from a community-related case is due to this variant."

Eastern Health confirmed that 145 students and/or staff at Mount Pearl Senior High had been infected with COVID-19. That accounts for the largest portion of the approximately 185 students and/or staff infected at 22 schools around the Eastern Health region. Overall, there have been cases at five high schools, four junior high schools, and 13 elementary schools in St. John's

and its environs

The recent resurgence of the pandemic in Newfoundland has once again demonstrated the central role that schools and young people, including children, can and are playing in the spread of COVID-19. Yet governments across Canada and internationally have time and again sought to downplay, if not outright dismiss, the dangers associated with school reopenings so as not to undercut their drive to "reopen" the economy.

Authorities in Newfoundland know full well that schools are a major vector of COVID-19 transmission, yet they are doubling down on the lie that schools are safe.

Students in the central, western and northern parts of the province were ordered to return to in-class instruction Wednesday. Most of the province has moved to Alert Level 4, meaning some non-essential businesses and schools can reopen.

On March 1, the Department of Education lifted restrictions on regulated child-care facilities on the Avalon Peninsula, where St. John's is located and more than half of the province lives. In a press release, the department said that the move would relieve some of the burden on essential workers. Centres must operate at 50 percent capacity, with preference given to parents who must leave their homes for work or families in which one or more parent is working from home, the department advised.

Schools on the Avalon Peninsula will continue to give classes online until March 12, when a final decision will be made on when students will be returned to in-school teaching.

Students from Kindergarten to Grade 3 are not

required to wear a mask during the school day, but will be required to wear one while travelling on school buses. All students from Grade 4 to Grade 12 will be required to wear masks all day, whether in class or on the bus. Students can take off the mask when they're eating or taking part in physical education classes. Students in Grade 7 to Grade 12 are required to keep a distance of two metres between them at all times. School staff will be required to wear a Level 1 medical mask and a face shield at all times while teaching, and at any other time when a two-metre distance cannot be maintained. The province said personal protective equipment will be provided by the district school board.

In interviews with the WSWs, teachers from other provinces have stressed that enforcing such regulations in crowded classrooms and buildings is impossible. Scientific studies from across the world, including one from Montreal conducted last fall, have demonstrated that schools act as vectors for the transmission of the virus, helping it spread throughout the local community.

Thousands of teachers, parents and students across the province are well aware of the fact that they are being sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit. In an expression of the lack of confidence in the government's public health measures, authorities were forced to postpone all in-person voting in the provincial election that was to be held February 13, less than 24 hours before polls were to open, after large numbers of election workers resigned their posts out of fear of being infected.

Sisters Kaitlin and Sarah Healey, who attend Gonzaga High School in St. John's, told CBC that they worry about COVID-19 transmission. Neither was planning to go to school. "I don't think that's an unreasonable ask, to be protected," said Sarah. "I don't feel safe going into a classroom with like 30 to 40 other children, and about 20 to 30 the kids aren't wearing their masks properly."

Ella Niblock, a high school student from Conception Bay South, says she and a lot of her friends are dealing with anxiety and fear over the outbreak and a potential return to school. "As much as I love the social aspects of everything ... some things are just not worth the risk of it," she said. "You're just waiting for the call. Like you never know if you're going to be the next one, and it feels like you're walking on thin ice."

She added, "It's hard to keep your bubble to 20 people when they're going to school with like 600 people. I just think that being in school right now is just one of the worst possible things, because every couple of minutes someone else is texting, being like, 'I have to isolate.' If we were all in school right now, we'd have so many more cases."

As the deadly threat posed to working people by the reopening of schools becomes ever clearer to workers and youth, the opposition to the ruling elite's reckless agenda must find political expression. The *World Socialist Web Site* is fighting to establish a cross-Canada educator's rank-and-file committee, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which have supported the capitalist elite's back-to-work/back-to-school drive. This committee will fight for an end to all in-person learning until the pandemic is brought under control, the closure of all nonessential businesses, and the provision of full wages to all workers and parents so they can shelter at home. We encourage all of our readers who agree with these demands in Newfoundland and across Canada to contact us today to participate in this fight.



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