

Canadian capitalism's reopening drive: Inadequate vaccination rates, fast-spreading variants and the dangers of a fourth wave

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Across Canada, provincial governments of all political stripes are aggressively implementing reopening plans, rapidly removing all remaining COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In this, they have the full support of the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government and the corporatist trade unions.

The restrictions that the provincial governments grudgingly put in place at the peak of the third wave in April were minimal from the start. Yet even these are now being repealed, in favour of extracting every last dollar that might be made over the summer season.

This is being done even though only a small fraction of the population has been fully vaccinated, and health experts are warning of a "fourth wave" fueled by the Delta variant, first identified in India. Just five percent of all Canadians are fully vaccinated, and little more than 50 percent of the population have received one dose. Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, still maintains her recommendation that only once 75 percent of all people over the age of 12 have had one vaccine-shot and 20 percent are fully inoculated should provinces and territories begin to lift the most restrictive public health measures, such as stay-at-home orders.

However, provincial governments, with Ottawa's complicity, are ensuring that this recommendation—one which is inadequate to begin with, considering what is now unfolding in several countries that had higher vaccination rates prior to easing restrictions—is a dead letter.

The ruling elite's back-to-work/back-to-school drive—that is, its prioritization of corporate profit over working people's health and lives—has already resulted in devastating second and third waves that are responsible for the vast majority of Canada's more than 1.375 million COVID-19 infections and 25,750 deaths.

The dangers of the current reckless reopening drive have already been amply demonstrated in jurisdictions with far higher vaccination rates.

In the United Kingdom, the Boris Johnson-led Tory government promised the population that June would see a grand return to normal life. Yet with 70 percent of adults having received one vaccine dose and 45 percent of the adult population fully inoculated, figures that far surpass those of any Canadian province, the UK is now dealing with the biggest increase in cases it has seen since March.

This is overwhelmingly due to the spreading of new variants. On June 6 5,683 cases were recorded in the UK, the fifth day in a row with more than 5,000 cases. A total of 35,796 cases were recorded from June 1 to June 8, 52.9 percent more than in the previous week. Hundreds of

coronavirus outbreaks have occurred in schools. Teachers and other workers in Canada should take this as an indication of what is to come if reopenings go ahead in this country in a similar fashion.

Another example of tragedy in the wake of premature reopening is the current situation in the small East African country of Seychelles. By early May, Seychelles held the title of the most vaccinated nation on Earth, as more than 60 percent of its adult population were fully inoculated against COVID-19. The island nation relies heavily on income from its tourist industry. After the country lifted restrictions and reopened its borders to travellers, a variant-fuelled outbreak developed. For its population of less than 100,000, the outbreak was worse in per capita terms than that currently raging in India.

In Canada, there has been a steady decline in cases since the third wave's peak in mid-April. In the last week of May, 3,400 new infections were reported daily, down from a rate of nearly 9,000 new infections recorded every day only six weeks earlier. The ruling class is exploiting case numbers trending in the right direction for its own aims, however, twinning it with the population's pandemic fatigue and understandable desire to "get back to normal."

Epidemiologists are sounding the alarm that vaccinations are not a "bulletproof vest" and that abandoning restrictions now could spark a fourth wave. Governments at all points on the official pro-capitalist political spectrum, from John Horgan's New Democratic Party (NDP) government in British Columbia to Jason Kenney's far-right UCP regime in Alberta, are striving to do away with public health measures that are needed now more than ever to prevent a fourth wave and protect the Canadian population's lives and livelihoods.

Ontario

In Ontario, the hard-right Ford government accelerated implementation of its reopening plan early this week, allowing outdoor dining and larger private gatherings. The case count continues to fall. Yet the COVID case data has led epidemiologists to suggest that this may be because the Delta, or B.1.617 variant, is "muscling its way in" and replacing the currently circulating strains of the virus.

Public Health Ontario data from recent weeks shows that the percentage of cases testing positive on the provincial variant-screening tests has dropped from 95 percent in early May to 85 percent. While this initially seems like a positive development, the variant screening tests do not check for the gene specific to B.1.617, which is thought to be up to 50 percent more transmissible than the B.1.1.7 variant that launched the

province's third wave.

"My belief is that B.1.617 is going to be the story for the fall. And the question is, where are we with vaccinations? Because a fourth wave, if we have one, will be B.1.617 among people not yet vaccinated," Colin Furness, an infection control epidemiologist at the University of Toronto, recently told the *Toronto Star*. Furness said that he is particularly concerned about a return to in-person learning in September if children are not yet vaccinated, a virtual certainty given inadequate supply levels.

Dr. David Fisman, an epidemiologist at the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health, said that B.1.617 is growing about 20 to 40 percent faster than B.1.1.7. "And," he noted, "that's with schools closed."

Quebec

On June 8, Quebec reported that eight additional people had succumbed to the virus in the province, bringing the province's COVID-19 death toll to 11,164. The province had 2,400 active cases, with 263 people hospitalized due to the virus and 60 of those patients in ICUs.

The reopening plan for Quebec was announced by Premier François Legault of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government on May 18. Simon Bacon, a professor of behavioural medicine at Concordia University, summarized the agenda of every province across Canada in his critique of the reopening plan. He noted that Quebec's government has been "very hell-bent" on defining the reopening process based on dates rather than the actual situation with the pandemic.

Quebec has imposed some of the strictest pandemic measures in Canada, including a months-long, now withdrawn, province-wide evening curfew. However, the CAQ government has simultaneously risked the lives of its residents. It has kept virtually all nonessential industry, including manufacturing, mining, forestry and construction, open since April 2020; and it insisted that the province's schools provide only in-class instruction, except for a short period in January, throughout the pandemic's devastating second and third waves. Quebec is the province with the highest per capita death toll.

On June 2, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge announced that students returning to school in September will not have to wear masks or "be restricted by classroom bubbles" and that special pandemic class-size caps are being abolished.

British Columbia

British Columbia announced its four-step reopening plan on May 25 and immediately moved to Step 1. "Stable" case counts and hospitalizations due to COVID-19 were used to justify the rolling back of the minimal restrictions the province implemented at the end of March, reinstating indoor dining and low-intensity indoor fitness, among other relaxations.

The plan will have already proceeded to Step 3 by July 1, less than a month from now. The only restrictions that will remain at that stage are limits on the number of spectators that can watch indoor sporting events and on the capacities of bingo halls, nightclubs and casinos. On September 7, Step 4 of the plan will be reached, at which point the resumption of normal social contact and behaviour will be allowed, and masks will be a "personal choice."

Significantly, schools are not included among the categories in the plan. This is due to the fact that, as the third wave proved, neither the provincial

government nor the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) will even consider closing schools to protect educators, staff or students in the face of record-breaking infection numbers.

The unveiling of BC's plan was accompanied by many disclaimers by public health officials that its success and implementation is contingent upon low case numbers, declining hospitalizations and 70 percent of the provincial population having received one dose of a vaccine. The reality is that the NDP government has no intention of following these inadequate pledges. Early on in the pandemic, the Horgan government presented benchmarks to determine when stricter controls should be imposed in schools, including outright closures. However, even as infections skyrocketed, the government relied on misleading and distorted infection data to justify systematically ignoring these requirements.

Alberta

Stage 1 of Alberta's recently released "Open for Summer" plan went into effect on June 1 and has evidently been formulated to work backwards from the Calgary Stampede. The reopening plan moves to Stage 3 in late June or early July, meaning that virtually all public health restrictions will be lifted at that point. The Calgary Stampede, which had a 2019 attendance of 1.27 million visitors, is set to take place this year from July 9 to 18.

As of June 8, only 13 percent of Alberta's population over the age of 12 had been fully immunized. An influx of visitors from across the country flooding into the province in five weeks' time will put the lives and health of a significant chunk of the population at risk.

"It's time to open up Alberta. I'm confident Albertans will clear these last hurdles and push towards a wide-open summer," Premier Jason Kenney brazenly declared. Kenney, it need be recalled, like Trump and Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, first dismissed COVID-19 as akin to the flu, and till only a few weeks ago was encouraging his fellow UCP legislators to denounce social-distancing measures in the name of "personal freedom."

Presently, there are 4,431 active cases of the virus in the province, and more than 417 schools have recorded outbreaks or exposures. Since January 11, there have been over 870 officially acknowledged occurrences of in-school transmission in Alberta.

Manitoba

In Manitoba, more than 12,000 people contracted the virus in the month of May alone, an astonishing development that saw it overtake Alberta as having the highest per-capita infection rate in Canada.

On June 1, another grim provincial record was broken, as 109 Manitoban patients were being treated in intensive care for the virus. Thirty-seven of these patients had to be transferred out of the province because hospitals had surpassed surge capacity, and there was no room to treat them anywhere in Winnipeg or Brandon. It may be several weeks yet before hospitals will be able to stop transferring critically ill patients to Ontario hospitals by air.

Manitoba hit the peak of its horrific third wave on May 22 and has since seen new infections decline. However, the population is still grappling with the worst current COVID-19 outbreak in any province or state in Canada or the United States.

On June 1, Brian Pallister, the province's Progressive Conservative

premier, callously played down the severity of the ongoing crisis, remarking that during the pandemic Manitoba had been the “peak and valley.” While the province did see relatively low case numbers in the first five months of the pandemic, it has since recorded the second highest pandemic death rate in Canada, with 77 deaths per 100,000 residents, second only to Quebec’s 103 per 100,000.

Despite the ongoing devastation, Pallister has unveiled a reopening plan for Manitoba no less aggressive than those being implemented elsewhere in Canada.

Build rank-and-file safety committees to combat the pandemic and save lives

The reopening plans that the provinces are implementing, indeed in many cases accelerating, are defended and endorsed by the Trudeau Liberal federal government. In last September’s throne speech, which only passed thanks to the support extended to it by the New Democrats, the Liberals stated that all future measures to fight COVID-19 must be “short-term” and implemented at the “local” level, i.e., totally ineffectual. The top priority for the Liberals, like the ruling elite as a whole, is to have big business resume full-scale operations and profit generation across the board, no matter the human cost.

Educators, school staff, students and their families should be deeply concerned about the premature easing of any and all public health measures based on profit considerations and business schedules—not vaccination rates, scientific data surrounding the spread of variants or the capabilities of the country’s provincially administered health care systems.

As protests, strikes and other expressions of working-class opposition continue to grow internationally, it becomes ever clearer that the fight for a rational, science-based plan to suppress the virus, based on putting human lives before capitalist profit, can only be waged by teachers and other workers independent of, and in opposition to, the corporatist trade unions.

The education unions are complicit in the endangering of workers’ lives by allowing schools to be open with totally inadequate protections. Teachers unions in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec helped design reopening plans whose principal aim was to avoid school closures at almost any cost. Even though contract struggles have been waged by teachers in Ontario and Quebec since the pandemic began, the education unions in both provinces refused to raise any COVID-19-related demands with the respective provincial governments, and instead endeavoured to sell out the teachers’ struggles on the terms demanded by the hard-right Conservative and CAQ governments.

When a Quebec educator sought to use a union local meeting on the teachers’ contract struggle to demand an emergency meeting of his union to discuss taking action against the life-threatening situation in schools, he was ruled out of order by union officials and told that he would have to wait two months to raise his concerns at a future meeting.

Asked last fall what his union intended to do about the life-threatening conditions in schools, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) President Harvey Bischof said, “If the question is whether we are planning some illegal job action, the answer is a flat out no.”

The unions have followed this maxim to the letter ever since. When teachers or education staff have walked off the job at individual schools because of COVID outbreaks, the unions have quickly intervened to shut the protests down. Where school closures have taken place, like currently in Ontario, they were imposed by local health officers, i.e., government officials, not the unions. This makes clear that even if infections rise

sharply in September as part of a deadly fourth wave, teachers in Ontario and elsewhere will have to fight not only the capitalist governments overseeing a homicidal “profits before lives” strategy but also the teacher unions.

Rank-and-file committees must be formed in educational institutions, as in every workplace, to fight for a scientifically guided approach to bringing the pandemic to an end. Until the virus is suppressed through mass inoculation, nonessential businesses must be closed and in-person schooling suspended. Moreover, the state must provide full income support for all affected workers and massively improve public health care and online learning, by reappropriating the hundreds of billions in pandemic bailout funds Ottawa funneled to big business and the financial oligarchy.



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