

# Ontario teacher calls on education workers across Canada: “Join the struggle to make our schools safe!”

Our reporter  
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The *World Socialist Web Site* received the following letter from an Ontario teacher explaining why they will participate in the inaugural meeting of the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee this Sunday (April 11), and why all education staff and working people should attend. The online meeting will begin at 1 PM Eastern Time. You can register to attend here.

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Dear Teachers, Educational Assistants, Caretakers, Education Support Staff, and workers across Canada,

Whether you work at a high school, a university, an elementary school, or a middle school—this letter is an appeal for you to acknowledge what you know is true, and to implore you to act and join with your colleagues in education across Canada in a struggle to make our schools safe for work and learning. Events over the past year have brought much into focus for education workers. At different times we have been exhausted, worried, anxious, hopeful, angry, and have felt uneasy. We worry about our children, loved ones and our parents.

New COVID-19 variants are having a transformative impact not only on Canadians, but on workers all over the world. Despite what governments led by Conservatives, Liberals or the New Democrats are telling us, deep in our heart of hearts and in our minds, we have discovered truths that are forcing us to reconsider the way we look at the world. Schools are not safe, our leaders have failed miserably, and we are left with little choice but to organize ourselves.

We work in buildings that are not safe places for our children to learn in, or for us as individual teachers to do the work that we derive so much joy in doing. This

has been demonstrated shockingly to all of us in Ontario as a healthy 47-year-old teacher is now fighting for his life in hospital, intubated, after contracting the disease from a student. In the past four days ending April 7, more than 25,000 people have been infected by the virus. Our emergency rooms are on fire. A growing chorus of medical professionals like the courageous Dr. Michael Warner, director of critical care at Michael Garron hospital in Toronto, are practically begging the province to enact serious measures to safeguard our healthcare system and prevent needless deaths.

The response from the provincial government has been a mix of either criminal indifference, or a complete lack of reason or rationality in developing a plan that puts people before profits. The ineffectual “stay-at-home” order announced by Ford this week is totally inadequate, because it allows schools and workplaces, the two main sources of transmission, to remain open.

Another painful truth that we have learned is that our unions were practically nowhere to be seen over the past year. Mega unions like CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees), OECTA (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association), ETFO (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario), and OSSTF (Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation), some of whose leadership makes more than 220K per year, have simply been missing in action. Educators have begun to ask the question, “At what point will my union intervene and say ‘No’? At what point will the unions order workers to not go into unsafe workplaces? At what point will the unions grow a spine and stand up to Doug Ford’s endless attacks on education workers’ health and safety? At what point will all the unions join forces and

unleash the power of millions of people in the educational services industry across Canada?”

The answer is never. The truth is that power lies in the hands of the workers alone. Our education unions have been unmasked and have lost so much legitimacy in the eyes of their membership. Their silence and invisibility has spoken volumes to all of us who make a living working in a school.

By the time you read this letter, Government, school board, media, and union talking heads will have spun events in a million different directions. They will tell you that they are doing everything they can to keep you safe. They will tell you that they are watching the situation closely. The pressure to act may even push some school boards to close. As some local health units reach their breaking points, they may have no choice but to take emergency measures and close schools unilaterally for a few days. None of that matters to us. We have learned many valuable lessons over the past year. The education sector, for one, has become the frontline in a much greater struggle. We have begun to internalize that this is above all else a political struggle. In households around the country and at kitchen tables from coast to coast, people are having conversations. When we speak to our friends and family candidly about what is happening, we realize that so much of this is about money. We need to work because nothing must be allowed to interfere with the profits of the elites. Come hell or high water, children need to be sent into dangerous and crowded schools not because anyone in government cares about their mental health, but because their parents need to work. The economy and profits come before everything.

The pandemic has revealed some harsh truths about education in Canada. The schools we work in are not safe, our leaders have indeed failed us, and we are left with no other choice but to look to each other and organize ourselves for the safety of our families, loved ones, and communities we live in. Join with your colleagues in education and struggle to make our schools safe! The emergence of the third wave and the new dangers posed by more lethal variants have revealed that urgent action is necessary. This may seem like a daunting task, but we are not alone. This is not a local struggle. It is both national and international in scope.

Our courageous colleagues in Europe, Australia and

the United States have already formed independent rank and file safety committees in defense of their right to work in safe spaces. Be heartened by their example, and join the struggle for the end of all in-class instruction until the third wave is brought under control. To this end, the Cross-Canada Educators Rank and File Safety Committee is holding our first public meeting on Sunday April 11 at 1 PM Eastern Time. Please join us online.



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