

Montreal authorities forced to backtrack on excluding teachers from vaccination pilot project

Our reporters
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Public health authorities in Montreal announced March 18 that they were launching a targeted vaccination campaign to inoculate the parents of school children in the neighbourhoods hardest hit by the more infectious and deadly COVID-19 variants.

A response to the major role that open schools are playing in the transmission of COVID-19, the health authorities' action underscores the threat in-class instruction represents to communities. It is yet a further refutation of the dishonest and lying propaganda used by politicians across Canada and internationally to keep schools open as the pandemic continues to rage—a policy that is dictated by the profit interests of big business.

Twenty-five schools in Cote-St-Luc, Cote Des Neiges, and Snowdon, where up to 26 percent of new cases are linked to the B.1.1.7 variant first identified in the UK, were selected for the pilot project. When the authorities first presented details of the initiative, they outrageously excluded teachers and other education staff from the planned vaccination campaign.

While the Quebec government continues to downplay the size and significance of school COVID-19 outbreaks, local officials were forced to acknowledge that parents are contracting the virus from their children, who had been infected at school. Montreal's Director of Public Health, Mylene Drouin, remarked, "What we've learned is that we have a pattern of transmission that has started from daycare and schools to households and after that to [other] settings, [in the] workplace or community."

This basic fact was proven months ago by scientific studies. A study conducted by Université de Montréal researcher Simona Bignami last fall demonstrated that the city's schools played a major role in unleashing Canada's deadly second wave of the pandemic, which claimed well over 10,000 lives across the country. But politicians and

media outlets in Canada, the US and Europe have repeatedly denied the role of schools as major vectors for the pandemic in order to justify the return to in-person learning. This was seen as necessary so that parents could be freed from child care responsibilities and sent back to work to churn out profits for big business.

Showing the authorities' total indifference to the lives of teachers and education workers, Drouin initially announced that they would not be part of the pilot-project vaccination campaign. She added, in vaguely worded language, that their possible inclusion at a future date was being "evaluated."

Less than 24 hours later, Drouin was forced to reverse her position and announce that teachers would be allowed to participate in the program. This was solely due to a wave of public outrage in response to the pilot project, with community members and people across Quebec taking to social media to denounce the exclusion of teachers.

It is all but certain that senior figures within Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government intervened to call for the inclusion of teachers in the project for fear that the burgeoning protest movement would raise broader demands, including vaccinations for all education staff and the closure of schools. Premier François Legault and his CAQ government have been vociferous proponents of "herd immunity," i.e., allowing the virus to spread freely, since last spring. But government ministers were clearly watching the public anger with mounting nervousness and concern. Provincial Education Minister Jean-Francois Roberge took the unusual step of commenting via Twitter on a project that was ostensibly being run by local health authorities, stating, "If parents are being vaccinated then so should school personnel."

The immense public support for vaccinating teachers reveals the widespread understanding in the population that schools are dangerous, and teachers are risking their lives due to the homicidal policies of the ruling elite. It is a slap in the face to all those, including within the trade union bureaucracy, who tell teachers not to wage a struggle for safe working conditions and the closure of schools because they lack popular support.

But the decision by the Montreal authorities to include teachers in the pilot project has merely underlined the complete inability of the capitalist ruling class to organize a rational and effective response to the pandemic. Teachers at one of the most impacted schools remain excluded from the pilot project, prompting a change.org petition to demand its inclusion. Schools just outside the postal codes of the worst-affected areas, such as Merton School on Robinson Ave. in Côte-St-Luc and Edinburgh School on Hudson Ave. in Montreal West, also remain excluded. Given the sluggish and shambolic character of Canada's vaccine rollout, teachers outside of these Montreal districts will not be receiving a vaccine anytime soon.

A teacher from one of the affected schools who wished to remain anonymous told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Learning that teachers were excluded didn't make any sense. We are a small school with elementary and high school students under one roof, with siblings in different cycles. If one child tests positive, the implications for multiple class bubbles are huge because multiple classes are impacted. I teach 7 groups. When I had to isolate with my own children due to my child being exposed to a positive teacher with the variant, all of my groups were impacted.

"Teachers are the first domino to fall in a larger chain. Being excluded from the pilot vaccination project was a slap in the face and a blatant disregard for the risk we, as teachers, take on a daily basis and have taken since the start of this pandemic."

She continued, "I was on calls with my union until 10pm for the past two days, thinking of what we could do to change the minds of Public Health—everything from walkouts to picketing was discussed."

Underscoring the extremely dangerous working conditions faced by teachers in Quebec and across Canada, members of the Quebec Professional Association of Teachers (QPAT), which represents educators in Montreal's English-language schools, received "COVID variant directives" via email that included advice not to drink or eat anything on school grounds. They stated that

sharing a socially distanced space with a colleague for 15 minutes unmasked would result in a moderate COVID risk, if one teacher was positive with the variant. This moderate risk would require isolation and testing for teachers and their families. Students have not been given these directives and continue to eat unmasked in their classrooms.

Not a single voice from the political establishment or trade union bureaucracy has dared raise the most obvious and urgent demand under these dangerous conditions: that schools be immediately closed to in-person learning with full wages paid to all parents so they can shelter at home with their kids until the pandemic is brought under control.

This comes as no surprise. Since last spring, the role of the education unions in Quebec and across Canada has been to suppress all opposition among teachers to the reopening of schools and provide arguments on how they can be reopened "safely." One example of this is the role of QPAT. Seizing on the media coverage in Quebec given to English-language school boards, which were portrayed as "opponents" of Premier Legault's reckless school reopening policy because they purchased air purifiers for classrooms, QPAT endorsed the reopening of schools after the Christmas break.

The only organization of educators that is advancing a science-based response to the pandemic that places the lives of teachers, students, and their families ahead of corporate profit is the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. It demands that all schools be closed immediately to in-person learning, that nonessential production be shuttered, and that all workers and parents receive full compensation for the duration of the pandemic. The committee urges all teachers and their supporters in Montreal and across Canada who agree with this program to join its Facebook page and email cercsppb@gmail.com to attend the next committee meeting on Sunday, March 28, at 1pm eastern time.



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