Dozens of Ontario schools forced to close, as government's "open school" policy endangers lives

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19 March 2021

Dozens of schools across Ontario have been forced to close since the beginning of the month due to COVID-19 outbreaks. Little more than four weeks after Premier Doug Ford, his scientific advisers and local public health officials reopened schools with propaganda about their concern for the well-being of "our kids," the consequences of the political establishment's criminal disregard for the lives of teachers and students is emerging into full view. As a third and even more deadly wave of the pandemic begins to take hold, teachers and students have been left to fend for themselves in overcrowded classrooms with virtually no safety precautions.

The latest tragic example of the devastating consequences of the restart of in-person learning came Thursday, when it was reported that five teachers at a Peel Region school have been sickened by the virus, including the vice principal, who is in a coma. The region includes the City of Brampton, where a mass outbreak at an Amazon fulfilment centre that infected over 240 workers forced local public health officials to order a two-week shutdown of the warehouse March 12 in the face of opposition from management.

Across Peel Region, 206 classrooms are in quarantine and five schools have been forced to close. The local school board is said to be discussing ordering all schools to close in the coming days amid mounting anger among teachers over the lack of workplace protection. "I don't feel safe going to my teaching job every day," an elementary school teacher told local news site insauga.com. "None of us do. This isn't just a health or education matter anymore. The Ministry of Labour should be investigating whether some schools are safe workplaces."

Almost 18 percent of schools across the province are currently dealing with COVID-19 infections, according to official government figures, including 202 in Toronto, 74 in Ottawa, and 61 in Brampton.

Twenty-three schools have officially been forced to close. On March 11, Woodbridge College Secondary School, in Woodbridge, a bedroom community just north-west of Toronto, was closed until March 25 due to 20 confirmed or probable COVID-19 cases. This is just one of seven schools closed in York Region due to COVID-19 outbreaks. On March 2, Mount Albert Public School in East Gwillimbury, with 6 cases, was closed until March 15 due to "operational constraints."

Toronto Public Health has reported that eight schools have at least one COVID-19 case that has screened positive for one of the new more contagious and likely lethal new coronavirus variants. These include Beverley School, Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute, Yeshiva Yesodei Hatorah, Gulfstream Public School, the Toronto Cheder, St. Helen Catholic School, Dante Alighieri Academy, and Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School. On March 1, Donwood Park Public school in Scarborough, a heavily working class Toronto borough, was closed "until further notice" due to a COVID-19 outbreak with 6 cases, including four who have tested positive for a variant.

Dr. Eileen de Villa, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, attempted to downplay the government's responsibility for the mounting public health crisis by claiming it was "too soon to say" whether the growth of school-related cases is tied to the reopening of Ontario schools on February 16. "Certainly we expected that as schools returned to in-person learning, … we would see cases within those settings, and in light of the fact that there are variants of concern in the community, we expect and we should expect to see variants of concern within schools," she said.

Dr. de Villa then went on to say that given the prevalence of the more contagious "variants of concern in our community" authorities are treating "every case that arises within" a "school context" "to be a variant of concern until proven otherwise."

This is a damning admission. It proves that the authorities know full well that they are playing Russian roulette with the lives of teachers and students, sending them back into

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unsafe schools even though they know that the more infectious and more deadly B.1.1.7 variant of the virus, first identified in the UK, is running rampant.

This state of affairs cannot simply be put down to the malefactor Doug Ford and his fellow Conservative ministers, as the trade unions are attempting to do. The reality is that the current catastrophe in schools could not have arisen were it not for the role the education-sector unions have played in demobilizing and suppressing widespread opposition among teachers and parents to the homicidal return to in-person learning.

In September, the unions played a critical role in corralling teachers and students back into schools under conditions of widespread public anger at the government's failure to implement adequate safety precautions. In response to a question on what action the unions were preparing to protect teachers' health and lives, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) President Harvey Bischof bluntly declared, "If the question is whether we are planning some illegal job action, the answer is a flat out no." (See: **Ontario teachers union leader emphatically opposes job action to stop reckless school reopening**)

The education unions instead pursued a strategy of pleading to the notoriously anti-worker Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to scrutinize the Ford government's drive to reopen the schools. The intent of the appeal was to demobilize teachers and prevent them from taking militant, independent action against the government.

Displaying its lack of concern for the lives of students and teachers, the OLRB waited a whole month before announcing that it was throwing out the unions' appeal on a technicality without even examining its contents. The unions responded by ordering their members to comply with the OLRB ruling's stipulation that teachers file individual complaints over unsafe conditions in single schools and even single classrooms. This in the face of a lethal virus that poses the same threat across Canada and internationally. The end result of this farce was that schools remained open, playing a central role in driving the deadly second wave of the pandemic, which claimed more than 10,000 lives across Canada.

In January, the unions began releasing statements supporting Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lece's drive to reopen the province's schools after the massive surge in infections during December had forced the government to delay their reopening from the winter holiday break. Demanding a few cosmetic measures be taken, an Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) press release complained that the Ford government had failed to make mask-wearing mandatory for students in Grades 1 to 3. Then, the ETFO got to the heart of the matter, writing, "To safely reopen schools, and to keep them open, which is everyone's goal, the province must prioritize safety over political grandstanding." That is to say, even though the union was well aware that restarting in-person learning threatened a catastrophic surge in cases, it lined up on the same side as Ford's hard-right government by not only demanding the reopening of schools, but insisting that keeping them open amid a devastating pandemic should be the "goal."

For its part, the OSSTF focused its broadsides not on the Ford government's reckless reopening of schools, but its failure to present the benchmarks and metrics used to justify a return to in-person learning. On February 4, it published a statement proposing a "fulsome safe return to in-person learning," which is an impossible task during a raging pandemic.

The ruling elite's cavalier dismissal of scientific advice is motivated by their determination to protect corporate profits at all costs, even if that requires sacrificing thousands more lives. The federal Liberal government and provincial governments of all political stripes have funnelled virtually unlimited sums into the financial markets, banks and big business, while starving the health care system of resources and refusing to provide non-essential workers and their families the support they need to shelter at home till the spread of the virus is halted.

A science-based response to the pandemic and the avoidance of a third wave and further mass death is dependent on the mobilization of the working class. Working people must intervene independently to fight for a political program that places human lives ahead of private profit.

To fight for this program among teachers, the *World Socialist Web Site* helped establish the Cross-Canada Educator's Rank-and-File Safety Committee, independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. This committee is fighting 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.

We encourage all Ontario school staff, educators, students, parents and their supporters who agree with these demands to contact the CERSC today and attend the next committee meeting scheduled for 1 p.m. this Sunday, March 21.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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