Ontario government calls for “normalizing” COVID-19 as it releases school reopening plan

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9 August 2021

Ontario’s hard-right Progressive Conservative government has released a plan to reopen the province’s schools that explicitly advocates a murderous policy of mass infection for students, educators, and their relatives.

The plan is meant to serve as the basis for a full return early next month to in-class instruction for the first time since mid-April. Last spring, the government was forced to order all Ontario to move to online learning, amid a catastrophic third wave of the pandemic that was overwhelming hospitals and had already led local medical offices of health in Toronto, Peel and other regions to enforce school closures.

Released last Tuesday, the government plan provides no details about how COVID-19 outbreaks will be managed or benchmarks for school closures.

Underscoring that these glaring omissions from the 26-page plan were intentional, Ontario’s chief medical officer of health, Dr. Kieran Moore, responding to a question about how school closures would be decided, asserted, “I really don’t see our schools closing going into the fall and winter and spring. I really can’t envision or see any closures of any schools in Ontario, or colleges or universities.”

Moore continued, “We have to normalize COVID-19 for our schools.” Claiming that COVID-19, which has already killed more than 26,600 Canadians, is akin to the seasonal flu, Ontario’s chief medical officer stated that at any given time, 10 to 15 percent of students could be expected to be infected. “But they recover, they resolve and they’re back in the classroom,” Moore declared.

In light of what is known about the threat posed by the virus and its variants to children, these statements, together with the government’s back-to-school plan, are nothing short of criminal. During the first six months of this year, around 1,500 children died due to COVID-19 in Brazil, where the virus has become one of the leading causes of death among young people. In Indonesia, where the Delta variant is running rampant, more than 100 children died every week during the month of July.

Epidemiologist Eric Feigl-Ding, a leading expert on COVID-19, recently warned, “Let this sink in—1 percent of all COVID-19 confirmed cases in kids lead to hospitalization. Is that really an acceptable level of kids’ morbidity that we will allow in society?” To translate this into the situation in Ontario, this means that if 20 percent of the province’s approximately 1 million elementary school students were to get infected (a conservative estimate given that not a single one of them will be vaccinated come September), 2,000 would end up in hospital.

The Ontario government is not only prepared to “allow” such levels of infection and death but is taking positive steps to facilitate it. The back-to-school plan contains no guidelines for testing asymptomatic students and no vaccine mandates for students or staff. Although cohorting of students in smaller groups formally remains in place, there are so many exceptions to the rule that it is made effectively meaningless. For example, school buses are allowed to operate without restrictions, students can mix in common areas like libraries and canteens, cohorting will not be applied during after-school clubs and sports, and high-contact indoor sports, like hockey and basketball, are permitted. Even music classes will be allowed to resume, with Moore positively encouraging students to sing and play woodwind instruments, two sure-fire ways to spread an airborne virus like COVID-19.

The more-highly contagious and lethal Delta variant that is wreaking havoc around the world is already well established in Ontario, accounting for more than 90 percent of all new COVID-19 infections. On Sunday, Ontario registered over 400 daily cases for the first time since early June, and infection rates have been trending sharply upwards since the beginning of the month. Dr. David Naylor, the co-chair of the federal government’s COVID-19 Immunity Task Force, tweeted last Sunday, “Community spread picking up fast across Canada even in provinces that haven’t gone full BoJo (i.e., haven’t followed British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s lead and abandoned all anti-COVID measures). Hoped otherwise, but zero doubt now: Nasty Fall ahead.”

Yet the ruling elite across Canada is moving to abandon any effort to contain the virus. Less than a week prior to the Ford government’s back-to-school plan being made public,

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Alberta's right-wing populist United Conservative Party government announced that all virus-related restrictions will be abolished as of August 16. Even people infected with COVID-19 will no longer be required to isolate.

These reckless policies, which threaten the lives of thousands of children and adults alike, have been facilitated by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government. Throughout the pandemic, it has pursued a "profits before lives" strategy aimed at protecting the wealth of big business and the super-rich at the expense of the health, wellbeing, and very lives of workers and their families. This has included leading the back-to-work/back-to-school campaign.

On occasion, Trudeau has cynically exploited the constitutional division of federal and provincial powers to put some rhetorical distance between his federal Liberals and the reckless reopening plans implemented by hard-right governments in Alberta, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec. However, the framework for these plans was laid down by Trudeau in his government's throne speech last fall, which declared that all COVID-19 restrictions must be "short-term" and enforced at the "local level."

There is widespread opposition among teachers, parents, and students to the ruling elite's criminal back-to-school drive, which is aimed at freeing up parents so they can return to work churning out profits for the super-rich. But this opposition is being smothered by the education trade unions, which are determined to facilitate the reopening of all schools.

The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), which represents around 83,000 elementary teachers and other education workers, supports the government's reopening plan. All that it is proposing are a few minor tweaks that will do very little if anything to reduce the wave of infections that will sweep the province if the back-to-school plan is implemented. "Overall risks would be reduced across the public school system if the government would implement key measures that include access to paid sick days, improving ventilation and reducing class sizes," the ETFO politely noted in a statement addressed to the Ford government last month.

Former Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) President Harvey Bischof, who recently left his well-paid union position to run for the pro-austerity, pro-war New Democrats in next year's Ontario election, shed crocodile tears about the risks involved in the reopening plan. He told BNN last month that OSSTF members were concerned about returning to full classrooms with as many as 30 students. He added that teachers were angry that no additional funds were being made available to hire more staff to reduce class sizes.

Having painted this dire picture, Bischof then made clear to his business audience that the OSSTF would sanction no collective action by teachers against the government's homicidal course. Asked by his interviewer, "What happens in September if teachers don't feel safe?", Bischoff answered, "It depends on individual circumstances…If a member has an underlying medical issue, we expect them to get medical documentation and then we would expect a medical accommodation under those circumstances that the teacher is legally entitled too…In some cases you could potentially see the use of the Occupational Health and Safety Act and work refusal when a worker refuses unsafe work."

The message to teachers from Bischof and the OSSTF bureaucracy is clear: "You are on your own. There will be no collective struggle. This September, go and get a doctor's note if you have a medical issue. If you feel unsafe at work, go stand outside your school by yourself and file an individual report with the Ontario Labor Relations Board. Your union will not take any collective job action. We will not mobilize teachers in solidarity to push back hard against this reckless reopening plan, which endangers the lives of teachers, students and their families. We will not under any circumstances do anything outrageous like call a general strike that will mobilize millions of teachers and educational support staff in Ontario and across Canada to force actual changes in policy. No, you are all by yourself. Thank you for your union dues!"

Teachers and education support staff, together with their supporters among students and parents, must draw the necessary conclusions from the unions' steadfast refusal to do anything to protect the health and lives of education workers and children by resisting the back-to-school drive. What is required is the building of a mass working class movement to fight for the closure of all schools and non-essential workplaces, with full compensation for all workers paid for by the bosses and state, and the adoption of mass testing, contact tracing, isolation of infected patients, masking, and vaccinations to suppress COVID-19 transmission. This movement must unify educators internationally, since it is only on the basis of a global strategy putting the protection of human life ahead of corporate profiteering that the pandemic can be combatted.

We encourage all educators who wish to fight for this program to contact the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at cersc.csppb@gmail.com.

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