

Canada's universities and colleges announce reopenings despite threat of COVID-19 third wave

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This article was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by a member of the newly established Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC). For more information about the committee's program or to get involved, read its founding statement or visit the CERSC Facebook page . You can also email the committee at cercs.csppb@gmail.com

Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the growing threat of a deadlier third wave, provincial governments across Canada have given the greenlight for the gradual reopening of universities and colleges. This premature and reckless step will contribute to spreading the lethal virus among students and staff on campuses and in the broader community.

At the urging of Quebec's right-wing CAQ government, which has been at the forefront of the Canadian ruling class's back-to-work/back-to-school drive, some universities and colleges (CEGEPS) in Canada's second most populous province began offering in-person learning as early as February 8.

Across Canada, universities are planning to offer "bimodal" learning this fall, which could see up to one hundred students gathered in one classroom, with a hundred more online.

University administrations have seized on the recent decline in daily new COVID-19 cases to around 3,000 per day—a level equal to the peak of the first wave last spring—to make their announcements about a return to in-class learning.

The reopenings represent a serious threat to students and staff members, as underscored by the repeated warnings of scientists and public health officials about the three more contagious and potentially deadlier new COVID-19 variants rapidly spreading across the country. As of March 4, 1649 cases of the variants had been reported in Canada, according to the country's Public Health Agency. The mingling of hundreds of students and workers on university campuses in the coming weeks, in classes, libraries, cafeterias, fitness centers, and campus residences will inevitably increase the spread of the virus.

Several outbreaks at privately owned student residence complexes have already occurred over recent weeks and months. For instance, at least 34 cases have recently been

identified nearby Fleming College and Trent University, in Peterborough, Ontario. According to *University Affairs Canada*, there have been outbreaks in three residences at London, Ontario's Western University since last fall. The university was forced to delay residence move-in for the Winter 2021 term until after reading week, with students returning on a staggered schedule as of February.

Reopening university and college campuses has nothing to do with offering students a better educational experience and learning environment. This hasty and negligent decision is part of a concerted drive to reopen the economy that is aimed at enabling the financial elite and big businesses to churn out more profits at the expense of the working class.

In the case of elementary and secondary schools, which have been open since last summer and have been shown to be a major vector in spreading COVID-19, big business governments were determined to get children back in schools so their parents could be pushed back to their jobs in unsafe working conditions.

A major reason university and college administrations are eager to restart on-campus learning is that this will ensure they can continue to charge students all sorts of fees and make money from residences and ancillary campus services.

The ruling class is only capable of going forward with the reopening of schools and non-essential production thanks to the trade union bureaucracy. The unions have been actively involved in closed door discussions with the federal and provincial governments and big business representatives to orchestrate the schools' reopening. One of their main functions from the beginning has been to suppress workers' opposition to the ruling class's disastrous pandemic response and subordinate them to the very capitalist parties responsible for this catastrophe.

A university professor in Ontario contacted the WSWWS and shared their observations of what is happening on campus: "As I was walking around the campus, I was shocked and appalled to see so many students gathered at the cafeteria with no masks, walking worry-free in their residence," he remarked. "It was strange to see maintenance workers, security employees and the

cleaning crew in several buildings. Also, electrician staff members were already starting to install the video equipment for the new teaching delivery, as if nothing was happening with the pandemic. Some workers already contracted the virus in the past months and the campus was completely empty. Imagine once it will fully reopen. Our lives and safety are at stake.”

The professor added: “I feel betrayed by my union for which I paid my dues but does not represent me at all. On the contrary nowadays, university unions only represent the interests of the administration. A grand betrayal.”

The pandemic has intensified the capitalist crisis, increasing social inequality, and impacting mostly working class people, many of whom are forced to work in unsafe workplaces. Teachers and workers on university campuses have not been spared from the ravaging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The university and college administrations view the reopening of campuses as a means of offsetting past and current revenue losses, which are the outcome of decades of austerity and underfunding. Canadian universities are also anticipating huge losses of revenue in coming years due to the pandemic, including a significant drop in student registration, especially among international students.

In an attempt to offset these pressures, universities got the greenlight from governments to receive international students as early as last October, even as experts warned of the dangers related to international travel. In Canada, international students pay approximately five times higher tuition than domestic students and represent a major source of revenue for universities. Tuition fees from international students accounted for over one-third of the tuition fees received by Canadian universities in 2018-2019.

The professor who contacted the *WSWS* also explained that poorly paid, overworked contract teachers are particularly risking their health. He stressed that the pandemic may be exploited to increase their workload. “There is an abusive instrumentalization of PhD part-time professors teaching undergraduate courses composed of more than 100 students,” he said. “We have,” he added, “an entire cohort of PhD’s struggling to pay their student debt with contracts at universities refusing them social benefits. This situation perpetuates the social determinants of health issues which arise in relation to precarious employment.”

The situation facing teachers and lecturers in Canada is similar to that in the United States and in Australia, where educators are being forced to go back to their classrooms with few safety measures and under increasing stress.

To justify the reopening of schools and universities, governments such as that of Emmanuel Macron in France invoke the pretext of mental health. Macron and the corporate media recently seized on the tragic suicide of one student to justify campuses reopening. In Canada, there is an increasing number of media reports about the isolation and depression felt by students.

While many students may well be experiencing stress and depression, what is required above all is ending the pandemic and the murderous herd immunity policy advocated by all the political parties of the establishment. Students’ mental health will be improved only if the spread of the virus is halted, the economic situation improves and good jobs are available. But in direct opposition to these goals, all measures have been taken to prioritize the profit interests of businesses over workers’ health and lives. Governments have imposed fruitless measures such as short and totally inadequate lockdowns, and systematically disregarded scientific evidence and the warnings of health experts.

The reopening of the economy amid delays in the vaccination campaign is leading to unnecessary and preventable deaths and threatens us with a third wave of the pandemic, even larger and more the lethal than the previous two.

To protect workers and save lives, teachers and support staff in Canada have begun to organize through the building of the Cross-Canada Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The committee’s statement adopted unanimously by its members on March 7 states: “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 encourage all university and college staff and students who agree with us to join and build our committee.



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