

Toronto school caretaker speaks out on dangers posed by authorities' insistence on "open schools" amid pandemic

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The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding its first public meeting this Sunday, April 11, at 1 p.m. Eastern Time to advance a program to close all schools and save lives. Register here to participate.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous physical, emotional and psychological strain on all education workers. This includes school caretakers, who are expected to open, clean and close elementary and high schools in the course of a normal work day, thereby placing them at high risk for contracting the virus and bringing it home to their loved ones.

Michael, a caretaker from Toronto, attended a recent meeting of the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC), where he made a powerful appeal for a united struggle by teachers, caretakers, and other education staff to secure safe working conditions. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Michael about his experiences at work during the pandemic and his views on the political establishment's criminal disregard for the health and safety of working people.

"I work for a Toronto school board where the high schools are only open half days, so they are safer than the elementary schools," he said. "The high school buildings are mostly empty by the time I get there. I worked at a working class neighbourhood's elementary school yesterday where there were 20 classes and half were closed due to COVID cases. Yet, somehow the school is still open. It is very dangerous for the cleaning staff, and really for anyone in there."

Michael discussed the impact of the pandemic on working conditions for him and his colleagues. "Before COVID, my working conditions were a bit better. I did not have as much anxiety about the environment," he explained. "Now, working in unsafe workplaces the

anxiety is the biggest difference, and morale has gotten lower. I go to a bunch of different schools every day. I definitely look forward to working in high schools—it is easier, more relaxed, less anxiety.

"Elementary schools have more students and staff. They are packed, when everyone is in class, staff and students. Those day shifts are the worst, the risks are a lot higher. There could be 500 out of 800 students in class in one school building because some classes are sent home to isolate or are sick, I don't know which."

Michael condemned the claims made by politicians to have hired more caretakers to clean schools. "Yes, they claim to have hired 200 more people and they are still hiring this month in my school board. But many older workers are taking early retirement and they also find it difficult to maintain supplies," he commented. "The school boards' claims of more staff are mostly PR, because there are not more staff despite the new hires. They did give us a new kind of disinfectant for floors and multi-surface cleaning. We disinfect bathrooms and desks, floors. Sanitizers and masks are supplied, but we don't have those PPE for the body like the nurses wear in dirty areas. We just have gloves, masks, some of us wear goggles when we are mixing chemicals."

We asked Michael whether he knew of colleagues getting infected and what he thought of the government's vaccine rollout. "Friends of friends got it and got quite sick," he responded. "I have not gotten vaccinated and I don't know why they have not expanded vaccines to all ages. I don't know when young people like me will be vaccinated. I worry about getting it with the new variants before they get me vaccinated..."

"The government strategy to keep schools open so parents can go to work and maintain business profits is not working for us. The resurgence in COVID-19 cases

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 say at home to get the cases down. Some right wingers say it's draconian. So what? It works. The (Ontario Doug) Ford government is unwilling to go that far. They much prefer to protect business profits even though closing it down is the best thing to do."

Michael criticized the profits before lives policy embraced by all levels of government across the country, irrespective of their political stripe. "The economy comes first," he said. "The federal and provincial governments are owned by their donors—the rich Liberals, the rich Conservatives and the banks! The Liberals and Conservatives serve Bay Street's interests. They are Number 1, yep.

"The school teachers' union has been silent. We caretakers are members of CUPE Local 1280 and since I started working here I have not heard a thing from the union. No union reps to be seen. All the caretakers who worked at my board for many years say there have been no emails from the union, no monthly meetings, complete silence. We have not even gotten the meagre pay raise negotiated in the last contract. It's pretty bad, no joint action between school workers, nothing. I am generally a union supporter, but I am sure I am not the only one who has become disillusioned. The problem is the leadership has been neutered by the government. The leadership is really letting down the rank-and-file. Nobody is in a good situation. I would say they are not doing enough."

Michael explained that he learned about the CERSC from an article on the WSWs and contacted us because he wanted to do something to improve working conditions. Commenting on his experience at the first CERSC meeting he attended, Michael added, "I think the discussion was good. It was about the union leadership and how they were basically corporatist and useless. Yes evidently it is clear that the union leadership is not looking out for our interests and we are going to have to fight for ourselves and take matters into our own hands. All school staff should come together, the secretaries, teachers, caretakers, the child care workers. The more we come together the stronger we will be. It's not working now because that is not what we are doing."

Michael stressed that the unions have no intention of organizing such a struggle, remarking, "They are basically working with the government to suppress the workers.

"I read an article about how the teachers' union was against striking last September. I don't know why the caretakers are not striking. The caretakers have power. If we don't show up, the school is not opened. They would all be closed. The union leadership should be saying we have had enough of this bullshit and we are all not showing up until our demands are met, whatever the demands of the rank-and-file are! That is what they should be doing! Challenging the power and making those in positions of power afraid.

"The union leadership, useless people like (Unifor President) Jerry Dias, have colluded with the people that they are supposed to make afraid and fight. They have become our enemy I guess, in a way. Regardless of the industry, they completely ignore the rank and file. They don't fear us and they have clearly switched sides, and the businesses don't fear us and the governments don't either."

Concluding with a message to his fellow caretakers and education workers across Canada, Michael explained, "I think if only the workers knew they had the power! A lot of workers don't think we do. They've internalized the anti-worker propaganda. It takes a lot of courage to challenge power. It can be scary, but workers do have the power by withholding their labour, not showing up to work whether you are a teacher, caretaker, or grocery store worker. The rank-and-file has to take back power, cause a ruckus. My message is just that it is up to us to ignore and defy rotten union leadership and really take control ourselves and put fear into the bosses and union leaders. Take back control of our workplaces for ourselves and look out for each other. It won't be easy but we have no choice, no other option, we must do it. The pandemic is getting much worse."



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