

British Columbia's NDP government keeps schools and workplaces open as infections surge

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The third wave of Canada's COVID-19 pandemic is surging across the country, including in British Columbia. On Saturday, the province reported 1,072 new infections—the third time in four days that the Canada's West Coast province set a new record for the highest daily total of new infections since the start of the pandemic.

Despite skyrocketing infection numbers, driven by a substantial rise in cases of the more infectious Brazilian P.1 variant, schools and workplaces remain open across the province. British Columbia's trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) government continues to cover up the extent of infections by refusing to provide information to the public about the number of infections in educational institutions. Instead, every outbreak in a school, regardless of the number of cases it produces, is misleadingly referred to as one "exposure."

Summing up his party's hostility to working people and his own criminal indifference to workers' lives, NDP Premier John Horgan cynically blamed young people last week for the resurgent pandemic. Brushing aside the fact that his government's reckless and outright homicidal policies force workers of all ages to crowd together on public transit, and in schools, offices, and at worksites on a daily basis, Horgan arrogantly stated, "The cohort from 20 to 39 are ... quite frankly, putting the rest of us in a challenging position...Don't blow this for the rest of us."

Horgan went on to demand that young people show more "individual responsibility," and announced a series of ineffectual restrictions impacting indoor dining and ski resorts that are no better than the farcical "shutdown" announced by Ontario's hard-right Conservative Premier, Doug Ford.

Horgan's effort to slander young workers and students is a deliberate attempt by the NDP government to conceal its own responsibility for mass infections and deaths in

the province. The reality is that the vast majority of infections, as is the case everywhere, are hitting workers because the NDP, in line with the policies pursued by governments across Canada and internationally, has insisted that the economy must remain open to protect the profits of the capitalist elite.

The heavy burden borne by workers, and teachers in particular, is underscored by figures from WorkSafeBC, the province's workers' compensation agency. The figures were compiled from all COVID-19-related claims registered with the agency since the beginning of the pandemic. They showed that apart from critical care staff in hospitals and employees of long-term care facilities, teachers are the most at-risk profession to get infected.

WorkSafeBC had registered a total of 149 claims from teachers as of March 26, including 109 from elementary and kindergarten teachers, and 40 from secondary school teachers. WorkSafeBC's public data does not separate elementary and secondary school teaching assistants, however the total number of claims made by teaching assistants as of March 26 stands at 64.

The BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) published a press release on the staggering figures of teacher COVID-19 claims, not to make the obvious point that schools should be closed to in-person learning to save lives, but to advance arguments to keep them open. Instead of focusing on the key fact from the figures, which is that the only professions to file more coronavirus-related claims than teachers are health care workers directly caring for infectious patients, the BCTF concentrated its fire on a secondary question: that elementary school teachers filed two-and-a-half times more claims than secondary school teachers. According to the BCTF, this demonstrated that all that was required for schools to continue with packed classes was for the provincial government to impose a

mask mandate on all elementary school students, like the one that already exists for their secondary school counterparts.

On March 29, Dr. Bonnie Henry, British Columbia's provincial health officer, duly obliged, stating at a press conference, "We're going to be updating our public health guidance to support mask-wearing for all students down to Grade 4, across the province."

Yet even this utterly inadequate measure barely lasted 24 hours. The announcement was undermined that very evening, when a bulletin was sent out to schools across the province from the deputy minister of education, Scott MacDonald, informing them that public health orders were being amended to only "support and encourage" students in grades 4 to 12 to wear masks at school.

In the days that followed Dr. Henry's announcement, provincial health officials backtracked still further on the language they had used, with "order" being amended in favour of "just guidance." This resulted in a great deal of confusion within schools, where workers were unsure if mask-wearing was mandatory, required, recommended or simply encouraged and supported.

In response to these developments, educators, parents and residents of the province took to social media to voice their outrage at the feeble character of the "support and encourage" phraseology, and to share their heightened concerns about the consequences of keeping schools open during the surge of new COVID-19 cases.

One BC teacher, aptly summarizing the fear, frustration and suspicion expressed in many Twitter discussions, referred to a tweet they had made in February that read: "I think the continued refusal to do a real mask mandate is a contingency plan to keep schools open even if/when the pandemic worsens to a dire level not yet seen here. If schools get so bad that they should close, this is the card saved to fix the situation with a spin."

Also referencing the mask mandate, another post read, "It's treating safety like a negotiation and starting with a low-ball offer to trick everyone into settling in the middle for less than what should have been given from the start."

As the third surge of the pandemic sweeps across Canada, government health officials continue to repeat the lies perpetuated by the ruling class globally. It is continually stated that schools are a safe space, that children contribute little to the transmission of the virus and that they are not at risk of severe health consequences if they become infected.

In fact, schools have been shown to be major vectors in transmitting the virus. This is especially true during

Canada's current third wave and in the worst COVID-19 hotspots, such as Ontario's Peel Region and Montreal. Adolescents and children who become infected can fall seriously ill, even die. Moreover, as with adults, the long-term consequences of a severe infection are not known.

No less deceptive is the slanderous lie that a lack of "individual responsibility" among workers is the reason for the resurgence of COVID-19. The truth is that the third wave is the direct product of the ruling elite's "open" economy policy, which was spearheaded by the Trudeau Liberal federal government, and ably supported by Horgan's NDP and the trade unions in BC.

Governments in Canada, as in the US, Europe and around the world have been especially anxious to reopen schools amid the pandemic, so parents can be compelled to return to work and churn out profits for big business.

It is critical that teachers in BC and across Canada organize independently of the pro-capitalist trade unions in order to have schools closed and cease in-person teaching to protect the lives of educators, school staff, students and their families alike.

Teachers have begun this struggle by joining the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is holding its first online public meeting on Sunday, April 11 at 10 am Pacific Time (1 pm EDT) to discuss how this struggle can be taken forward. Teachers, education workers, parents and students can register to participate in the event here and contact the committee at cersc.csppb@gmail.com.



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