

The working class must intervene to halt Canada's COVID-19 catastrophe

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Canada is rapidly emerging as a global coronavirus epicentre, with a surge in cases due to the new more contagious and lethal variants.

Daily new infections have more than doubled from an already high level in mid-March. On Thursday, there were 7,984 new cases, and the 7-day daily average of new cases, which has risen steadily for the past month, reached 6,873—its highest point since close to the peak of the pandemic's second wave in early January.

Canada's per capita daily new infection rate is close to matching, if not surpassing, that in the US, as is the number of critically ill COVID-19 patients per 100,000 people.

Due to the rapid rise of cases and the rampant spread of variants, three of which are spreading widely throughout the population, the US Centres for Disease Control (CDC) on Wednesday issued its highest-level warning against travel to Canada.

Absent the political intervention of the working class to force the closure of all nonessential production and schools, and confiscate the vast wealth of the super-rich to provide billions in funding for overstretched hospitals, Canada is heading towards a catastrophe.

In Ontario, the country's most populous province, more than 550 COVID-19 patients are in intensive care. During the winter's second wave, authorities repeatedly warned that if the number of ICU patients in Ontario hospitals rose above 350, it would be impossible to maintain emergency medical care for all. According to CBC the Ontario government's health agency has ordered the province's hospitals to postpone all non-emergency surgeries as of next Monday.

Stories are also emerging of certain drugs, including one that has proven highly effective in treating critically ill COVID-19 patients, being rationed in Ontario hospitals, and patients being transferred to other regions due to a lack of beds. ICU occupancy rates are also at their highest since the pandemic began in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick.

Canada is one of the few countries where all three of new more infectious virus strains—the B.1.1.7 British variant, the P.1 Brazilian variant, and the B.1.351 South African variant—are spreading widely throughout the community. In Quebec and Ontario, the B.1.1.7 variant is already the cause of the majority of new COVID-19 cases, while in Alberta and B.C., where Thursday saw the highest number of new infections since the start of the pandemic, the P.1 variant is running rampant.

"There's no other country that's kind of dealing with it as we are—we have all of them emerging at once," Dr. Zain Chagla, an

epidemiologist at St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, told CBC.

The new variants are exacting a far heavier toll on younger patients in the prime of their lives, many of them frontline workers and/or their partners. Last weekend, a 47-year-old teacher in Ontario with no previous health issues was intubated. On Wednesday, local media in Montreal reported the death of a 16-year-old student. The Ontario government's scientific advisory panel reports that the variants have increased the risk of hospitalization by 103 percent, ICU admission by 63 percent, and death by 56 percent.

A significant contributing factor to the eruption of a third wave fueled by these more transmissible variants is the ruling elite's shamolic rollout of vaccines. Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government announced late last year with much fanfare that a military general would oversee the distribution of vaccines—a tacit admission that the decades of austerity imposed on health care by all political parties, from the New Democrats to the Conservatives, has decimated Canada's health care infrastructure. The past few months have demonstrated that the consequences of this class war policy, pursued to ensure the enrichment of Canada's fabulously wealthy financial elite, could not be overcome by military command, no matter how often bourgeois politicians and the mainstream media invoke the armed forces as the country's national saviour.

However, the principal cause of Canada's unfolding coronavirus catastrophe is the ruling elite's fulsome support for a criminal "profits before lives" policy of mass infection. To ensure that the profits of big business, the banks and the financial oligarchy continue to increase, governments at every level have refused to impose the necessary restrictions on workplaces and schools, the two main vectors of transmission.

Since September, schools have been open almost continuously across the country, due to the ruling class' insistence that parents must be freed from childcare responsibilities in order to go to work churning out profits for the capitalists. Scientific studies have proven the authorities' insistence on in-class teaching played a critical role in triggering Canada's deadly second wave, which claimed over 10,000 lives. And, as has been explicitly stated by public health officials in Montreal and Ontario's Peel Region, two of the country's biggest COVID-19 hot spots, schools are major vectors in the transmission of the current third wave.

The ruling elite's back-to-work/back-to-school strategy has been spearheaded by Justin Trudeau's Liberal government, which

began the pandemic by funnelling more than \$650 billion in emergency bailout funds to the big banks and financial oligarchs with no strings attached.

Following last spring's lockdown—which was only imposed because workers, including autoworkers in Windsor and across North America, launched job action to close their unsafe plants—the Trudeau government, with the support of corporate lobby groups and the trade unions, implemented a reckless back-to-work campaign. Employers were given a free hand to ignore public health orders and basic virus protection measures, as Ottawa and the provinces refused to enforce even their own inadequate pandemic regulations. The unions connived in this gang-up against working people by sabotaging all workers' struggles against unsafe work, and ordering teachers and education workers to return to their jobs despite widespread opposition.

In its throne speech last September, the Trudeau government sent a clear message to big business that absolutely nothing would be done to get in the way of their profit-making. Any lockdowns or further public health restrictions, the speech asserted, should be implemented at the "local level" and be "short-term," i.e., totally ineffectual. The minority government's throne speech only passed parliament due to the votes of the New Democrats, whose leader Jagmeet Singh has vowed that he will continue to prop up the Trudeau government until the pandemic is over.

Trudeau has also hidden behind the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments to offload blame for the failure to close down all but essential businesses and the overall ruinous response to the pandemic onto the hard-right premiers like Doug Ford in Ontario, Jason Kenney in Alberta, and François Legault in Quebec.

While they and their governments are undoubtedly complicit in social murder, the reality is that the conspirators-in-chief sit around the Liberal cabinet table in Ottawa. Already in early April 2020, federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu callously declared that "herd immunity" was a viable policy because, "Having 70 percent of people get COVID is not the end of the world." Trudeau provided billions of dollars in additional funding to the provinces that was made conditional on the enforcement of homicidal reopening policies.

The entire Canadian political establishment, from the hard-right Conservatives to the ostensibly "left" New Democrats, is on board with the policy of mass infection and death to protect corporate profits. Just last week, British Columbia NDP Premier John Horgan arrogantly denounced young working-age people for spreading the virus, saying, "Don't blow this for the rest of us." This from a Premier whose government has done absolutely nothing to stop hundreds of outbreaks at workplaces across the province, and deliberately covered up the extent of infections in schools by means of a byzantine reporting system. Meanwhile, Ontario Premier Ford continues to refuse to provide paid sick leave for workers despite widespread acknowledgement that this would curb the spread of the virus by allowing workers to shelter at home when they feel unwell.

These political criminals would never get away with these policies without the assistance of the trade unions. They have enforced the ruling elite's back-to-work/back-to-school program,

expanded their corporatist partnership with big business and the Liberal government, and denounced calls for job action to protest workers' health and lives as "illegal." Under conditions where even sections of the corporate media have had to concede that the working class is bearing the brunt of the pandemic as both a health and socio-economic crisis, the Canadian Labour Congress website proclaims atop its homepage, "In Canada, we've weathered the pandemic by sticking together and supporting each other."

If the looming catastrophe of mass infections and death on an even greater scale than the pandemic's first and second waves is to be averted, the working class must urgently intervene with its own program to stop the spread of COVID-19. All nonessential production and in-person learning in schools must be immediately halted, with full compensation for all workers and families so they can shelter at home. The ill-gotten gains of the super-rich, including the \$650 billion bailout and the more than \$50 billion accumulated by Canada's 40 billionaires since the beginning of the pandemic, must be expropriated and used to fund urgent social needs, from shoring up the crumbling health care system, to providing effective distance learning for all students and safe workplaces for all essential workers.

If human lives are to be prioritized over private profit, workers must build new organizations of struggle—including rank-and-file safety committees, established independently of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions—to fight for workers' power and the socialist reorganization of economic life.

The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) is holding its first public meeting on Sunday at 1 PM Eastern Time to discuss this program of political struggle. We urge all teachers, education staff, students and working people from all sectors to register to attend.



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