

“We are told to just live with an ‘acceptable amount’ of death and disease”

## Canadian educator makes powerful call to mobilize working class to eradicate COVID

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As Western Canada reels under the fourth wave of the pandemic, a macabre picture of death and suffering is being vividly painted for the entire country to see. Collapsing health care systems, the denial of care to those least likely to survive under triage protocols, and morgues that are filled to the brim are terrifying and angering working people. This reality is contrasted by the callous indifference, ignorance and malign neglect of big business and its political representatives, ranging from the hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government in Alberta to the nominally “left,” trade union-backed New Democrats (NDP) in British Columbia.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed Malcolm, an educator from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, who is outraged by the NDP government’s open schools/open economy policy.

Like many teachers, Malcolm was drawn to the profession by a desire to help young people. “I was passionate in helping young people who are dealing with childhood trauma,” he explained, adding, “Part of what drew me to education was the desire to have a nice middle-class life.”

The pandemic has changed all that. “I got nothing left,” he remarked. “I’m just punching the clock. I want to get out of there as fast as possible.”

Malcolm continued, “When the first wave hit, we went online, but when we came back in June (2020), I remember wearing a mask at school and I was the only staff member that did. In September (2020), the government did not mandate masks. Instead, they said that they would ‘allow us to wear masks.’ More teachers began to wear them, but it just became a culture war—not only between teachers and the community, but between teachers themselves.”

Malcolm explained that right-wing forces in his local community have been emboldened by the ruling elite’s prioritization of corporate profits over human lives, and consequent refusal to adopt a science-based response to the pandemic. Instead, Canada’s governments, including BC’s, have downplayed the threat COVID represents, especially to

children, and the role that schools have played as vectors of transmission in the country’s recurring devastating waves of infection and death. To this day, BC officials largely ignore the threat of airborne transmission of the virus.

“The community (where I teach),” said Malcolm, “is very conservative, and they view any public health measure as an attack on their freedoms. Many refuse to wear a mask or be vaccinated. Not pleasant.”

When asked how the school administration handled the COVID-19 threat, Malcolm answered, “The school began to segregate students into cohorts and taking incremental public health measures. But even these minimal measures were fought every step of the way. Every single measure was challenged and fought, and the admin just gave in. For example, when a mask mandate was instituted, most of the students would simply refuse to wear masks. The response from the admin was okay, well we can’t make you wear them—do as you please. Then the cohort system began to break down.

“It’s been exhausting knowing that the limited health measures that were put into place to protect us were not being followed and are nonexistent in my school. Going into that every day really took its toll. It’s gotten a little better this year because I am vaccinated, but this will be my last year, I have had enough.”

Malcolm continued, “I don’t think they (the school administration) cares about the staff...I mean now with the fourth wave and the Delta variant kids are at a huge risk. ... The admin loves to talk about how this is all about the kids, but I don’t see it in their actions. All they want to do is keep the school open.”

He drew attention to the concern felt by teachers about how the NDP government’s reckless reopening policies are exposing children and young people to a high risk of COVID-19 infection. “Some of us are very concerned about basic public health measures that are not being followed,” he said. “Many of us are angry, and everyone is scared. Anger and fear are pervasive.”

Malcolm detailed how the BC Teachers Federation (BCTF) has bitterly resisted any effort by educators to fight for safer working conditions. “When there was a bad outbreak going on in the community and people were going to the hospital, some teachers began to talk about the possibility of job action. Then the union caught wind of this and ruled out our doing anything.

“The unions have talked about masks a lot, and they’ve brought those in, but that’s about the only thing that they have done. When it comes to implementing safety protocols like reduced class sizes, mask mandates for all staff and students, social distancing measures, the union says that there is nothing we can do about it. We must follow the public health guidelines.”

In fact, the BCTF has loyally enforced the NDP provincial and federal Liberal governments’ murderous “profits before life” strategy, ensuring that schools have remained open throughout most of the pandemic. This is so that parents can be compelled to keep working and producing profits for big business.

In contrast to this criminal policy, Malcolm advocates a strategy to eliminate the virus. “I think the union should be demanding that everything go online until community transmission is zero,” he said. “That would be a policy that values people’s health and safety. We have seen it in other countries, so we know it can be done. But instead, we are told to just live with an ‘acceptable’ amount of death and disease. An amount that won’t crash the health care system. Anything less than that is fine. But our health care system has already crashed and we’re all pretending that everything is fine.”

He added, “That’s why I have gotten involved with the CERSC (Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee) and I’m trying to organize colleagues and activate them. I see how closely aligned my union is with the BC NDP government, and I must assume that’s part of the reason for their inertia. These are not safe working conditions for staff or students and all the union seems to do is just shrug their shoulders.”

The disastrous levels of infections and deaths in BC presided over by a nominally “left” government has led Malcolm to draw important political conclusions. Asked if he thought there was any difference between the pandemic response of the NDP and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney’s hard-right government UCP, he responded, “There is no difference. None. In fact, BC’s pandemic response lines up perfectly with the Trumpist Republican response. In BC we have the lowest testing rates in the country and have kept the economy open the entire pandemic. We have prioritized rapid testing for the film industry, but nothing for long-term-care homes. This is a government that totally values profits over lives. There is no difference between BC’s NDP government and, say, a conservative government from the prairies. The only difference is that the liberal media has decided to give (BC Premier John) Horgan a free pass and focus all their fire on Alberta’s Jason

Kenney. Canada stops existing at the Rocky Mountains when it comes to COVID responses.

“Among teachers, there is a lot of anger and a feeling of betrayal. The BC NDP had said they were the teachers’ friend, but during this pandemic they have not only taken the bus and driven over us, they also put it in reverse and ran over us again. I think it’s really telling that over the summer there were protests in Alberta against Kenney when he said they were going to abandon all safety measures with the reopening of the economy. Those protests were spearheaded by health care workers. But in BC the protests were not led by nurses, they were led by teachers. All I can tell you is that from what I see teachers are revolutionary in our grievances.”

We asked Malcolm if he agreed with the CERSC’s fight for teachers to organize themselves independently of and in opposition to the unions. He answered, “A thousand percent, 19 months into the pandemic and this is the thing that I am most sure of. It’s the only way that teachers are going to protect themselves—by building a grassroots, independent popular organization with members’ safety as the paramount concern. It’s up to workers to organize.”

Due to the fact that schools are major vectors of transmission, the CERSC calls for them to be closed for in-person learning. Full support must be provided to families to shelter in place until the pandemic is brought under control as part of a zero-COVID, eradication strategy. Malcolm commented on the CERSC’s program, “The pandemic has really brought out the inequality in society. I realize how unimportant I am and how little the government values my personal safety. I always naively believed before the pandemic that my government cared about my well-being at some level. I now know that’s not true. They don’t care if I live or die. It makes no difference to them, so long as the economy keeps functioning.

“There are two outcomes as far as I can see. There is an endless cycle where capitalism has had almost 20 months to figure out how to end this pandemic and we’re in worse shape now than we were when it started, or there is socialist revolution where the pandemic response is guided by values of social justice, international solidarity, and the idea that nobody is safe unless we are all safe. That’s what’s going to get us out of this pandemic.”

Malcolm has signed up to participate in the October 24 webinar, “How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication.” He encourages all educators and their supporters to do the same. “Now is the time for the international working class to take up the banner of zero COVID and usher in a new era of struggle against this disease.”



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