

Only a COVID-19 elimination strategy can protect educators, students, and their families from the Omicron tsunami!

**Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
16 December 2021**

Canada, like every country in North America and Europe, is threatened with an Omicron-variant fueled tsunami of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the days and weeks ahead. The World Health Organization and leading scientists around the globe warn Omicron is far and away the most infectious variant of COVID-19 to date, that it at least partially evades the immunity provided by vaccines, and that it threatens to overwhelm already battered health care systems. Modelling suggests that daily infections in Canada could increase eight-fold in just a month.

Under these dire conditions, the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands the immediate implementation of a Zero COVID policy. The only way to prevent the horrendous levels of infection and death threatened by Omicron is through the adoption of an elimination strategy, which demands the immediate shutdown of all in-person learning and nonessential production with full compensation for all workers until new cases are reduced to zero.

Imposing this strategy, which must be fought for globally, requires the independent political mobilization of the working class in opposition to the policy of prioritizing corporate profits over the protection of human life that Canada's capitalist ruling elite, like that in almost every country, has pursued.

The threat posed by Omicron

The latest scientific data suggests that Omicron is spreading twice as quickly as the Delta variant. People who are double vaccinated may have as little as 20 to 30 percent protection against infection by Omicron, underscoring that full vaccination against COVID-19 now requires three doses. Initial data coming out of South Africa and the UK illustrates that children are suffering particularly severely at the hands of the new variant. In a deeply disturbing development, 67 children were hospitalized in Britain during a single day this week.

Continuing in-person learning under these circumstances is nothing short of criminal. It amounts to the conscious and reckless endangerment of the health, well-being, and very lives of children, education staff, and their loved ones. But that is precisely what governments across Canada are doing. In Quebec, where infections have skyrocketed over recent weeks and fully 42 percent of schools currently have a COVID-19 outbreak, the hard-right Coalition Avenir Quebec government has flatly refused to move forward the Christmas

holidays by even a few days, never mind adopt adequate safety measures to protect staff, students, and their families from infection.

In Ontario, where chief medical officer of health Dr. Kieran Moore revealed that each Omicron case is presently resulting in the infection of between four and eight times more people than every Delta case, the Ford government is rumoured to be considering extending the holiday break by one or more weeks.

Should this prove true, it will be because the government's stated policy of "normalizing" or "learning to live with the virus" has again led to a disaster; because the crush of COVID-19 cases threatens to once again overwhelm the health care system and because the ruling elite fears the eruption of working class anger against its "profits before life" pandemic policy.

Even then, no support would be forthcoming for working families from Ford or from the federal Liberal government, which has phased out all general pandemic relief programs. Parents would be left to fend for themselves in organizing childcare and compelled to keep working so as to swell corporate profits.

In other words, this would be another hastily improvised stop-gap measure, aimed at continuing the failed policies of allowing the virus to become endemic, and relying solely on vaccines to limit the virus' spread.

Over the past two years, workers have endured successive waves of mass infection and death, with each new wave triggered by governments' reckless decisions to prematurely reopen schools and lift restrictions so as to safeguard corporate profits. Absent the intervention of the working class, this process will repeat itself, with catastrophic consequences.

The ruling class' homicidal pandemic policy

Omicron's properties—its unprecedented infectiousness and ability to evade vaccines—represent a serious medical problem, but the principal reason it is having a devastating impact is political. This new variant can justifiably be described as the product of the ruling elite's homicidal and reckless pandemic policy, which the CERSC and its sister rank-and-file committees internationally have consistently condemned and opposed since their founding.

After the initial temporary lockdowns in the spring of 2020, which were only imposed following a wave of independent worker-led

protests across North America and Europe, governments in every country abandoned all serious efforts to contain the spread of the virus. They rushed to “reopen” the economy, and sent education staff and students back into overcrowded and poorly-ventilated schools. Canada’s federal government stubbornly denied that COVID-19 is primarily transmitted through aerosols, miniscule airborne particles, not droplets, for almost two years. As a result, teachers, education staff, and other workers were forbidden to wear high-quality masks of at least the N95 grade, which can prevent transmission. These actions helped turn schools into COVID-19 hotbeds.

Government officials repeated the mantra over and over that the pandemic would be overcome through vaccination alone. However, the policy of allowing the virus to run rampant through the population gave it the opportunity to evolve and undermine the immunity generated by vaccines.

The emergence of the Omicron variant has underscored that the political establishment has no intention of changing course. Instead, it is doubling down on its murderous pandemic response. In the three weeks since the WHO declared Omicron a variant of concern, the highest classification for an infectious disease, Prime Minister Trudeau has not made a single public address to the population about what his government intends to do to halt Omicron’s spread. His latest brief remarks on the subject, confined to a regular year-end interview, consisted of him describing the variant as “scary” before declaring that the population will have “a much better summer” in 2022. Although community transmission of Omicron is already widespread in Canada, the federal government has confined its response to travel restrictions.

The refusal of the Trudeau government and all its provincial counterparts, from Jason Kenney’s United Conservative Party regime in Alberta to John Horgan’s New Democrats in British Columbia, to take any serious action to stop Omicron’s rampage is deliberate. Their principal concern is safeguarding the wealth of Canada’s super-rich shareholders and large corporations, who demand an uninterrupted flow of profits from workers’ exploitation.

The trade unions are no less complicit in letting Omicron rip through the population. The education unions smothered all opposition among teachers and support staff to the reopening of schools, and have insisted that schools remain open even as infections spike. When rank-and-file walkouts and protests developed, the unions sabotaged them and directed teachers to place their faith in the pro-employer labour relations boards. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, one of the largest education unions in the country, has not issued a single statement since omicron was detected to explain its impact on workplace safety.

Workers must fight for an elimination strategy

The experience of China throughout the pandemic proves that basic public health measures can contain and stamp out COVID-19. In a country with over 1.4 billion inhabitants, including several cities with over 20 million residents, a Zero COVID policy has been successfully pursued. Only three people have died from COVID-19 in China since the first wave of infections was suppressed in April 2020, and only a little over 100,000 people have been infected since the pandemic began. This has been achieved thanks to mass support for a

comprehensive public health strategy of mass testing, the isolation of infected people, quarantines for contact persons, mass vaccination, and the shutdown of facilities where outbreaks occur. As a result of this policy, the population has endured far less restrictions on public life than workers in Canada.

The measures adopted in China are not socialist, but they are anathema to the ruling elite of Canada and the other Western imperialist powers. They cannot tolerate even for a single day any public health initiative that cuts across the profit and geostrategic interests of Canadian imperialism. That is why Canada, with a population some 40 times smaller than China’s, has officially recorded more than six times as many COVID-19 deaths and over ten times as many infections.

The CERSC demands a halt to this policy of social murder. We urge education workers, parents, students, and other workers across the country to join our struggle for an elimination strategy by establishing rank-and-file safety committees in their workplaces or neighbourhoods. These committees should call for the closure of schools, universities, colleges, and all nonessential production with full wages paid to workers and families until the pandemic is brought under control. Vast resources must be made available to provide every student with the technology and comfortable environment required to participate in online learning from home. In addition, a huge expansion of social and health care services is required to help children, their families, and education workers cope with the devastating impact the ruling elite’s policy of mass infection and death has had on mental health and wellbeing, and to provide care for the growing numbers stricken by Long COVID.

Critical to mobilizing masses of workers in this fight around the world is the exposure of the criminal response by the ruling elite to the pandemic and the presenting of science-based measures to combat COVID-19. The CERSC therefore unreservedly supports the Global Workers’ Inquest established by the *World Socialist Web Site* and International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The Inquest is laying bare the social, economic, and political interests behind the “profits before life” agenda, providing workers with a platform to make their own experiences known, and explaining the scientific measures necessary to end the pandemic. We appeal to all teachers, support staff, parents, students, and medical professionals to participate in the Inquest and make its findings widely known.



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