

Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Committee hears report on pandemic from Dr. Benjamin Mateus

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At a meeting last Sunday, the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) heard a presentation by Dr. Benjamin Mateus, a physician who has written extensively for the *World Socialist Web Site* on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Mateus writes on the science of the virus, the development of vaccines and the use of pseudo-scientific arguments by the political establishment to legitimize the reopening of schools and the economy. Following his report, participants seized the opportunity to ask him questions about the pandemic's progression in Canada and globally.

The meeting took place under concerning circumstances. Despite Canada having recorded over 10,000 fatalities from the virus just in the first 20 weeks of 2021, the country's provincial governments, with the full support of the Justin Trudeau-led federal government, are using slowly increasing (but as yet far from exemplary) vaccination rates as an excuse to lift the totally inadequate restrictions implemented in recent months as the pandemic's second and third waves ran rampant.

"Under these conditions, it is absolutely critical that educators and their supporters have a thorough understanding of the scientific issues in respect to COVID-19," explained *World Socialist Web Site* reporter Roger Jordan in his introductory remarks to the meeting.

The central message of Dr. Mateus' report was that COVID-19 is a global phenomenon that can only be combatted by means of an internationally coordinated response led by the working class. In the opening section of his presentation, Mateus spent time reviewing the horrifying extent of infection and death across the world's regions, laying particular stress on the vast under-reporting of fatalities in underdeveloped countries due to the absence of health care infrastructure.

He presented data covering a broad spectrum of interconnected aspects of the pandemic, including the disastrous impact of vaccine nationalism, the flaws in data captured through symptom-based testing, and major developments in the scientific understanding of the transmission of respiratory viruses.

Dr. Mateus compared Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) reports on COVID-19 mortality with modelling studies outlining excess death estimates, all of which indicate that the true pandemic death toll is far higher than officially registered figures suggest. One study put the likely death toll as high as 10 million,

about three times the current official number of fatalities.

Yet, he pointed out, such reports—which underscore the malign neglect pursued by the capitalist elite and their explicit embrace of policies of mass infection and death—have hardly received any attention in the mainstream media coverage.

"The lives of these ten million people, according to the economists, are essentially immaterial for them," Dr. Mateus stated. "The pandemic has shown that mass death is highly lucrative for the financial oligarchs."

He noted that the wealth of the global ruling elite has risen exponentially in tandem with the deepening global crisis. The combined wealth of the financial oligarchy rose by sixty percent—from \$8 trillion to \$13.1 trillion—in 2020. The number of billionaires globally has risen to 2,775, the highest ever recorded in history.

Dr. Mateus also spoke on the role that children and schools play in the transmission of the virus. He presented the CERSC with data that conclusively demonstrated that children are major vectors of the illness and have, in fact, contracted it at substantial rates.

Referencing a May 19 report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the estimated burden of disease in the United States associated with COVID-19, Dr. Mateus noted that, from February 2020 to March 2021, there were 114.6 million cases of COVID-19 and 26.7 million of these cases were found in patients aged 0 to 17 years. This age group, which represents 24 percent of the overall population, accounts for 23 percent of COVID-19 cases.

"This proves that children have been getting infected throughout this pandemic, and what's been mainly driving these infections have been schools," he said.

The Ontario government recently proposed that when 20 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, it would be acceptable to essentially eliminate all restrictions on gatherings. Dr. Mateus was asked what he thought of the risks that such a plan would pose, both for the remaining partially immunized and unvaccinated eighty percent of the population and in relation to potentially vaccine-evasive variants.

In response, he compared such a plan to current government initiatives in Europe, where countries are aiming to rake in the profits of the summer tourism season by allowing fully vaccinated tourists to travel with virtually no restrictions.

“The majority of the population has not been vaccinated,” he pointed out. “There are many, many vulnerable people. Children are not immune to the ravages of the virus, they can get quite sick, they can get long COVID, there are children who are vulnerable because they’re immune-compromised as well as adults.”

He added that, for the proportion of the population that is vaccine-hesitant, such government actions will only serve to embolden them to abandon compliance with existing public health measures.

“What is more worrisome and insidious, is that we’re still seeing deaths in Europe and the United States at a significantly high rate, but these are being normalized. These are just accepted deaths,” he said, noting that over 500 people continue to die from COVID-19 in the US every single day.

Speaking to the dangers posed by variants that are potentially resistant to vaccinations, Dr. Mateus said that breakthrough infections—meaning instances in which an individual who is fully vaccinated still becomes infected with the virus—are a concern that is only heightened by the spread of mutant variants.

He said that there is data suggesting that fully vaccinated people can still transmit the virus, and countries dropping all restrictions would cause the spread of the virus at a community level and put vulnerable members of those communities at great risk.

“It befuddles the mind, but this is what the herd immunity policy means—that the economy supersedes the life and livelihoods of people,” he said in conclusion. “The majority of the world hasn’t been vaccinated. Now, you’re going to lift all restrictions, and you’re going to essentially seed this virus into other communities that have never seen a vaccine. This is criminal, this is thoughtless, and this is completely imprudent.”

An attendee from Alberta asked Dr. Mateus to comment on claims that the mental health impacts of school closures on the most marginalized students are a justification for the reopening of schools. He responded by discussing the disproportionately high impact the virus has when it is contracted at school by children from working class homes.

“The ruling class is going to use this to force schools to be opened again, and especially so in environments where there’s no incentive to invest in ventilation and air quality,” he said. “We know these are bald-faced lies. These forms of moralizations fly in the face of the existential threat that the virus poses.”

Laurent Lafrance, an educator from Quebec and leading member of the CERSC, expressed his agreement with Dr. Mateus’ analysis in the discussion that followed his report.

“As Dr. Mateus emphasized, this is a political struggle in the final analysis. We are confronting a ruling class that puts profits before lives,” he said. “Their handling of the pandemic, both in terms of prevention as well as their response when the pandemic inevitably emerged here, is what caused the virus to transform into a pandemic and is what brought about millions of deaths.

“We fully agree that schools are not safe. Clearly, governments have lied to workers, to educators, in order to open schools so that parents can be sent back to work and generate profits for big business,” Lafrance added.

After the conclusion of the discussion on Dr. Mateus’ report, Jordan explained that the need for workers to mobilize against the

ruling class’ murderous COVID-19 strategy is highlighted by the case of victimized bus driver David O’Sullivan. A 30-year veteran bus driver from London, England, O’Sullivan spoke out against unsafe working conditions and—with the active support of his union Unite—was fired as a result.

Jordan explained to attendees that O’Sullivan was trying to resist the criminal policies of his immediate employer, but that the existence of these policies was ultimately made possible by the Boris Johnson-led Conservative government’s criminal agenda of “herd immunity,” which has kept nonessential businesses open and put workers’ lives at risk.

“The issues that O’Sullivan and other bus drivers confront in terms of the danger posed by the virus are very similar to those confronting educators in schools and other educational institutions,” Jordan stressed.

The CERSC discussed and voted unanimously to adopt a resolution demanding David O’Sullivan’s immediate reinstatement and to pledge to publicize his case among workers across Canada.

A committee member sent a message in support of the resolution, declaring, “The scandal in this instance is not only that David O’Sullivan was dismissed by his employer for fighting for a safe workplace, but also that Unite, the trade union which claims to represent the interest of London bus drivers, is openly trying to water down or eliminate safety measures on London public transport. Unite stands against David O’Sullivan in this matter. Those who stand with David O’Sullivan must also take a political stand against Unite, which is working to contain the struggle of working people, not to advance it.

“O’Sullivan’s case is a clear demonstration that workers cannot count on a safe workplace if they confine their struggles to the historically obsolete and nationalist trade unions, who have evolved into labour management corporations acting on behalf of capital and the state.

“David O’Sullivan must be reinstated immediately, with full pay and benefits. He is an example to workers everywhere.”



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