

Canada's schools are not "safe!" Build rank-and-file committees to shut down all in-person classes and save lives!

Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee
8 March 2021

The following statement was unanimously adopted at a meeting Sunday of the recently organized Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

We have formed the Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee to fight for the immediate closure of all schools across the country. Such action is urgently required to protect the lives of school staff, students and their families from the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

Even the federal government's own chief medical officer acknowledges that a third wave of the pandemic is rapidly developing, fuelled by new, more contagious variants of the virus, and that it threatens to be even more deadly than the two previous waves.

Scientific studies from around the world—including one that showed school infections played a major role in incubating and spreading Montreal's second wave—have demonstrated that in-person instruction is an important vector in the spread of COVID-19.

Yet provincial governments of every political stripe, from Ford's right-wing Tories in Ontario and Quebec's CAQ regime to BC's New Democrats, are adamant that schools remain open, and have continuously sought to downplay the threat to educators, students and their families. In this they have had, and continue to enjoy, the unstinting support of Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government.

The politicians are hostile to a science-based approach to containing and halting the spread of COVID-19, because they represent a corporate elite for whom profits, not working people's safety and lives, are the priority. Keeping schools open for in-person instruction is viewed by them as vital, because then parents can be compelled to return to work, churning out profits for big business.

This has to stop! The ruling elite's ruinous mishandling of the pandemic—a health crisis that was both foreseeable and foreseen—has already resulted in 885,000 Canadians being sickened with COVID-19 and more than 22,000 deaths.

Far from opposing the ruling elite's homicidal back-to-work/back-to-school policy, the trade unions have aided and abetted it. Behind educators' backs, they have negotiated and helped implement totally inadequate safety measures, while appealing to provincial governments to "reopen schools safely," an impossible feat during a raging pandemic.

The teachers' unions in Ontario, Quebec's CSQ, the BC Teachers' Federation, the Alberta Teachers' Association and their counterparts across the country have systematically suppressed opposition to in-class schooling from teachers and parents. In the half-dozen instances where rank-and-file workers responded to COVID-19 outbreaks at their schools by walking off the job, the unions isolated their struggles and quickly shut them down.

The union bureaucracy's attitude was epitomized up by Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) President Harvey

Bischof. When asked last September what steps the OSSTF would take to prevent the Ford government from implementing a school reopening plan that the union itself charged placed teachers' lives in jeopardy, Bischof exclaimed, "If the question is whether we're planning some illegal job action, the answer is a flat out no."

When a rank-and-file educator presented a motion in late January demanding an emergency meeting of his 10,000-member CSQ local to discuss what needed to be done about the unsafe conditions in South Shore Montreal schools, the union leadership ruled it out of order. The earliest a discussion about workers' response to the pandemic could be held, insisted the *Syndicat de Champlain* executive, was two months hence.

Schools are not "safe!"

Studies from Canada and around the world have shown that schools are important vectors for the transmission of COVID-19. A study conducted by Dr. Simona Bignami of the Université de Montréal and Dr. John F. Sandberg of George Washington University found that it was Montreal children who infected their parents last fall, not the other way around, transforming Canada's second largest city once again into a COVID-19 epicentre.

All workers know that the concept of "class bubbles" is smoke and mirrors. Despite our best efforts, essential measures such as wearing a mask and physical distancing are impossible to systematically apply and enforce. They are all the more ineffective in schools that due to decades of capitalist austerity are generally crowded, dilapidated and poorly ventilated.

According to government data—data which undoubtedly underestimates the gravity of the situation due to inadequate testing and contact tracing—more than 30,000 students and school staff have been infected with COVID-19, and at least one Ontario educator has lost her life. More than 7,500 Canadian schools have recorded at least one case of the disease and there are currently more than 2,000 active outbreaks. In many regions, the total number of school and daycare outbreaks exceeds those in workplaces.

The claim, promoted by the political establishment and corporate media, that COVID-19 doesn't represent a serious health risk for children and young people is a lie. As the second wave crested in late December and early January, there was a spike in cases of the COVID-19-linked and potentially fatal Multisystem Respiratory Syndrome. "We've seen more cases in the past weeks and the children are more sick," explained Dr.

Marie-Paule Morin, a pediatric rheumatologist at Montreal's Sainte Justine Hospital. "We've had more cases that have gone to the ICU, who had cardiac involvement, who needed treatment."

Moreover, the long-term consequences of COVID-19 for both children and adults are unknown.

If a Third Wave is to be averted the working class must intervene as an independent force

At every point in the pandemic, Canada's governments have prioritized the selfish class interests of the capitalist elite over saving working people's lives. While well in excess of \$650 billion has been funneled into the financial markets, banks and big business to guarantee the wealth and profits of the super-rich, working people have been provided totally inadequate makeshift assistance and forced back into unsafe jobs. Ignoring World Health Organization recommendations, workplaces and schools were reopened without massive investments in the chronically under-resourced health care system, including in developing systematic mass testing, contact tracing and surge capacity. Similarly, the country's governments have refused to fund the most basic public health measures, such as the provision of air filtration devices and air conditioning systems, to make schools and other buildings safer.

The explosion of COVID-19 cases and deaths produced by their reckless drive to reopen the economy ultimately forced governments to re-impose some lockdown measures at the end of 2020, including a return to online instruction in some provinces. But no sooner did COVID-19 cases begin to fall back from a level triple last spring's "peak," than they rushed to scrap all restrictions, with reopening schools once again the first order of business so that parents could be pushed back to work.

All this underscores that the fight against the pandemic is not primarily a health issue. It is first and foremost a political struggle. If a deadly third wave is to be averted, educators and the working class as a whole must take matters into their own hands and intervene as an independent force.

To do so, they must build new organizations of struggle: rank-and-file committees, independent of and in political opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. The Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to spearhead and coordinate the fight for the building of such committees in every school and educational institution. The principal task of these committees will be to mobilize educators and their supporters to take all measures needed to protect school staff and students' health and lives.

The resources to establish high-quality online learning and provide everyone with adequate health care and workplace protection exist in abundance. However, they are monopolized by a fabulously wealthy elite that has profited off the mass infections and death and considers spending on pandemic prevention a drain on its wealth. During the first year of the pandemic, Canada's 40 billionaires saw their combined wealth rise by over \$50 billion.

As always, the ruling class seeks to frustrate working class opposition by trying to pit workers against each other. Thus, the politicians and media try to paint educators as selfish for wanting to shut down unsafe schools, cynically invoking the hardships that working parents must bear. This only serves to underline that the struggle of educators and school support staff is inseparable from, and must be consciously tied to, the struggle to mobilize all working people to fight for the measures needed to halt the spread of COVID-19.

In fighting to ensure that schools do not serve as vectors for the deadly pandemic, education workers are fighting on behalf of the entire working class.

The struggle for an end to in-person learning must be linked to the call for a halt to all nonessential production with full wages guaranteed for all workers, and the provision of free and safe childcare for health care and all other essential workers. In taking up this critical demand, rank-and-file educators' committees will provide a lead to the growing opposition among health care, industrial, construction, and logistics workers and other sections of the working class over the ruling class' ruinous response to the pandemic.

We are founding our committee on a cross-Canada basis because it is critical for workers—English- and French-speaking, immigrant and indigenous—to be united in political struggle. A key element in the trade unions' sabotage of working class opposition to austerity over the past four decades has been their systematic efforts to quarantine these struggles on provincial lines and subordinate them to the pro-employer, provincially-regulated labour relations and collective bargaining systems.

In Ontario, the unions, bowing to an Ontario Labour Relations Board decision, are telling teachers to file grievances over unsafe COVID-19 working conditions on an individual school or even class-by-class basis. This when teachers everywhere face essentially the same conditions in confronting a virus that can only be properly contained on a global basis.

The full social power of the working class can be mobilized only to the extent that the artificial barriers promoted by the political establishment are swept aside, and workers are unified behind common demands and a political program. We direct a special appeal to students at all levels of education, and to teachers, administrative, janitorial and food-service workers at colleges and universities. These education workers, many of whom labour on precarious contracts with virtually no job protections, share the same fundamental interests with teachers in the context of the reckless reopening of college and university campuses alongside schools.

The Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee proposes the following demands to teachers throughout the country as a basis for current and future struggles:

- End all in-person learning, from elementary school through to universities, until the pandemic is brought under control!
- Shut down all nonessential production!
- Provide full wages for all affected workers so they can shelter at home until the pandemic is over! Comprehensive financial support to families so they can provide for the well-being of their children!
- Invest billions of dollars in the education system to strengthen online learning, protect public education from privatization, and provide students, families and educators with the necessary social and psychological support!
- All decisions regarding school openings and closures must be overseen by rank-and-file committees formed by workers and parents, in consultation with scientists of their choosing and without the involvement of school boards or unions!

These demands are based not on what the ruling class and its media mouthpieces claim they can afford, but on what is truly necessary and scientifically possible to protect lives and meet human needs. In the final analysis, securing these demands will require the mobilization of the full social power of the working class through a cross-Canada general strike, which must be fought for and organized by an interconnected network of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace.

To realize this program, the Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee will wage an aggressive campaign over the coming weeks and months. This will include:

- Sharing information about the struggles of educators in schools and other educational institutions with a Canada-wide and global audience, including news about infections, protests, and other initiatives.
- Exposing the complicity of the trade unions in facilitating the return to school and their opposition to any and all independent action by educators.

- Fighting to link the struggles of teachers with other sections of workers, like meatpackers, service employees, health care workers, and autoworkers, who all confront similar life and death threats from the virus.

The situation faced by education workers in Canada is similar to what workers around the world are experiencing. Whether it is in Brazil, Germany, France or the United States, teachers are being sent to the front lines of the pandemic under dangerous conditions. Because the pandemic is global, the working class must provide an international solution.

The Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety committee will work in solidarity with existing rank-and-file committees in the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Australia and elsewhere, sharing our experiences and with a view to mounting a common struggle. All teachers, workers, parents and students interested in joining our struggle to mobilize education workers to halt the spread of the pandemic and save lives should contact us at: cercs.cspfb@gmail.com



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact