

Canada admits aerosols are major source of COVID-19 transmission after nearly two years of denying it

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Almost two years into a pandemic that has claimed the lives of close to 30,000 Canadians, Canada's Liberal government has admitted what scientific experts have long insisted—aerosols play a major role in the transmission of COVID-19.

Indeed, research has conclusively demonstrated that aerosols are the virus' principal means of transmission.

Yet up until late last week, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), which is overseen by the federal Liberal government, stubbornly insisted that respiratory droplets are far and away the most important means by which COVID-19 is transmitted. This is because highlighting the key role aerosols play in spreading the virus points to the dangers people face when they congregate in workplaces, schools, buses and subway cars, and thus cuts across the ruling elite's drive to corral working people to return to work amid the pandemic.

Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam tweeted the new public health advice concerning aerosols late Friday afternoon. "Since the outset of the pandemic, we've learned a lot about the SARS2 virus that causes COVID-19," the tweet read. "Importantly, we've learned how the virus can linger in fine aerosols and remain suspended in the air we breathe. Much like expelled smoke lingers in poorly ventilated spaces, the SARS2 virus can remain suspended in the air, with those in close proximity to the infected person inhaling more aerosols, especially in indoor and poorly ventilated spaces."

The PHAC has not followed up Tam's tweets, which appear to have been timed to minimize their impact, with a public information offensive to alert the population as to the dangers of aerosol transmission. Nor is it advocating any policy changes to prevent a surge of infections, as people increasingly congregate indoors during the cold winter months.

The PHAC's belated admission constitutes a devastating indictment of the political establishment's prioritization of corporate profits over human life, which has gone hand-in-hand with a systematic repudiation of a science-based response to the virus.

Until Tam's tweet, the federal government had treated aerosol transmission of COVID-19 as little more than an afterthought. Not until November 2020, long after scientific

investigations had demonstrated the centrality of airborne spread, did the PHAC even admit that aerosol transmission was possible. Moreover, as the CBC noted at the time, this change to the PHAC's COVID-19 guidance was done "quietly," and was not accompanied by any campaign to warn the public of the danger of aerosol transmission, let alone any changes in government policy.

The federal government's insistence that droplets were the main mode of transmission, a claim followed by provincial governments across the country, was driven by political motives. The ruling elite's "profits before life" pandemic policy, based on forcing workers back into unsafe workplaces so they could churn out profits for corporate Canada, required that airborne transmission be denied or at least downplayed. This enabled governments to avoid imposing any responsibilities on employers for taking adequate precautions to stop the airborne spread of COVID-19, while at the same time removing any obligation from governments to fund basic upgrades to improve ventilation and air quality in schools, colleges and other public buildings.

Speaking at the October 24 webinar "How to end the pandemic" organized by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Prof. Jose Luis Jimenez, a chemistry professor at the University of Colorado (Boulder), addressed this issue directly. Noting that governments and public health authorities around the world have concentrated above all on transmission via droplets that are inhaled at close proximity or transferred via contact with surfaces, he remarked, "Droplets and surfaces are more convenient for governments, organizations and companies. If you get infected, you didn't wash your hands, you didn't keep your distance, you didn't wear your mask well, so the responsibility is mostly yours. But if it was airborne, your employer or your government didn't provide you with good ventilation, and they have a horror of that."

One of the most notorious examples of this outlook in practice came in the fall of 2020, when provincial governments across the country reopened schools with virtually no protections against virus transmission. Campaigners who pushed for the use of HEPA filters and other ventilation devices

in overcrowded and poorly ventilated classrooms were contemptuously dismissed by the authorities, while the education trade unions connived with provincial governments to suppress opposition among teachers and education workers to the reckless return to in-person learning. The back-to-school drive, as a study carried out in Montreal later demonstrated, played a crucial role in fuelling Canada's second pandemic wave, which claimed over 10,000 lives last fall and winter.

Similar devastating scenarios played out at numerous workplaces. Over 600 Amazon employees at the company's massive Heritage Road facility in Brampton—more than 10 percent of the workforce—were infected by COVID-19 in a massive outbreak last winter. Thousands of workers crammed elbow-to-elbow in meatpacking plants also got infected in Quebec and Alberta, with several losing their lives.

There is no indication that the Trudeau Liberal government, or any of its provincial counterparts, intend to pull back in the slightest from their back-to-work/back-to-school drive in response to Tam's admission about the dangers of aerosols. On the contrary, Tam's statement came as governments move to dismantle all remaining public health measures aimed at limiting the virus' spread. Despite resurgent infections, the Ontario Progressive Conservative government led by Doug Ford is pressing ahead with a timeline that will see the abolition of all public health measures, including mask-wearing, by March.

In Quebec, the hard-right Coalition Avenir Quebec government lifted a mask mandate for high school students on Monday and eliminated restrictions on karaoke bars and dance venues. COVID-STOP, a group of health care experts, attacked the government for refusing to acknowledge aerosol transmission, which it says accounts for between 85 and 100 percent of all COVID-19 transmission. Nima Machouf, an epidemiologist and member of COVID-STOP, said in response to the lifting of the mask mandate in high schools, "It's like replaying last year's movie. We were expecting that the government would have learned from it. The timing is not right."

In fact, the situation being provoked by the ruling elite this winter is arguably even worse than a year ago. Under conditions in which the significantly more infectious Delta variant is dominant, and the immunity provided by vaccines is beginning to wane, even the inadequate protective measures deployed earlier in the pandemic are being tossed aside. The health care system, which has operated at the breaking point for close to two years, is even less equipped to deal with an influx of patients than it was 12 months ago, with thousands of overworked, mentally-exhausted health care workers having left the profession.

Nonetheless, the ruling elite is determined to resist taking even the most basic public health measures to reduce COVID-19's further spread. Tam's admission that the virus is transmitted by aerosols was itself somewhat contradictory, with

the Chief Public Health Officer unable to even bring herself to recommend high-quality N95 masks or equivalents for workplaces and other indoor settings. Instead, she merely suggested that a "well-fitted and well-constructed mask" should be worn.

Nicolas Smit, an Ontario-based engineer and scientist who has been a strong advocate for better access to personal protective equipment (PPE) throughout the pandemic, told the WSWs in an interview that protections for workers must be strengthened following the government's admission that COVID-19 is transmitted primarily through the air. "There have been a lot of outbreaks at Canada Post facilities, for example," he said. "Federal workers should get N95 masks at a minimum."

Smit added that the revised PHAC guidance makes a "big difference" to how the threat of infection in schools should be viewed. Classrooms now become "a danger zone," he continued. "As we enter the winter, it will be harder to open windows. They're going to have to use other methods of protection and technology, like N95 masks and elastomeric respirators," he said. "But in Ontario, you have teachers getting suspended for wearing N95 masks."

Workers who have based themselves on the science ignored by the ruling elite and fought for improved PPE over recent weeks have been met with intimidation and reprisals from their employers and trade unions. In Ontario, a campaign initiated by the biostatistician and educator Ryan Imgrund, and supported by hundreds of teachers, calling for only N95 masks to be worn in schools was viciously denounced by the teachers trade unions. Teachers who wore N95s to school were suspended by their school boards, including some with immunocompromised children at home.

These events underscore that if science-based policies to combat the pandemic are to be implemented, they must be enforced through a mass movement led by the working class. This movement must be guided by the understanding that the only way to prevent an airborne virus like COVID-19 from inflicting further mass infection and death on workers across Canada and internationally is to fight for its elimination.

This requires the immediate closure of all nonessential production and in-person learning in schools, with full compensation paid to all workers from the vast wealth being hoarded by the pandemic profiteers. It also requires the development of a comprehensive program of testing, isolation of infected people, contact tracing and vaccinations, to bring community transmission down to zero.



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