

Canada's governments pave way for mass death as third COVID-19 wave surges

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Canada's third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is now surging across the country. Yet Canada's governments, from Doug Ford's hard-right Tory regime in Ontario to John Horgan's purportedly "progressive" New Democratic Party administration in British Columbia, are refusing to take the emergency measures needed to stop the pandemic's spread.

With ICUs reaching capacity, and health experts warning that the new more contagious and lethal COVID-19 variants are now driving the pandemic, governments at all levels are pursuing a policy of social murder. Prioritizing business profits over human lives, they are keeping virtually all workplaces and schools open.

The callous indifference of Canada's elite to working people's health and lives was epitomized by Thursday's announcement from Ontario Premier Ford of a four-week "shutdown" that is anything but. While Ford talked of applying an "emergency brake," he did little more than ease his ample weight on the accelerator, with the "boldest" step a ban on in-person dining and drinking.

Even sections of the corporate media felt compelled to admit that virtually nothing will change, especially in the areas of that province that have been hardest hit by the current surge in infections—Metro Toronto, the adjacent Peel Region, Hamilton, Sudbury and Thunder Bay.

Ontario's schools will remain open, even though dozens have had to be ordered closed in recent weeks due to major COVID-19 outbreaks. The same is true of industrial workplaces, although they are being ravaged by COVID-19 as exemplified by the numerous outbreaks at Peel Region warehouses and factories, including the outbreak that has sickened hundreds of workers at Amazon's 5,000-strong Brampton Heritage Road facility since January.

The toll the more infectious and deadly variants is taking on the working class is shown by the ever younger average age of patients ending up in ICUs. According to *Maclean's*, the number of ICU patients in Ontario under 60 is 50 percent higher than it was on December 26, near the peak of the second wave.

Overall, the new variants are proving far more dangerous. Ontario's Science Table recently reported that they pose a 63 percent higher risk of hospitalization, a 103 percent higher risk of ICU admission, and a 56 percent greater risk of death.

Ontario's seven-day average of new daily COVID-19 infections reached 2,340 on Thursday, up from 1,600 just 10 days before. Meanwhile, the number of ICU patients rose to a record 421. During the winter, the provincial government repeatedly warned

that any rise above 350 ICU patients with coronavirus would make it extremely difficult to provide adequate care to other patients.

Directly repudiating the scientific evidence, which indicates that schools are a major vector in the transmission of the new variants, Ford's widely-hated Education Minister, Stephen Lecce, asserted Thursday that schools remain "safe." There are no plans to order school closures province-wide, he added, even though a growing number of medical experts are warning that this is the only way to avoid a total collapse of the health care system. As Dr. Nathan Stall, a researcher at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital and a member of Ontario's Science Table, bluntly put it in an interview with CTV News, "When you do not act to control the pandemic early, swiftly, and get things under control, and you push your healthcare system this far and you try and compensate not by preventing people from getting sick, but by building field hospitals and opening new hospitals, you are going to end up in this predictable situation where eventually, you can no longer cope."

In neighbouring Quebec, Premier Francois Legault has enforced further school openings even as virus cases spike. Last week, he told English-language school boards in the Greater Montreal area to bring all students back for in-person learning, and followed up this week with a government decree that ordered the school boards to force all high school students to return to class full-time.

Skyrocketing infections nonetheless compelled his government to announce the closure Wednesday of schools in three areas, including Quebec City and Gatineau. Yet Legault plans to keep them closed for a mere 10 days, i.e., less time than the lifespan of a single virus infection.

Alberta recorded its highest daily increase in cases Wednesday since mid-January, when Jason Kenney's United Conservative Party (UCP) government was forced to open field hospitals in Edmonton and Calgary to cope with the overwhelming of hospitals. Alberta's test positivity rate was 6.52 percent on Wednesday, the 10th day in a row that it had exceeded 5 percent. The World Health Organization advises that test positivity rates of 5 percent or more indicate that a pandemic is out of control.

Alberta, whose UCP government has repeatedly boasted of its support for an "open economy," currently has the highest per capita infection rate of any province. Although the government claimed that its rush to reopen schools and the economy in January and February was tied to a drop in the number of ICU patients below 300, this figure was breached this week with no new restrictions being announced.

In BC, cases are also rising dramatically, driven by close to 200 confirmed cases of COVID-19 variants. On Wednesday, the province recorded more than 1,000 daily infections for the first time since the pandemic began.

John Horgan's NDP government continues to refuse to close schools, and is still using a fraudulent system to inform the public about infections in education institutions. This consists of counting every outbreak in a school as an "exposure," regardless of the number of infections it has caused. Due to this suppression of critical information, the full extent of the virus' spread is totally unclear. There have been numerous reports of parents only finding out by accident that their child has been exposed to the virus.

Illustrating the rapid increase in infections across the country, active cases in Canada shot up from around 36,000 on March 23 to over 46,000 one week later. The peak of the first wave, which claimed over 8,000 lives, was around 34,000 active cases in late May 2020.

Presiding over and facilitating this disastrous state of affairs is the Trudeau Liberal government. It spearheaded the reckless reopening of the economy, beginning in April 2020, and egged on the right-wing, anti-worker provincial governments to dismantle COVID-19 restrictions. The federal government provided them up to \$19 billion in additional funding last year that was tied to reopening schools and the economy. Its September throne speech bluntly declared that any future lockdowns should be "short-term" and implemented at "the local level," i.e., totally ineffectual. Meanwhile, the Trudeau government has lavished over \$650 billion in emergency bailout funds on Canada's big banks and corporations to ensure the protection of their profits and vast wealth.

Trudeau has all but washed his hands of any direct responsibility for the shambolic public health response to the virus' second and third waves, which have driven total COVID-19 deaths to more than 23,000. His government has refused to eliminate Stephen Harper's austerity cap on health care transfers to the provinces, which have starved hospitals of funding for years, helping create the abysmal conditions health care workers confront.

Like the provinces, the Liberal government is relying on the various vaccines to suppress the third wave—weeks or even months hence—and effectively telling the population, above all the working class, to fend for themselves till then. This under conditions where Canada's vaccine rollout has been plagued by disorganization and shortages. According to Our World in Data, as of April 1, just 13.8 percent of Canadians had received a first dose and less than 2 percent were fully vaccinated.

The criminality of the ruling elite is confronting mounting opposition in the working class.

Six out of nine schools in the Sir Wilfred Laurier School Board in Greater Montreal rejected Legault's order to return to full in-person learning. Students at Westmount High School in Montreal wore signs on their clothing this week to denounce the government's reckless policy.

At Heritage School on Montreal's South Shore, students walked out Wednesday in protest over the government's plan. "We aren't a game to be played, we're not lab rats. Our lives matter," remarked protest leader Desreen Howell. "We could catch COVID

and have no choice. And the government, rather than doing what's best for the students or teachers, is doing what will line their pocket."

An Ontario teacher contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* to describe his recent experiences in Brampton, the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada's most populous province. "My kids' elementary school had an outbreak on Tuesday, but they didn't close the school," he said. "We kept them home yesterday and today. One of the students in my class asked for an extension for his assignment yesterday. When I asked why, he said he and his whole family came down with COVID—a family of five in Brampton. The dad is in a bad way. How are schools safe?"

"The government strategy to keep schools open so parents can go to work and maintain business profits is not working for us," added Michael, a caretaker for the Toronto District School Board. "The resurgence merits a lockdown but the federal and provincial governments are staying status quo. They should have closed all non-essential workplaces and the big drivers of the infection rate—Amazon fulfillment centers and big plants. It is a losing battle because they won't do the big lockdowns that are needed. The big giants, the Amazons, the President Choice warehouses, are profiting big time. There is a lack of financial support for people to stay at home to get the cases down."

The only way the looming catastrophe produced by the ruling elite's ruinous policies can be averted is through the independent political intervention of the working class.

Workers must fight for a lockdown worthy of the name, including the closure of all schools to in-person learning, the shuttering of all nonessential production, and the paying of full wages to all workers and families affected until the pandemic is over. The resources to fund such urgent measures, including the provision of billions of dollars to the health care system, must be seized from the super-rich and redistributed to meet social need.

To fight for such a program, workers must form rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and neighbourhood, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which have sided with the ruling class' policy of reopening the economy and suppressed struggles by teachers and other sections of workers to secure safe working conditions.



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