

Canada's Liberal government eliminates all pandemic support for workers, amid country's fourth wave

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25 October 2021

Canada's Liberal minority government has effectively eliminated all emergency pandemic financial support for unemployed workers, with the aim of enforcing big business' drive to increase economic output and profits amid the country's fourth wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths.

The more than 800,000 workers who have been receiving the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), which paid up to \$400 a week to those either jobless or with sharply reduced working hours, have had the rug pulled out from under them. Many are now threatened with destitution, even hunger and homelessness.

Flanked by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland told a press conference last Thursday that the CRB would not be further extended. Consequently, last week is the final week for which CRB payments will be made. This callous decision will impact those ineligible for employment insurance—that is, largely younger workers and those who were employed in the so-called gig economy.

Freeland announced the CRB would be replaced by a new benefit, but this is nothing more than a sham. The new benefit has been expressly designed to make it all but impossible for jobless or underemployed workers to obtain a single cent in future government assistance, even as the COVID-19 pandemic rages across the country. For her part, Freeland said the goal of the changes is to make government support “more narrow, more targeted and less expensive.”

The Liberals' Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit will provide a meagre \$300 per week and only to workers who cannot go to work during a provincially ordered pandemic lockdown. Under these terms, none of the more than 800,000 people receiving CRB benefits last week will be eligible for the Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit once, weeks' hence, it gets parliamentary sanction. Nor would they or any other workers likely ever be eligible, since the provincial governments have uniformly vowed not to reimpose lockdowns no matter how high COVID-19 infections and deaths rise.

In comments to CTV News, Employment Minister Carla Qualtrough emphasized that workers would only be eligible for the benefit under a “complete lockdown.” Anyone losing their job due to the tightening of public health restrictions short of a “complete lockdown” will get nothing.

Although Canada continues to record almost 3,000 new infections per day and almost 2,000 people have died of COVID since September 1, governments across the country are once again rushing to remove any and all public health restrictions as they double-down on the ruling class's homicidal “live with the virus” strategy.

Yesterday, John Horgan's trade union-backed New Democratic Party government in BC and Doug Ford's hard-right Conservative government in Ontario lifted virtually all capacity restrictions in indoor settings. In announcing its latest rollback of COVID restrictions, the Ontario government stressed its aim is to continue aggressively removing public health measures, with all of them, including mask mandates, ended by March 2022.

Ford's plans to abolish all COVID restrictions “seem to complement what is occurring federally”—i.e., both underpin the corporate drive to churn out bigger profits—observed an *Ottawa Citizen* editorial Saturday. “Now that the federal government is ending COVID relief programs such as the Canada Recovery Benefit,” the *Citizen* continued, “it is possible more people who depended on such subsidies will seek work. As Ontario loosens restrictions on small business, demand for employees will rise. All of this, presumably, will be good for the economy.”

The criminal character of the ruling elite's drive to deprive workers of any financial support to force them to accept dangerous low-paid jobs, where they will face a high risk of infecting themselves and their loved ones, is underscored by the ongoing progression of the pandemic. One day prior to Freeland's announcement, Saskatchewan's chief medical health officer, Dr. Saqib Shahab, broke down in tears as he informed the province's residents that his agency's modelling shows that the number of intensive care patients infected with COVID-19 could more than double by the new year. Saskatchewan is already sending patients to Ontario due to a lack of health care staff and beds. In neighbouring Alberta, where some hospitals were forced to deny care to patients deemed least likely to survive over recent weeks, the COVID-19 fatality rate is three times higher than for the rest of Canada. According to Worldometers, 765 people are currently in critical condition across the country, and the death toll reached 28,750 Monday.

Corporate Canada and its political representatives are positively revelling in this mass death, applauding the Liberal government for scrapping the last vestiges of financial support for workers. Big business had long complained that the CRB was “overly generous” and blamed it for the staff shortages, especially in the low-wage restaurant, hospitality and retail sectors. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce declared Freeland's announcement “the fair thing to do for businesses.” It praised the fact that while financial supports for workers were effectively removed, companies that hire new employees can continue to receive a subsidy worth 50 percent of their salary costs until May 2022.

The official opposition Conservatives, who have long echoed business complaints about the CRB, were likewise full of praise. “The Prime Minister followed (party leader Erin) O’Toole’s fiscal plan and announced that the CRB would be ending,” said Tory finance critic Ed Fast, before going on to demand that Trudeau “halt” his government’s “out of control spending.”

The reality is that the big business Liberals, together with their allies in the trade unions and NDP, have been working throughout the pandemic to protect the interests of big business at the expense of the working class. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the CRB’s predecessor, extended a pittance of \$500 per week to workers laid off following the outbreak of the pandemic. This program, touted as generous by NDP leader Jagmeet Singh and Canadian Labour Congress head Hassan Yussuff, was a drop in the bucket compared to the more than \$650 billion forked over to the banks and big business by the Trudeau Liberal government in March 2020. This unprecedented bailout of Canada’s financial oligarchy led to the accumulation of fabulous quantities of wealth, with the country’s super-rich billionaires becoming \$78 billion richer during the pandemic’s first year.

Last fall, the Trudeau government took the first step in scrapping financial support for workers by replacing the CERB with the CRB. Initially, the government planned to accompany this change by slashing benefit payments from the already inadequate \$500 per week to just \$400. However, faced with the rapidly accelerating second wave of the pandemic, which was the product of the reopening of the economy and schools pursued by all provincial governments and overseen by Trudeau, the Liberals backtracked and maintained the \$500-a-week payments until the spring. In their 2021 budget, they cut CRB payments to \$400 a week, a move which secured the needed majority parliamentary support thanks to the votes of the New Democrats.

No such “fiscal prudence,” to use Freeland’s corporate jargon, is exercised when dealing with Canada’s wealthy elite. The Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, which also expired last weekend, was a massive corporate slush fund that paid for bumper shareholder payouts and lavish executive salaries at many of the country’s leading businesses (see: “Corporate Canada used government’s pandemic emergency wage subsidy as slush fund”).

There is also nothing new in Trudeau’s partnership with hard-right provincial governments in implementing the ruling elite’s murderous open economy/open schools policy. In its September 2020 throne speech, which passed with NDP support, the Trudeau government called for any future anti-COVID lockdowns to be adopted “at the local level” and on a “short-term” basis. This gave the likes of Quebec’s “herd immunity”-promoting premier, Francois Legault, and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, who was describing COVID-19 as a “flu” as late as June 2020, a free hand to pursue a policy of mass infection and death.

In early July 2021, when Kenney declared that Alberta was “open for summer” and eliminated almost all public health measures, Trudeau and his Liberal government said and did nothing. Over two months later, when Alberta’s ICUs were already full to the brim with seriously ill patients, the prime minister cynically seized on Kenney’s reckless reopening strategy to attack the federal Conservatives in the final days of the federal election campaign.

The scrapping of what little remained in the way of financial support for Canadian workers marks a further stage in the intimate collaboration between all Canada’s parliamentary parties in enforcing

the interests of the ruling elite during the pandemic. It and the recent joint US-Canadian naval provocation against China in the Taiwan Strait provide a foretaste of how ruthless the incoming Liberal minority government will be in attacking the rights and living standards of working people and in pursuing an aggressive foreign policy aimed at upholding the global interests of Canadian imperialism.

Today Trudeau is to announce the cabinet for his third term in office. Business lobby groups and media commentators have been clamouring for months about the need to make Canada more “competitive” and ready to take advantage of the “economic recovery,” code words for forcing workers to accept brutal exploitation, low wages, and next to no benefits and job protections. To make clear that he supports this agenda, Trudeau promptly announced after last month’s election that Freeland, a darling of the financial and corporate elite for her hawkish fiscal policies and virulent anti-Russia stance, will remain deputy prime minister and finance minister.

The aggressive class war program of big business and all its political representatives from Trudeau and Ford to Legault and Horgan is increasingly meeting with resistance from the working class. Like their counterparts in the United States—where a massive strike wave among manufacturing, health care and other workers is being fuelled by decades of concession contracts and the corporate oligarchy’s prioritization of profits over human lives during the pandemic—workers across Canada have waged a series of militant strikes in recent months for improvements in wages and conditions. The mass protests which swept Alberta in opposition to the Kenney government’s dismantling of public health measures also revealed the broad-based hostility to the ruling elite’s strategy of “living with the virus.”

The task now is to develop this widespread opposition into an industrial and political working-class counteroffensive to overturn the ruling class’ profit before lives pandemic policy, oppose rearmament and war, and fight for workers’ power. A pivotal first step in this fight is the mobilization of the working class to enforce an immediate shutdown of all nonessential business activity and in-class learning with full financial compensation for all workers, as part a strategy to eliminate COVID-19 in Canada and internationally.



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