

Canadian workers speak out against reckless reopening of schools amid fourth wave of pandemic

Our reporters
9 September 2021

The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Committee is holding a meeting this Saturday, September 11, at 1:30 p.m. Eastern to discuss a fighting program to close schools to in-person learning as part of a comprehensive strategy to eradicate COVID-19. **To participate, email the committee at cersc.csppb@gmail.com**

Ontario became the last province across Canada to reopen its schools, with almost one million students and two hundred thousand educators and support staff returning to crowded classrooms and poorly ventilated school buildings this week. The homicidal decision to open schools with almost no public health protections in place is supported by all provincial governments across the country, irrespective of their political composition.

Governments from John Horgan's New Democrats in British Columbia to Doug Ford's Tories in Ontario and François Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec are demanding that schools reopen fully so that parents can be freed up to return to the labour force to generate profits for corporate Canada. They are enforcing this criminal policy as Canada's deadly fourth wave of the pandemic gathers pace.

On Wednesday, the seven-day average for new infections stood at 3,824, a four-fold increase in the past five weeks. Scientific modelling suggests that Canada's fourth wave could be the pandemic's biggest and deadliest to date. Last Friday, Canada's Chief Public Officer of Health warned that daily new COVID-19 infections could reach 15,000 a day by early October, if governments do not restore social distancing measures. In Alberta health care authorities

have already been forced to cancel all elective surgeries in the Calgary region as hospitals buckle under a crush of COVID-19 patients.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to workers about their concerns over the threat posed to children and their families by reopening schools under these conditions. Five million children remain unvaccinated in Canada, leaving them fully exposed to the extremely infectious Delta variant.

A teacher from the York region in Ontario explained the conditions he faced upon returning to the classroom. "Back to 1,600 people in my building," he wrote to us. "No social distancing going on in the hallway or classroom. Bumped into seven different kids walking down the hall. No place to eat my lunch. Do I stay in my classroom after 2.5 hours in a room with 26 kids and take my mask off and eat at my desk? Do I go to the staff room with no windows and sit with other teachers? I just went outside and ate in my car all by myself. Came back and hundreds of kids in the hallways, bumping into me."

The teacher added, "If I get up to help a kid, there are three of us within 5.5 feet. ... If I stand between desks, I can hit both desks with my hips and not even move my feet."

Justin, a construction worker from the Hamilton area with two small children, commented on the return to school, "It makes me feel very uncertain, scared, worried. I don't want my kids to catch it (COVID-19) or have any long-term health effects because of it. It's also tough because our eldest daughter is going to go back into a special class, due to a developmental speech delay.

"The problem with this is that she has to go to school

physically, so it worries me. What's the class size, 10? So it's not very big but still. It's like being stuck between a rock and a hard place."

Florence, Justin's partner, added, "I'm really worried about it, the numbers are climbing really quickly already. I think in Hamilton they've staggered outdoor breaks, and kids will be wearing masks. I don't think they should be going back; I don't think kids should be in school. It's going to be really bad for the children, and it doesn't seem like that many people are as concerned as they should be."

"Not just for the kids but for everybody, the whole population," continued Justin. "It could get very ugly. Also, seeing as the kids can't be vaccinated yet, they should have at least done something like put better ventilation in. They had months over the summer break where they could have done this."

Both Florence and Justin were infected by COVID-19 at an earlier stage of the pandemic. "I was pretty sick for two weeks, and I still have some lasting effects," explained Florence. "I had a fever, and I was just exhausted. There were days where I couldn't even lift my cell phone off the table. I had no sense of taste, and it's still a little bit off. I had to sleep all the time, and everything was aching. It was really horrendous. My lungs still have problems."

A school worker from Toronto added, "As a night caretaker I am not looking forward to going to work. Understanding the science of the Delta variant and how contagious it is means I must be vigilant at all times around students and other staff members."

"My colleagues are equally anxious about the resumption of schools. Most aren't self-described socialists, but they know we are being exposed to COVID in all its variants to prop up the fragile financial dictatorship imposed upon us by the ruling class."

Lisa, a former nurse from Ontario, drew attention to the joint push by the hard-right Conservative government of Doug Ford and the trade unions to reopen schools. "I think that the government and unions should not be forcing the teachers and other affiliated staff to go back to work in the school system, especially during this increase in the Delta variant," she said. "I have two family members who are retired teachers, two are currently working and one retired friend. It's too risky to open the schools again given the

increasing Delta variant spread."

A teacher from Ontario, who wished to remain anonymous, pointed to the lack of basic personal protective equipment and the lack of air filtration devices in school classrooms. "Fellow education workers are wondering," he added, "if they'll be disciplined by the Board for wearing their own personal protective equipment, particularly N95 respirators, which are the only thing capable of keeping COVID out at this point. Much better than the 3-ply blue medical masks we're being provided en masse."

The CERSC insists that the frustration and anger expressed by workers in these comments must find political expression in a mass, worker-led rebellion against the teacher trade unions, which are complicit in the dangerous reopening of schools. We call for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and educational institution to fight for an immediate halt to in-person learning, the shutting down of all nonessential production until the pandemic is brought under control, and the provision of full compensation to all workers so they can shelter at home with their families. These measures must be combined with a strategy to eliminate COVID-19, including mass testing, contact tracing, the isolation of infected individuals, travel bans and mass vaccination.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact