

COVID-19 death of 13-year-old Brampton girl underscores criminality of Canada's open economy/open schools policy

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The tragic death of a young teenage girl in Brampton, Ontario has brought home the terrifying reality to parents across Canada that despite what they have been told by the political and media establishment, they can lose their young children to COVID-19. On April 22, Emily Victoria Viegas became one of the youngest Canadians to die from the disease when she was found unresponsive by her brother in their shared bedroom.

In a scenario that is all too common for working class families across the country, COVID-19 spread throughout Emily's family. Emily's mother was in hospital on oxygen at the time of her daughter's death, and her younger brother had also contracted the virus. Emily's father, Carlos Viegas, a warehouse worker, was the only member of the family not to test positive for the virus, but both Brampton schools and warehouses have been ravaged by COVID-19 infections.

Because the province's ICUs are overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients and falsely believing his daughter's life was not in danger, Carlos did not seek hospital treatment for Emily.

Emily's tragic, entirely preventable death has triggered an outpouring of anger towards the political elite and solidarity with the stricken family across Canada. A fundraiser to support the family gathered donations of over \$112,000 in a matter of days. A rural family doctor wrote on Twitter, "NO MORE CROCODILE TEARS. A Brampton family has lost their 13 yr. old child. Her mother remains in hospital. This hard hit area was supposed to have been prioritized for vaccines, but promises aren't action. [Ontario Premier Doug Ford] tell us the concrete actions you're taking now or RESIGN." A parent tweeted, "I hear calls not to politicize Emily Viegas' death. My son died from failed public health measures. I desperately wish every single politician in the

last five years had taken Jude's death as a call to action so there'd never be another family like mine. Fix what's broken."

Emily Victoria Viegas's death did not occur in a vacuum. It was the direct result of the policy decisions made by the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government, Ontario's Conservative government and their counterparts across the country, at the behest of Canada's capitalist elite. The most consequential of these decisions was to prioritize the protection of corporate profits over human lives, keep the economy and schools open at all costs, and refuse to provide adequate financial support so that families like Emily's could shelter safely at home until the pandemic was contained.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford was one of the first politicians to declare that the teenaged girl's death was "heart-wrenching" and that it serves as a "devastating reminder of what this virus can do."

One could counter that it also serves as a devastating reminder of what the federal and Ontario Governments' policy of putting the economy and profits before people *has done* to workers and their families.

This is what refusing to give Ontario's essential workers, like Emily Victoria Viegas's father Carlos, paid sick days has done. This is what refusing to shut down warehouses and factories like Amazon that are major vectors of transmission has done. This is also what the blatant lies about children not being at risk from COVID-19 have done.

Brampton provides an especially stark example of the devastating consequences of the ruling elite's profits before lives strategy. With many industrial worksites and distribution warehouses, the city to Toronto's northwest has seen the virus rip through its crowded apartment blocks, where predominantly low-income and

precariously employed workers live. The test positivity rate in the city was recently reported at a staggering 20 percent.

The new COVID-19 “variants of concern” are hitting both younger and healthier Canadians significantly harder than the original strain. A recent *Toronto Star* report noted that since March 1, 60,000 Ontarians in their 20s or younger have become infected during the third wave—an astonishing 40 percent of all new cases. This is a far higher share of overall infections than what this cohort experienced during the first two waves.

Emily is not the first young person to endure a horrific death in recent weeks. A 16-year-old boy fell victim to the virus in Montreal in early April, becoming the youngest Canadian up until that point to have died from COVID-19. Since then, a 2-year-old has died in British Columbia, which is experiencing a devastating surge in cases of the new variants, and it has been revealed that a baby in BC died of COVID-19 in January. On April 26, Sarah Strate, a 17-year-old Grade 12 student from Alberta with no previous health issues, died suddenly less than a week after being exposed to COVID-19.

The new variants of concern have shattered the lying propaganda that schools are safe, and that children are not likely to catch the disease and become sickened—let alone face possible death. While these were always lies aimed at providing propaganda cover for the ruling elite to keep schools open as holding pens for children so that their parents could return to work churning out profits for big business, the human cost of this deception is increasing as the third wave progresses.

Not only are children suffering, but as public health authorities in Montreal and Peel Region, of which Brampton is a part, have been forced to acknowledge, open schools are major vectors of community transmission and have contributed hugely to Canada’s devastating third wave of the pandemic.

Predictably enough, the education trade unions have made absolutely clear that they intend to do nothing to protect teachers and young people from the more infectious and lethal variants.

They played no role in the Ford government’s decision, announced on April 12 just the day after Education Minister Stephen Lecce had vowed schools would reopen after that week’s Spring Break shutdown, to order a temporary, open-ended return to online teaching.

And rather than fighting to keep schools closed and ensure teachers, students and parents have the resources they need to meet the educational, social and

psychological challenges of online education, the teachers’ unions stand in the front rank of the political forces demanding a return to dangerous classrooms as soon as possible. As Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation President Harvey Bischof declared in a statement just a week prior to Emily’s death, “We believe that students learn and receive supports and services best when they are in-person in school, something that the Minister of Education has echoed many times. It’s time that this government comes up with a clear plan based on evidence-informed medical advice to allow front-line education staff immediate access to vaccinations and keep schools open safely.”

The fact that larger numbers of younger people are facing more serious outcomes during the third wave of the pandemic, including an increase in premature deaths, raises many questions that teachers, parents and students are not being given answers to by the political elite and corporate-controlled media. Will Ford and Lecce persist with their reckless attempts to reopen Ontario’s schools before the current school year ends in late June? Will all teachers and support staff be fully vaccinated before September? Will all children from K-12 be vaccinated when the new school year begins?

The growth in suffering and death for children, young people, and working class families underscores the urgency of taking up the struggle for the program fought for by the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The CERSC demands an immediate end to all in-person learning and the shutdown of all nonessential production until the pandemic is over, with full compensation for all workers and families impacted. These socially necessary measures, which are imperative if thousands of human lives are to be saved over the coming weeks and months, can be funded through the expropriation of the ill-gotten gains of the billionaires and ruling class as a whole, which has profited handsomely from mass death.

We encourage everyone who agrees with this program to make plans to attend the next meeting of the CERSC, which will take place at 1 p.m. eastern time on Sunday, May 9. Email us at cersc.csppb@gmail.com for further information.



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