

Canadian parent speaks out against devastating impact of COVID-19 open schools policy

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Angel is a working-class mother from Burnaby, British Columbia. Concerned about the lack of proper safety measures in schools, she has kept her 6-year-old son, who has autism, and her 8-year-old daughter at home since the beginning of the pandemic. She spoke candidly with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters Laurent Lafrance and Ken Lagerfeld about the state of the pandemic in British Columbia.

While Alberta is currently the Canadian province hardest hit by the pandemic's fourth wave, BC and Saskatchewan have also seen an alarming increase in the number of daily COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. This increase coincides with the full throttle reopening of schools to in-class teaching and non-essential businesses. While BC registered 30 daily cases on July 12, the numbers began climbing in August and reached more than 800 at the end of September.

Throughout the pandemic, the John Horgan-led New Democratic Party (NDP) government has refused to provide transparent reports about the number and whereabouts of COVID infections in BC schools. BC Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry was recently forced to admit, however, that cases among school-aged children are spiking, with more than 50 kids out of every 100,000 aged five to eleven currently officially infected.

Under these conditions, Angel voiced her full support for the October 1 school strike initiated by British parent Lisa Diaz. "Parents need to stand up and raise their voice," Angel said. "I follow her on Twitter, and she echoes the feeling that parents just don't feel safe. I like the movement."

Angel explained what motivated her choice of keeping her children home during the pandemic. "When the pandemic began, we were really not comfortable sending our kids to school so we opted for distance learning," she explained. "I was hoping to bring the kids back to in-person learning this year as all adults at home are vaccinated, but there is no mask mandate for their age group. In addition, ventilation is poor, and no social distancing is being practiced. Pretty much zero mitigation measures are in place at schools. Remote learning is an option in BC, but there is very minimal support for parents."

Angel also condemned the hypocrisy and recklessness of the

provincial NDP government's pandemic response. She explained the role of Public Health officials in deceiving the population and discouraging a safe approach. "Provincial public health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry has become something of an international figurehead at the forefront of our pandemic response," Angel commented. "The messaging that's coming out in BC downplays the seriousness of the pandemic. Phrases like 'Be Kind, Be Calm, Be Safe' are constantly repeated in the media and by the government. But as a person living in BC, I don't feel calm, the kindness is not here, and it is not safe. It took very long even to impose a mask mandate, with Dr. Henry saying masks 'are not that effective.' In schools, as in the community, the language is weak and wishy wash—language like it's 'recommended,' but there's never really a 'this has to be done' approach. And that's why many people don't follow the rules. They just don't take it seriously."

An October 8 report from CTV titled "Children face similar risk of coronavirus infection as adults" explodes the lie parents were fed by governments around the world that their unvaccinated children are much less likely to catch COVID than adults. "The study demonstrates that all along, children of all ages including infants and toddlers have had a similar risk of SARS-CoV-2," the report states. It went on to conclude, "If lessons are to be learned from our collective experience and if we agree to acknowledge the role of children in transmission of respiratory viral infections, then pediatric populations, from infants to adolescents, must be included in pandemic preparedness from day one."

Angel already knew this scientifically proven fact. "It's so obvious to me that everyone, everywhere, should be wearing masks, limiting where they go, and that schools should be closed or at very least be hybrid," she told us. "There should be messaging that encourages people to do the right thing, but here it's a 'fend for yourself attitude'."

In addition, she noted that the government has abandoned any effort to implement basic public health measures such as systematic mass testing, contact tracing and isolation, commenting, "You can't get tested in BC unless you have symptoms and there's a set of symptoms that you have to have."

There's a two-to-three hours wait for COVID tests. They closed almost half of our places to get COVID tests. Personally, I must take a transit bus and then I have to travel one hour to get a COVID test. I have to stand in line for a couple hours and it takes two days before I receive my result." She added that the government is promoting private companies on its own website. "On the CDC (Centre for Disease Control) BC, there's a page where they promote at least three places where you can get a rapid test for \$250 to \$500. So, the rapid tests that BC received were sold to private businesses and are now sold to people who are traveling."

When the WSWs reporters explained what must be done according to science to eradicate the virus, such as closing schools and non-essential production with full financial support for workers, Angel fully agreed. "I agree with you that we have to close things down and stop COVID in its tracks," she said. "Yes, COVID can be eradicated within two to three months according to scientists." Pointing to the disastrous state of the health care system in BC, she continued, "Look what's going on in Alberta. But the health system is even worse in BC. I'm acutely aware that if someone in this house needs emergency care it may be hours before an ambulance can get to us."

Governments in every province, at the federal level, and in the other advanced capitalist countries of Europe and North America have opted for a mitigation strategy that allows the virus to spread and potentially mutate, while keeping hospitals and their staffing near or at the breaking point. The federal government of Justin Trudeau, on behalf of the financial oligarchy, bailed out the banks and big business with more than \$650 billion during the first limited lockdown in March 2020. As soon as the bailout was completed, the ruling class pushed for the full reopening of the economy. Schools were reopened so parents could be sent back to work churning out profits for the elites. The provincial governments of Doug Ford in Ontario, Jason Kenney in Alberta and François Legault in Quebec have been at the forefront of the school reopening drive.

Angel "agreed 100 percent" when asked if the BC government had prioritized propping up business over saving human lives as in the rest of Canada. "It's all about keeping the economy open," she added. "John Horgan boasted that we are the only ones who kept the schools open and kept the economy open!...The NDP BC are criminals. They are only motivated by profits."

Angel also agreed that the trade union-backed NDP, despite its progressive or "left-wing" pretensions, is fundamentally a right-wing pro-business party. "It's not just the pandemic!" she said. Turning to the opioid crisis, which is a veritable social catastrophe in parts of BC, she said, "The pandemic is the first time I paid attention to the BC NDP, but in the last couple years I have had time to get informed on the other crisis that BC faces, the opioid crisis, that's not getting addressed. There are hundreds of people dying from overdoses in BC every year, and they tossed it over to the federal government. They say, 'oh

well it's all about legalization.' It's not. When you look at overdoses it comes down to mental health and then you look at BC health services and it's severely underfunded. It takes months before you can see a mental health professional.

"And it's the same with the environment. Look at deforestation in BC. Companies with the support of government are taking down old growth trees, it's the same thing. And then they called a snap election during the pandemic last year only to secure four more years in power for themselves. We didn't want an election."

When asked if she thought workers in BC would be interested in a genuine left-wing party that advocates for working people and speaks on the real issues confronting workers such as the pandemic, the social crisis and gaping inequalities in wealth and income, Angel said, "Absolutely. We need a different voice here. It would be nice to hear a voice that speaks for the little people. We also have a lot of homeless and marginalized people, a lot of immigrants. These voices don't get heard here and are swept under the rug."

At this point, Angel's partner Mike, who had been listening to the discussion, jumped in. "Social inequality keeps widening, because the people with the money rig everything to make sure they don't lose money. It's more like we have 'rich people socialism' here. All the protections are there for them. Not for most people, just for the minority that has the wealth. And its inter-generational.

"It's crazy to see these things happening in Canada," Mike continued, "Things that we've heard for decades 'don't happen in Canada,' like children dying of disease, are now happening on a daily basis. And unless something changes it will keep evolving making people more and more miserable ... Something really needs to change."

The *World Socialist Web Site* and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees are organizing a webinar entitled "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication" on Sunday, October 24, at 1PM eastern time. We encourage all of those like Angel who oppose the ruling elite's homicidal response to COVID-19 to make plans to attend and promote the event among their friends and work colleagues. To attend the webinar, please register here.



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