Educators and a scientist react to Canadian government's belated admission COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through aerosols

Our reporters
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Since Canada's federal government acknowledged earlier this month that aerosols play a major role in the spread of COVID-19, the *World Socialist Web Site* has spoken to several educators and scientists about the significance of this belated admission. Until a series of November 12 tweets from Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, the federal government had spent almost two years insisting that respiratory droplets were the main source of COVID infections.

The downplaying and even denial of airborne transmission flies in the face of long-established scientific evidence that COVID-19 spreads through aerosols that can hang in the air like smoke. The Canadian government's lying claims were necessary to facilitate its reckless drive to "reopen" the economy, a profits before lives pandemic policy that has claimed the lives of 29,500 Canadians, and shield employers and governments from any responsibility to invest in adequate protective measures for workers.

Nicolas Smit, an engineer and scientist, who has been an advocate for high-quality personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers throughout the pandemic, told the *World Socialist Web Site* in an extended interview that the federal government's denial of airborne transmission went hand-in-hand with a refusal to supply masks and other protective gear to frontline workers. "One of the reasons they have denied this has to do with liability," he said. "The government doesn't want liability for businesses. If workers become infected because of airborne transmission, a workers' compensation claim could result in employers having to pay higher fines."

Smit explained that through his advocacy work, he convinced the federal government to recommend elastomeric respirators for use in workplaces, especially in health care settings. These face shields, which are typically used in industries like mining, have a classification of N99 and N100, making them at least as safe as, if not safer than, N95 masks. Respirators of this kind can be used repeatedly, provided they are maintained correctly. Smit said a single respirator could be used for up to a year.

According to Smit, the Ontario government purchased 100,000 elastomeric respirators following his advocacy. However, the right-wing, Doug Ford-led government has refused to release them for use. The government's scandalous refusal to distribute the respirators ultimately forced opposition politicians to raise questions. Last month the Ontario Liberals' health critic tabled a formal question in the provincial legislature calling on the government to provide an accounting of why the respirators remain locked up.

Smit believes that the threat of embarrassing revelations about the respirator scandal may have forced the federal government's hand in acknowledging airborne transmission. "The Ontario government has to provide detailed answers (to the provincial Liberal request) in writing, and this would make the government look bad. Canada was also one of the few countries still not admitting that vaccines alone don't work, and that people need a proper mask to protect themselves," he said. The federal government may now use its admission to shift blame for any shortcomings in protections for workers onto the provinces, Smit warned.

Referring to the *WSWS*' October 24 webinar, "How to end the pandemic," we asked Smit if he agreed with Prof. Jose Luis Jimenez's statement that the World Health Organization's refusal to acknowledge the airborne transmission of COVID-19 was one of the greatest failures in the history of public health. "Absolutely," Smit responded. "The CDC used the precautionary principle for SARS and H1N1. They explained how surgical masks would bleed. During SARS, Canada used surgical masks, which was in part why things got so bad in Ontario. In Victoria and Vancouver, they used N95 masks for SARS. This is the first pandemic where the CDC did not use the precautionary principle. It's not just negligence, but it involves ignoring past experience. The (Canadian government's)

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announcement shows how the government is trying to get away with this."

Members of the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) also spoke to the *WSWS*. The CERSC was set up by education workers to fight for a program of eliminating COVID-19, including by demanding the closure of all schools for in-person learning and all nonessential workplaces till the virus is suppressed. The CERSC calls for these measures to be combined with full pay for all workers affected, and a comprehensive program of testing, isolating infected people, contact tracing, and vaccination to reduce community transmission to zero.

Michael, a teacher from York Region, said, "My colleagues and I have known about the belief that COVID is spread through aerosol transmission for quite some time. On the one hand this is obviously a positive development for the safety of educators who work in crowded schools where proper ventilation is still an issue (many of us do not work in newer buildings). Yet on the other hand, I am furious that it took the federal government this long to admit the truth.

"There are questions that must be answered. I want to know how long did they sit on this knowledge? Why did it take almost two years to admit COVID is spread through aerosol transmission? How many Canadians have needlessly been sickened, and have perished because of this failure to inform the public on the nature of how COVID spreads? Most importantly, what else does the government know right now that they are not telling the public?

"I also want to know what every school board in Canada is waiting for. Equip all students and staff with N95 masks immediately! Update our WRONG health and safety protocols that still misinform staff, students, and parents. When will school boards and unions admit our masks are inferior and that we are sent into work basically unprotected? Stop the theatre! Leave the caretakers alone with the useless wiping down of door handles and light switches that does absolutely nothing! Install HEPA filters in every classroom! Invest heavily in public education! Don't cut $500 million in school budgets like Doug Ford is doing!"

Malcolm, a teacher from Vancouver Island, added, "The announcement by Tam that the virus is indeed airborne is no surprise to anyone who has paid attention to the science. It was of course backed up by no action. It's clear, two years into the pandemic, that such action will only be taken by governments when it's forced upon them by the coordinated demands of the international working class."

Turning to the cover-up of the implications of Tam's admission, Malcolm continued, "The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party is the only political organization across the political spectrum that is loudly and consistently analyzing the pandemic from a class perspective and demanding an end to unsafe and deadly workplace conditions faced by the Canadian working class, especially educators. For this they have my everlasting gratitude."

Another CERSC member told us, "I'm not surprised by Dr. Tam's confession that COVID is airborne. The implication is that virtually all indoor spaces are dangerous. As a caretaker in Toronto, I am anxious and concerned for all staff members and the students because schools aren't safe.

"The corporate media are covering up Dr. Tam's admission in order to protect the conspiracy of the ruling elite: corporate profits before lives. The unions and the school board have done nothing to protect staff or students from the dangers of COVID since the beginning of the pandemic. We are left out to dry.

"Education workers must take control by forming rank-and-file committees at all schools to demand a closure of all schools and non-essential production. This is essential to save the lives of our friends, colleagues and neighbors. We also demand financial support for all workers during the shutdown. It must be equivalent to a living wage, not the pathetic poverty level support the (federal government provided) with CERB and then the CRB."

The *World Socialist Web Site* strongly urges educators, support staff, scientists, and all other workers to contact us to share your comments on the dangers posed by airborne transmission of COVID-19 and your experiences during the pandemic. You can also follow the CERSC on Twitter and its Facebook page, and join the fight to mobilize the working class to impose a science-based strategy to eliminate COVID-19 that prioritizes protecting lives not profits.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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