

# Canada's governments prioritize profits over lives, keep schools and workplaces open as third COVID-19 wave surges

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COVID-19 infection rates are once again rising dramatically across Canada driven by new, more contagious and lethal variants. Yet all levels of government are prioritizing corporate profits over human lives and adamantly refusing to take the urgent public health measures needed to prevent a catastrophic third wave of the pandemic and mass death.

Last Thursday, Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford ordered a totally ineffectual 28-day “shutdown” that has been denounced by health experts and even sections of the corporate media as too little, too late. Similar “shutdowns” were announced last week in British Columbia, Quebec and in the Atlantic provinces, while doctors in Alberta have unsuccessfully implored Premier Jason Kenney and his United Conservative Party government to apply an “emergency brake” to its reckless re-opening policies.

What all of the new “shutdown” announcements have in common is that they are designed to keep industrial workplaces and in-school instruction—that is the main, or at the very least two of the principal, vectors of the current upsurge in COVID-19 infections—fully operational.

Unlike the two previous waves of the pandemic, in spring 2020 and last December-January, which saw intensive care referrals and deaths heavily weighted towards the elderly and less healthy, hospital staff in Ontario have reported a significant increase in younger, healthier patients from working class neighbourhoods and occupations.

Canada officially surpassed one million COVID-19 cases Saturday. The total case count has risen more than seven-fold since last September, when the campaign to reopen the economy went into high-gear with the reopening of schools for in-class teaching. Ontario's hospitals are already treating 50 percent more patients under the age of 60 than they were at the peak of the second wave.

The B.1.1.7 variant, which is at least 75 percent more transmissible, is rapidly becoming the most common version of the virus in Ontario. The variant has been spreading as Ford has reopened the schools and continued with the designation of virtually every industrial and logistics enterprise as essential. In the factory belt in Peel Region immediately to the west of Toronto, public health authorities have recorded over 300 outbreaks at industrial sites. Variants are also running rampant in British Columbia and Alberta, including the potentially even more hazardous P1 Brazilian variant.

A review of the workplace outbreaks added to Toronto's official list on just one day last week illustrates the brutal policy of mass infection that all levels of government and every establishment political party are supporting. On April 1, 28 separate workplace outbreaks were added to the city's list, including 16 infections at an Amazon fulfillment centre, and eight at a Hudson's Bay warehouse. Four cases at Maple Leaf Foods and 11 among City of Toronto employees were also recorded. Five people were infected at a Tim Hortons coffee shop, and seven each at a Metro store and a Real Canadian Superstore outlet.

This follows the recent mass infection of over 900 workers at a Brampton, Ontario Amazon warehouse, 300 infections (not properly reported) at a Canada Post sorting plant in nearby Mississauga, and outbreaks at 225 schools in the Greater Toronto-Hamilton industrial corridor.

As the intensive care units begin to reach capacity, the rollout of vaccines in Ontario, as across the country, continues to lag far behind the rates achieved in many other countries, because of vaccine shortages, supply bottlenecks and insufficient distribution networks. To date, vaccine distribution has targeted older age groups and people with serious health conditions. Workers in high-risk virus hotspots such as factories, warehouses and schools, and those living in high-density public housing, are not being prioritized.

The severity of the crisis is not the consequence of the unexpected nature of the pandemic, which was both foreseeable and foreseen, but of the disastrous response of government authorities. They have refused to funnel the requisite resources into a health care system that was already ravaged by decades of budget cuts, thus ensuring its inability to carry out systematic mass testing, contact tracing and vaccine rollout.

Added into this rotten bargain has been the criminal disregard for human life exhibited by the provincial governments in concert with the major corporations and trade unions. With the full blessing of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government, they have all connived since last April to convince the population that reopening nonessential businesses, factories and schools is desirable, even as the virus continues to run rampant.

Two incidents over the past week show how the mantra of profit over people is being implemented by the institutions of the ruling

class.

At Toyota auto assembly plants in Cambridge and Woodstock, Ontario workers were sent letters from the Southwestern Public Health Unit saying there is a high probability that they have been exposed to COVID-19 and should self-isolate from March 25 to April 8. At one of the plants, an employee told the press that at least 150 workers could have been exposed to the virus.

Nonetheless, despite being identified by public health as “high risk close contacts” of infected employees, workers were advised to continue to clock in to the job. “During your self-isolation, you may continue to go to work but you must go directly to work and home again. While you are at work it is important you maintain your isolation, meaning you avoid any close contact (within 6 feet) of any co-workers until your isolation period is over,” stated the letter. The public health officials continue to “work closely” with Toyota management to continue production at the two plants. Cynically invoking “privacy issues,” they refused to release the number of infected workers and details about where they were infected.

Also last week, CBC reported on hundreds of pages of documents and an audio recording detailing the Alberta government’s ruinous response to a massive outbreak last spring at a Cargill meat processing plant in High River. They showed that at a “town hall meeting” with workers meant to discuss safety at the facility, provincial Labour Minister Jason Copping, Agriculture Minister Devin Dreeshan and public health officials, including Chief Medical Officer Deena Hinshaw, deliberately concealed from the assembled workers the ongoing danger.

“If you look at this evidence in its totality, it is clear that keeping the plant open is more important than worker safety,” stated University of Regina professor of occupational health and safety, Sean Tucker. “I think there is enough evidence to show that there was a regulatory breakdown in the case of Cargill’s High River, Alberta plant, that people knew about problems but were not empowered to share them with workers.”

The April 2020 Cargill outbreak was the largest single localized COVID-19 outbreak in North America at the time. Almost 1,000 of the plant’s 2,000 workers were infected. Over six hundred close contacts of the meatpackers also tested positive. Three workers died. Infections continue throughout the Canadian meatpacking industry. In February, an outbreak at Olymel’s pork processing plant in Red Deer, Alberta infected 515 workers and killed three.

The release of the damning documents served as the occasion for trade union bureaucrats to denounce the provincial government in sharp terms. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401 president Thomas Hesse described the government’s handling of the outbreak as “not just negligence, it is worse than negligence.”

This is no doubt true, but the fact is that these same unions have been telling workers for over a year to rely on the very same “negligent” government to protect their health and safety. During the Cargill outbreak, the UFCW repeatedly insisted that the pro-employer labour and health and safety boards of Alberta, overseen by the pro-big business, hard-right United Conservative Party government, would protect workers’ health and well-being on the job. Hesse summed this up last spring, when he categorically ruled

out any job action by workers, who were opposed to a precipitous return to the plant due to the deaths of their colleagues. “We are looking at legal options,” Hesse asserted at the time. “We are not asking for a work stoppage. A work stoppage would not be legal.”

Hesse’s statement exemplifies the outlook and role of the unions across Canada and internationally. They prioritize the upholding of the pro-corporate collective bargaining and labour relations “legal” framework, which exists to protect the interests of the bosses at the expense of workers. The unions are bitterly opposed to challenging it because it is this system that underpins their perks and privileges, including six-figure salaries for top officials and prestigious positions on various tripartite corporate-government-union committees.

The argument that workers must abide by “legality” has been used by the unions in every province to sabotage worker opposition to the reopening of schools and workplaces, and their continued operation even as infections skyrocket. When the blatant indifference of the ruling elite and its state structures towards the lives of workers has been spelled out in flesh and blood, as in the case of Cargill, bureaucrats like Hesse seek to cover their tracks with radical bluster and feigned shock at government “negligence.” But they continue to corral workers into unsafe workplaces, risking their health and lives.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has long insisted, until the pandemic is over, “Schools must be closed, and millions invested in e-learning. All non-essential economic activity must be shut down. PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) must be made available to all those workers who must stay on the job for essential production and services. And full financial compensation must be provided to all workers and small businesses affected by lockdown measures.

“The resources to finance such measures exist in abundance, but they are monopolized by the billionaires and multimillionaires, whose grip on society can only be broken by the independent political mobilization of the working class.

“To fight for these demands, workers must build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions. This must be combined with a broader political struggle on a socialist perspective, for the bringing to power of a workers’ government and the reorganization of economic life to meet the social needs of all, not the profit interests of a tiny minority.”



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