

Canada's governments refuse to protect workers' lives as pandemic's third wave surges

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18 April 2021

Canada's governments are refusing to shut down schools and nonessential businesses amid a dramatic worsening of the COVID-19 pandemic across the country. Last Thursday, there were 9,561 new infections, a record since the start of the pandemic. In Ontario, where new cases are averaging more than 4,300 per day, hospitals and intensive care units (ICU) are buckling under a flood of new patients.

By prioritizing corporate profits over workers' lives, the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal and Ontario Conservative governments are ensuring that the virus and its new and more lethal variants will continue to spread, threatening the lives of thousands and indeed tens of thousands of people in coming weeks and months.

The ruling elite's callous indifference to the lives of workers and their families was epitomized in Ontario Premier Doug Ford's emergency announcement on Friday, the third such announcement in as many weeks. Despite the horrifying projections made public immediately prior to his statement, including a worst-case scenario of 1,800 ICU patients and 18,000 daily cases by the end of May, Ford unveiled a series of totally ineffectual measures.

They included the extension of a "stay at home order" from four to six weeks, the reduction of capacity limits for retail outlets to 25 percent, a ban on outdoor meetings apart from gatherings consisting of one household and one other person who lives alone, and restrictions on inter-provincial travel.

Ford also gave draconian emergency powers to the police, empowering them to stop anyone outside of their home, demand details of where they were going and impose fines of up to \$750 for violations of the province's stay-at-home order. After a public outcry, with many rightly noting that they would be used disproportionately against low-income workers, Ford was forced to retreat Saturday and announce that the new policing powers were being dropped.

One of the sharpest condemnations of the government came from University of Toronto epidemiologist David

Fisman, who told Global News, "The reason it's so frustrating to hear stuff like this is he's (Ford) got the science absolutely upside down. ... We know in Ontario that the huge drivers right now of transmission are workplaces, particularly industrial workplaces, warehouses, Amazon distribution centres, post offices. We know a lot of the folks who are getting sick are lower income or have poor job security, can't stay home if they feel sick. And I didn't hear any of that today. I didn't hear any of that in today's press conference ... It's so ridiculous."

Underscoring that the ruling class' policy is to let the virus rip through workplaces and working class communities, Ford contemptuously brushed aside appeals from medical professionals that his government provide paid sick-leave for workers, even if only for the remainder of the pandemic. He also refused point blank to impose any new restrictions on worksites, other than a toothless ban on "nonessential construction," which most contractors will simply evade by declaring their operations "essential." In effect, the "stay at home" order exists only on paper, or more accurately only for those who can afford to do so.

In light of the well-known fact that workplaces are the main driver of the pandemic, Ford's policies amount to a death sentence for hundreds of workers and their relatives. As the latest update from the government's own Ontario Science Table noted prior to Ford's announcement, "Without stronger system-level measures and immediate support for essential workers and high-risk communities, high case rates will persist through the summer."

The update noted that the province-wide test positivity rate is 7.9 percent. The World Health Organization considers any test positivity rate above 5 percent to indicate that a pandemic is out of control.

Ontario's hospitals are also showing signs of collapse as the number of patients continues to steadily rise. Over the weekend, the province surpassed the threshold of 2,000 COVID-19 patients in hospital and 700 patients in intensive

care. This is more than double the rate that the government cited during the winter as the upper limit for guaranteeing regular health care for all.

Doctors acknowledge that a triage-type system in which care is rationed is already in effect, with some patients who normally would be hospitalized told to stay at home and others who normally would have been placed on ventilators receiving oxygen via a technique called high-flow nasal cannula. Triage describes a situation in which due to a lack of resources, medical personnel must determine who receives treatment and who is left to die.

At Sunnybrook Health Science Centre in Toronto, a field hospital is being brought into service to cope with the overflow of patients. Other field hospitals are expected to begin operating across the province in the coming days. The Ford government has made a desperate appeal to the federal government to help it mobilize 600 medical personnel from elsewhere in Canada to cover a staff shortage produced by decades of austerity and over a year of punishing pandemic-related workloads. Underscoring the fact that the catastrophic situation in Ontario is by no means unique, the Quebec, Saskatchewan and Alberta governments promptly responded that they have no medical personnel to spare. British Columbia is likewise confronting a mounting threat of equipment and personnel shortages, fueled by the spread of the P1 variant. First identified in Brazil, the P1 variant is highly transmissible and appears to be less impacted by, if not resistant to, existing vaccines.

In response to the calamity in Ontario, which will be repeated in most other provinces in the coming weeks unless an independent working class-led movement enforces a change in policy, the federal Trudeau government has all but washed its hands of any responsibility. Speaking like a disinterested external observer, Trudeau said at a Friday press conference, “Canada continues to face an incredibly serious situation with this third wave, cases are rising rapidly in many cases, in many places, numbers are higher than they have ever been before and many hospitals are stretched way too thin.”

In reality, Trudeau and the trade union-backed Liberal government bear chief responsibility for Canada’s ruinous response to the pandemic, including for its second and third waves, which have already claimed well over 10,000 lives. They spearheaded the reckless back-to-work/back-to-school campaign last summer, ruled out comprehensive lockdowns in last fall’s throne speech, and have refused to provide the necessary resources to strengthen the health care system and provide the social supports that would allow working families to shelter at home till the spread of the virus is halted. The “open economy” policy created conditions in which the more infectious and deadlier COVID-19

mutations, the B.1.1.7 or UK variant, the B.1.351 or South African variant, and the P1 variant, could take root and are now spreading widely in communities across the country.

The Trudeau government’s advocacy of a strategy based on “profits before lives” has been backed from the outset by the corporatist trade unions. Even now, with the health care system in the early stages of a terrible collapse, the union bureaucracy is refusing to call for any closures of industrial, manufacturing, logistical and other workplaces. Instead, the unions are offering their services, including to the hard-right Premier Ford, to ensure that the economy remains open throughout a deadly third wave in the face of deepening popular outrage.

In a pathetic “open letter” to Ford and other members of his cabinet last week, the Ontario Federation of Labour pleaded with the government to abide by the very labour relations laws and union/corporate management structures that have facilitated the spread of COVID-19 throughout the province, especially in industrial centres like Peel Region. The union federation, which ostensibly represents over 1 million workers, made not a single demand for the closure of businesses or schools. Instead, it urged the government, which even before the pandemic was shredding what worker rights remain, to ensure the enforcement of the existing toothless Occupational Health and Safety Act. The letter concluded with an appeal to Ford to “open the door” to enhanced cooperation with the unions, i.e., to create a new mechanism to enforce the profits before lives policy against worker opposition.

To resist this anti-worker agenda, bring the pandemic under control, and save lives, workers across Canada must intervene independently with their own political program and unite their struggles with their brothers and sisters internationally. Rejecting the capitalist imperative of protecting corporate profits, they should fight for the closure of all nonessential production with full pay for workers until the pandemic is over, and an end to all in-person learning in schools with comprehensive social support to families. These demands require a frontal assault on the vast wealth hoarded by the ruling elite, which must be expropriated as part of a socialist program to fund a global response to the pandemic based on the health and social needs of all.



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