

Canada's ruling elite paving way for third, even deadlier wave of COVID-19

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As is the case in many countries, new variants of the coronavirus are rapidly spreading in Canada. While all three of the more contagious variants first observed in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Brazil are present in the country, the B.1.1.7 variant responsible for a dramatic surge in cases in the United Kingdom appears to be emerging as the dominant COVID-19 variant.

Among the most affected provinces are Alberta with over 700 new variant cases identified as of last week, and British Columbia with more than 575 cases. It needs to be emphasized that only a fraction of the more than 130,000 COVID-19 cases identified nationwide over the past 6 weeks have been tested for the new variants.

In Ontario, which leads the way with more than 1,000 identified new variant cases, they were estimated last week to be responsible for more than 40 percent of all new infections, and as of Monday 49 percent of all new infections.

The same trend is happening in Quebec. While the province has so far identified only 343 cases of the variant, nearly 1,850 suspected cases are under investigation. With B.1.1.7 accounting for 15 to 20 percent of new infections, an increase in cases is expected in the coming weeks. According to new projections from Quebec's health institute (INSPQ), if further measures to restrict COVID-19 spread are not taken, the province could see its daily number of new cases rise to 4,000 by next month.

The outlook in Ontario is just as bad. The province's COVID-19 Science Table projects that daily cases will reach 5,800 in early April, driven by the new variants. In a worst-case scenario, the projection sees infections rising to 8,000 per day. "We're most definitely in a third wave," commented Dr. Peter Juni, a medical professor and head of the Science Table, last Thursday. "We have two pandemics going on. We have the pandemic with the old variants, old-fashioned and slow on the control, and then unfortunately we have the new variants."

At the beginning of this week, the Ontario Hospitals Association tweeted that a "third wave" has begun and that "strong adherence to public health measures is urgently needed to prevent overwhelming hospitals."

Like the US last summer, Canada's second wave is likely to extend into a third wave as the country's health care systems have yet to recover from January's near-deployment of the triage protocol—used to determine who will and will not have access to life-saving treatment when hospitals are overwhelmed.

Despite the new variants being known to be more contagious

and, in all likelihood, more lethal, governments across the country have rolled back the limited measures deployed at the peak of the second wave in late December and early January, thus allowing the virus to circulate freely in the population.

In Alberta, Jason Kenney's United Conservative Party government announced last week the reopening of gyms and libraries, while its counterpart in Manitoba announced relaxations regarding maximum capacity in stores and businesses.

Ontario had to impose new lockdowns last week in Sudbury, Thunder Bay and the Simcoe-Muskoka district due to outbreaks related to the B.1.1.7 variant. Yet the rapid advance of this "second pandemic," to use Dr. Juni's words, did not prevent the Ford government from relaxing measures in seven other regions.

In Quebec, the CAQ government of Premier François Legault has rolled back lockdown measures across the province, with only the Greater Montreal area and its environs remaining in the "red zone." Yesterday, Montreal's public health director, Dr. Mylène Drouin, reported that the B.1.1.7 variant has taken root in several Montreal neighbourhoods. Significantly, she also reported that there are currently 35 COVID-19 outbreaks in schools and 43 in daycares.

While the Quebec government, like its counterparts across the country, has justified its insistence schools remain open amid the pandemic with the claim schools do not represent a major transmission risk, Dr. Drouin said they are serving as a crucial link in the spread of the new variants. Summarizing her remarks, the *Montreal Gazette* reported, "Public health authorities believe variants are mainly spreading from young children who are getting infected in schools or daycares and then passing the virus on to their parents."

Whatever measures remain in place in Quebec and across Canada are grossly inadequate. As the authorities' projections point out, governments are doing exactly the opposite of what should be done to staunch a third wave.

As it has done throughout the pandemic, the Canadian ruling class is adamantly refusing to put in place any measures that might affect the profits of big business, hence their criminal insistence on keeping open schools and workplaces—the main vectors of transmission. An especially devastating consequence of this policy was shown at Amazon's Brampton Heritage Road Fulfilment Centre, where over 250 low-paid and highly exploited workers got infected before the local health authority ordered the warehouse to temporarily close, over management objections, last Friday.

As scientific data and studies show, the role of schools in community transmission is no longer in question and this is even more true with the arrival of the new variants. Schools account for some 30 percent of COVID-19 cases, and there are dozens of schools with at least one case of the new variant. In Quebec, more than 20 schools had to close after the discovery of the B.1.1.7 variant, and in Ontario, just in the City of Toronto alone, more than a dozen schools have had to close.

While hypocritically citing concerns about the mental health of young people to justify keeping them in school, governments claim that the disease does not represent any physical danger to them. What a lie! Many young people have been hospitalized and there have been deaths among those under 19. Moreover, as is the case with adults, the long-term consequences of COVID-19 infection on children and young people is unknown.

The “open school” policy is part of a broader “herd immunity” policy, based on abandoning efforts to halt the virus’ spread and allowing much of the population to get infected with the purported aim of achieving long-term natural immunity. In addition to being anti-scientific and decried by health agencies such as the WHO (World Health Organization), this policy, adopted publicly or behind the scenes by the capitalist ruling elite, has caused the death of more than 2.6 million people around the world, including more than 22,000 in Canada.

As evidenced by official projections, if nothing is done, Canada will in all likelihood be engulfed by a third wave, larger and potentially more lethal than the two that preceded it. This perspective is supported by scientific experts such as Raywat Deonandan, a global health epidemiologist and associate professor at the University of Ottawa. According to Deonandan, a third wave is “mathematically inevitable” because of three factors: the history of epidemics, the arrival of variants and the nature of the measures put in place. If the first two factors underline the need to act to prevent a new deadly wave on a national scale, the third one directly implicates the authorities. Their decisions over the past few weeks demonstrate that they are acting with criminal intent to prevent the implementation of the necessary measures to curb the pandemic.

Unlike the corporate elite and their political hirelings, workers want to prevent a third wave and its potential consequences. According to an Ipsos poll of 3,000 people commissioned by Radio Canada, 76 percent of respondents would be willing to go through a new lockdown to limit the impact of the variants.

On the vaccination front, despite the approval of the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines by Health Canada in the last two weeks, provinces are running out of time to vaccinate enough people to prevent a third wave. Even though vaccination began almost three months ago, only 7 percent of Canada’s population has received a first dose, and just 1.6 percent have received both doses.

This vaccination fiasco is the result of the policies pursued by the Canadian establishment over decades. While Canada was among the countries with the most advanced pharmaceutical industry in the 1970s, the federal government in the 1980s privatized Connaught Laboratories in Toronto and then in the 1990s cut the budget of the Ministry of Industry by two-thirds,

thereby cutting off most public investment in research and development. Companies followed the government’s lead during these decades and moved their facilities elsewhere, leaving the government and the public at the mercy of the markets.

More broadly, the vaccination fiasco only underscores the inability of the capitalist system to prepare for and manage major crises. Once again, millions of people are at risk not because of a lack of knowledge or scientific advances, but because of the capitalist system where everything is subordinated to private profit.

Moreover, access to the vaccine has become a source of great-power competition and conflict. The major powers, led by the United States, are using their control over vaccine production to advance their geopolitical and economic interests. Canada is one of the imperialist powers blocking the temporary lifting of COVID-related patents so as to allow the production of generic vaccines in lesser developed countries, thereby placing tens of millions of lives at risk.

Although time is running out, a third wave can be avoided. This requires the complete closure of schools, as well as non-essential industries and businesses, with full financial compensation for affected workers and small businesses. Billions must be invested in testing, tracing and sequencing cases, vaccinating the Canadian population and providing vaccines to people around the world. Additional billions must be invested in hospitals, which have been ravaged by decades of austerity, so they can build up surge capacity and the infrastructure to treat those who develop severe forms of COVID-19.

This strategy, the only one capable of stopping the pandemic, requires the independent political mobilization of the working class. Rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions, must be formed in education, health care and industry to demand the immediate closure of non-essential businesses and schools.

These committees can appeal to and win support from working people across the country and internationally, as evidenced by the many work stoppages mounted by workers around the world to preserve human life and public health. This program of struggle must be guided by a socialist perspective, that is, the fight for a workers’ government which will reorganize economic life to meet the social needs of the majority, not produce profits for the few.



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