

Canadian big business advocates policy of social murder as provinces move to dismantle remaining COVID-19 restrictions

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Canada officially recorded its 25,000th COVID-19 death this week. This includes some 10,000 fatalities just in the first 20 weeks of 2021. Yet as far as the ruling elite is concerned, the pandemic is old news, and the time has come to rapidly dismantle all the remaining restrictions aimed at halting the virus' spread so that corporate Canada can boost its profits.

This was the unmistakable message of the open letter 61 leading business associations, including the Business Council of Canada, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Quebec Employers' Council, addressed to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government earlier this week, with copies to the 13 provincial and territorial governments. It urged the Trudeau government to even more explicitly embrace a policy of mass infection and social murder that will result in tens of thousands of additional infections and thousands more unnecessary deaths.

The letter began with a totally false presentation of the state of the pandemic. Claiming that the pandemic has reached a "turning point," the corporate lobbyists declared, "By mid-summer, if not sooner, some three-quarters of Canadian adults will be at least partially vaccinated, and one in five will be fully vaccinated. When that scenario is reached, federal modelling suggests, it should be possible to begin relaxing restrictive measures." Claiming "the light at the end of the tunnel grows brighter," the corporate mouthpieces demanded "a pan-Canadian approach to reopening our communities, schools and businesses."

What big business is demanding was made even clearer when the letter pointed to the international examples they insist Canada's governments emulate. "Other jurisdictions have paved the route for us to follow," they enthused. "In February, the United Kingdom unveiled a four-stage, roadmap out of lockdown ... The European Union is currently developing a travel certificate that would replace the existing patchwork of country-specific travel regulations among its 27-member nations... The US Centers for Disease Control has issued guidance for those who are fully vaccinated."

In other words, the Canadian government should follow the examples of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who infamously declared, "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high;" the European Union, within whose borders over 700,000 people have lost their lives to COVID-19; and the US, which has the highest official death toll in the world and is

currently dismantling the last vestiges of any organized public health response to COVID-19. Last week, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or CDC went so far as to effectively abolish any mask mandate.

When big business urges Trudeau via its open letter to convey a message of "hope" and "optimism" to the population and focus on the "post-pandemic recovery," they are telling him to serve as the frontman for a ruthless push to "reopen" the economy and to blithely ignore the inevitable accompanying surge in new infections and deaths. In comments to the *National Post*, business leaders like Business Council of Canada CEO Goldy Hyder were even more forthright warning that a failure to do so risks "stifling" Canada's economic recovery and undermining its competitive position.

The claim that the worst of the pandemic is in the past and that what is required is more "optimism" in order to secure a "stable recovery" flies in the face of the reality facing the working class. Canada continues to record over 5,100 daily infections, according to the latest seven-day average, well above the peak of the first wave. Massive outbreaks are hitting workplaces across the country, including an ongoing disaster at CNRL's Horizon oil tarsands operation in Alberta that has sickened over 1,500 workers and killed three. Hundreds of workplace outbreaks continue to be reported in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia.

Even assuming the midsummer scenario outlined in the business groups' letter is achieved, this would in no way justify their cavalier and reckless demands for the scrapping of all anti-COVID-19 measures. Epidemiologists have stressed that 80 to 90 percent of the population will need to be fully inoculated before it will be safe to reopen due to the more infectious and potentially lethal nature of the new variants. Currently, just 48 percent of Canada's population has received a single vaccine dose, and just 4.1 percent or about 1.5 million people are fully vaccinated. Even assuming the business groups' optimistic prediction that "one in five will be fully vaccinated" by midsummer, Canada will barely have achieved a quarter of the target recommended by epidemiologists. Around 80 percent of the population would still be left with inadequate or no protection against the deadly virus.

The reality is that the big business representatives, and their bought-and-paid-for political stooges, have no interest in systematically combatting the pandemic. Their overriding concern

is to create the best conditions to allow the super-rich to continue accumulating vast amounts of money and squeeze out of the working class through stepped-up exploitation the hundreds of billions of dollars the state funnelled to the banks and corporations last year through so-called emergency bailouts.

Despite Alberta having among the highest per capita infection and active case rates in all North America, the province's hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government has announced schools will reopen across Alberta as of Tuesday, May 25. The only exceptions are those in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, where the health care system is collapsing due to dozens of oil sector outbreaks.

On Thursday, Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford unveiled a sweeping reopening plan that will scrap all restrictions in three stages. Underscoring the reckless character of the plan, restrictions on indoor gatherings, retail, and dining and recreation would all but be abolished once between 70 and 80 percent of the adult population has received just one vaccine dose, with only 25 percent having received two doses.

Although no official announcement was made about reopening schools, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, Dr. David Williams, refused to rule out reopening schools prior to the end of the academic year next month. Signaling that a reopening is actively being prepared, the province released data on Thursday indicating that the reopening of schools on June 2 would result in a 6-11 percent rise in COVID-19 infections, an increase which officials asserted would be "manageable." In other words, they believe that there are enough ICU beds freed up by the deaths of patients during the ebbing of the pandemic's third wave to accommodate a new influx of critically ill teachers, parents and children.

The provinces' homicidal policies are backed to the hilt by the Trudeau Liberal federal government. It spearheaded the back-to-work/back-to-school drive that triggered Canada's second wave last fall; and in a silence that bespoke support it said nothing as the provinces quickly rescinded the limited lockdown measures they introduced in late December as the second wave peaked, thereby creating conditions for a devastating third wave. In last September's throne speech, which only passed thanks to the social democrats of the New Democratic Party, the Liberals insisted that all public health measures must be "short-term" and implemented at the "local" level, a formula designed to allow major businesses to continue operating and generating profits.

The trade unions are similarly complicit. They have spent the entire pandemic telling workers that they have "common interests" with the very same business groups now openly advocating a policy of social murder. As early as last May, Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff co-authored a piece with Chamber of Commerce President Perrin Beatty demanding a national economic task force made up of employer, government, and union representatives to oversee the "recovery," i.e., to boost the profitability and advance the global interests of corporate Canada. Throughout the pandemic, the unions have suppressed all opposition among workers to dangerous working conditions, denouncing calls for strike action to shut down unsafe facilities as "illegal."

In Ontario, the unions have made absolutely clear they will do nothing to oppose the Ford government's possible reopening of schools in June. "We look to the medical experts for what they think should be happening," commented Richard Seeley, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation District 6A. "Probably a regional approach wouldn't be a bad thing. Our members want to be back in school. They want to see their students again. And we want the kids back as well. But we want it to be done in a safe way."

What this means for teachers is clear: the Ford government has a free hand to decide whatever it likes, and the education unions will go along with it.

At the peak of the third wave in April, Ontario's schools were only closed because local medical officers of health in Toronto and the neighbouring Peel Region took the decision to do so, and because of an outcry from health experts including many of those serving on the government's own COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. No demands were raised by the unions for school closures, even as infections grew among teachers, students, and parents. On the contrary, the Ontario Federation of Labour sent a letter to the Ford government that did not call for a single business closure and pleaded for him to "open the door" to closer cooperation with the unions on keeping the economy open.

If the ruling elite is to be prevented from continuing to play Russian roulette with the lives of workers and their families, the working class must intervene as an independent political force fighting for a science-based response to the pandemic that prioritizes saving workers' lives and livelihoods over capitalist profit. This must include: a complete and total shutdown of all nonessential production until the pandemic is over with full wages for all workers; the maintenance of online learning with billions of dollars in financial support provided to students and their families; and a scientific plan to vaccinate everyone before reopenings are permitted. The resources required for these measures must be seized from the corporations and financial oligarchy in a frontal assault on the capitalist profit system.

To take forward this struggle, we call on all workers to form rank-and-file committees at their workplace, in schools, and neighbourhoods, independent of the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses.

We encourage workers wishing to participate in this fight to attend the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting, which will take place online this Sunday, May 23, at 1 p.m. eastern time. Email cersc.cspgb@gmail.com to register to attend.



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