

In keeping with their criminal mishandling of the pandemic

Canada's two largest provinces reject vaccine mandates for health workers

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The hard-right governments of Canada's two most populous provinces, Ontario and Quebec, announced last week that they were abandoning any plans to implement a vaccine mandate for health care workers.

The refusal of Ontario's Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative (PC) government and François Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government to adopt this elementary public health measure is politically criminal. It is a consequence and a continuation of the ruling elite's homicidal prioritizing of profits over lives during the greatest global health emergency in a century. This policy has claimed the lives of more than 29,000 Canadians.

The repudiation of vaccine mandates for those on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19 is also a political gift to the far right. In the US and Europe, it is far-right and outright fascist forces, like the would-be-dictator Donald Trump and his followers and the AfD (Alternative for Germany), that have spearheaded the push to end all public health measures to fight the virus, including vaccine mandates. The same is true in Canada, where the People's Party of Canada (PPC), the fascist groups in its orbit, and the most right-wing sections of the federal Conservatives, Alberta's United Conservative Party and the Ontario PCs have fomented opposition to vaccine mandates and support for the anti-vaxx movement with bogus claims of defending "individual liberty."

PPC leader Maxime Bernier responded to Ford's and Legault's repudiation of vaccine mandates for health care workers by tweeting jubilantly: "The idiots in the Quebec and Ontario governments have finally come to their senses (just a little bit) and announced today that they won't force all health care workers to be vaccinated."

The Ford government had never committed to implementing a vaccine mandate. It merely said that it was considering one. Quebec's CAQ government, by contrast, had announced in August that all health care workers had until October 15 to get fully vaccinated; then, after repeatedly insisting the vaccine mandate would proceed as planned, the CAQ government announced less than 48 hours before it was to go into effect that the deadline was being extended to November 15.

In announcing that Ontario would not impose a vaccine mandate for health care workers, Ford declared it a "complex issue" and claimed its imposition could potentially trigger the "departure of tens of thousands of health care workers" from the public health care system. Health Minister Christine Elliott warned that "thousands of surgeries" would be at risk of cancellation.

For its part, the CAQ government declared a vaccine mandate would

have had "a devastating impact on the health care system."

Such professions of concern for patient care and protecting the health care system, coming from those chiefly responsible for the current crisis, are deeply cynical. By permitting unvaccinated staff members to continue working in hospitals and other frontline health care facilities, where many patients are immunocompromised or otherwise highly vulnerable to the deadly virus, both governments are creating the conditions for disastrous outbreaks to occur. These outbreaks will force hospitals to restrict services and cancel "thousands of surgeries" as they have had to do during the successive waves of the pandemic, threatening a sharp increase in preventable deaths.

Even the Ontario government's own pandemic Science Advisory Table warned COVID-19 outbreaks caused by unvaccinated staff are likely to more severely disrupt hospital care than any staff reductions due to a vaccine mandate—only to have Ford ignore their expert advice, just as he has on many other issues throughout the pandemic.

Hospitals in Ontario that have chosen to enforce their own vaccine mandates report that a mere 1-3 percent of workers have been impacted. The Ford government has refused to release figures on the overall vaccination rate among the province's health care employees, but those who are refusing to get inoculated are a tiny minority.

It should be added that as a condition of their employment, health care workers in Ontario must already prove they are vaccinated against some 17 diseases, including measles, tuberculosis and rubella.

As for Quebec, the CAQ government has acknowledged that at least 97 percent of all health care workers are vaccinated.

If the threatened loss of such a small percentage of workers would have produced the catastrophic disruptions to health care that the two governments claim, this only attests to the shambolic state of the public health system and their ruinous mishandling of the pandemic.

As a result of the austerity policies pursued by the entire political establishment for decades, even before the pandemic, emergency rooms at hospitals across the country were overcrowded and major hospitals were working at close to or over capacity. Due to chronic staff shortages, nurses and other workers faced punishing workloads that pushed many to the breaking point.

All of this has dramatically worsened during the pandemic. Due to stress and fatigue, some 4,000 nurses just in Quebec have quit the profession during the pandemic, while across the country mental health problems have skyrocketed among health care workers.

No one should accept the claims of Ford and Legault to be anguished over the disruptions to the health care system a vaccine-

mandate might have caused. They expressed no similar concerns about the fragility of the health care system when, in conjunction with the federal Trudeau government, their governments instituted the reckless back-to-work/back-to-school policies that have led the virus to repeatedly surge across the country causing mass infection and death. Those decisions, including the full reopening of schools in the fall of 2020 and again in February 2021, produced Canada's devastating second and third pandemic waves, which claimed tens of thousands of lives—as a study of excess deaths by the Royal Society of Canada has shown—and overwhelmed hospitals across the country.

If Canada's political establishment continues to be able to cover up its criminal culpability, it is largely thanks to the corporatist trade unions. They have enforced the back-to-work/back-to-school policy, just as they have suppressed working class opposition to capitalist austerity for decades.

In the debate over vaccine mandates for health care workers, the unions have played a foul role, with many of them adapting to or openly aligning themselves with the far-right anti-vaxx campaign. The Ontario Nurses Association lobbied Ford not to adopt a vaccine mandate. Many of Quebec's major health care unions, including the FSQ?CSQ, CUPE, APTS and FIQ held a joint press conference with the Quebec chauvinist, pro-austerity Parti Quebecois to press the CAQ government not to proceed with the vaccine mandate on October 15. Whilst these unions suddenly found the "courage" to speak out against what they termed the imminent threat of "service ruptures," they have otherwise been pliant instruments of the Legault government's pandemic policy. They have not lifted a finger to oppose the government's anti-worker health care decrees and have just imposed sellout contracts that retain the punishing forced overtime regime for nurses.

Media coverage of the vaccine mandate issue portrays it as a debate over the "balance" between "individual rights" and collective protection. This is itself a concession to Bernier and the far right, which feels ever more emboldened. The day after Ontario and Quebec declared that they were not adopting vaccine mandates for health care workers, Conservative MP Marilyn Gladu announced that she was the spokesperson for a far-right group of 15-30 Conservative MPs and senators who were forming a "civil liberties" caucus focussed on opposing vaccine mandates and defending "medical privacy" and the unvaccinated. Conservative leader Erin O'Toole has consistently pandered to anti-vaccine sentiment, including by remaining the only major party leader to refuse to disclose the vaccine status of his party's MPs.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously explained, there is no legitimate reason for workers who have ready access to COVID-19 vaccines to reject them. No individual has the "right" or "freedom" to go around infecting others with a debilitating and potentially deadly disease. As we noted in a July 29, 2021 statement, the reactionary anarchist and libertarian political forces who oppose vaccine mandates appeal to "ignorance, fear and anti-scientific prejudice." The statement rejected efforts by the corporate elite to demonize individual unvaccinated workers, stressing that the vast majority could be convinced of the overwhelming benefits of vaccination through a systematic worker-led campaign of public education. (See: [Oppose the right-wing campaign against vaccination!](#))

The ability of anti-vaxxers and far-right political forces to win a hearing among a small minority of workers is due above to all the political establishment's systematic opposition to basing pandemic policy on science. Determined to protect the "right" of the super-rich

and major corporations to continue extracting profits from working people regardless of the consequences for public health, all governments, from Trudeau's Liberals on down, flouted science-based recommendations in order to keep the economy open and profits booming. Supported by a pliant corporate media, the political elite has fed workers one anti-scientific lie after another, including the long-disproven claim that schools can remain open because children are less susceptible to catch and transmit COVID-19. The New Democratic Party provincial government in British Columbia continues to downplay or even outright deny that COVID-19 is an airborne disease, even though scientific studies have demonstrated that aerosols are its primary mode of transmission.

Then there is the fact that the political establishment in Canada and almost every other country has deliberately sown confusion and misinformation about what vaccines can accomplish. They are invariably presented as a silver bullet that removes the need for the retention of any substantial public health measures, such as mask wearing, social distancing, lockdowns and contact tracing. The Public Health Agency of Canada, which is overseen by the Trudeau government, asserted for months that a vaccination rate of 70 percent among the adult population was adequate to scrap most public health restrictions. This advice neatly dovetailed with a growing chorus of voices from the corporate and financial elites demanding a return to "normalcy" and ordering everyone to learn to "live with the virus."

But the truth is that whilst vaccines provide an extremely high degree of protection against serious illness as a result of a COVID-19 infection, their ability to guard against someone catching and transmitting the virus is lower. This problem has been exacerbated by the Delta variant, against which fully vaccinated individuals have significantly waning immunity some five or six months after they receive their second dose.

For these reasons, serious scientists have insisted that while mass vaccination is a critical tool in the fight against the pandemic, it needs to be combined with broader public health measures to suppress and bring community transmission down to zero. These measures include a lockdown of schools and nonessential production with full compensation for workers, isolation of all infected people, contact tracing and mask mandates. Such a strategy, according to Alberta-based developmental biologist Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz, could eliminate COVID-19 from the community in a matter of a few months.

The fight for a program to eliminate COVID-19 requires the mobilization of a mass movement of working people, including health care workers, educators and workers in the public and private sectors. A critical part of this movement must be a sustained campaign of public education, led by medical experts and health care workers, to refute the pseudo-scientific nonsense propagated by far-right opponents of COVID-19 vaccines and by the ruling elite's anti-scientific "live with the virus" propaganda that facilitates it.



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