

For a “Zero COVID” policy in Canada’s schools!—an appeal from a special-needs educator

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The following statement was issued in French by Quebec special-needs educator Laurent Lafrance on Friday, December 24. To get in touch with the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC), email cersc.csppb@gmail.com.

As a special needs educator, I have experienced first-hand the impact of the Quebec government’s disastrous policies in schools since the COVID-19 pandemic began. But what has happened in the last few days—especially since the emergence of the Omicron variant—is a total fiasco.

By keeping COVID-19-infested schools open for weeks before the holiday break, the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec government of the ex-corporate CEO François Legault has put hundreds of thousands of children and school staff at risk and facilitated the virus’ spread throughout the population.

The last-minute cancellation of the last day of school before the holidays was a desperate measure that only demonstrated the government’s lack of preparedness and neglect of the health of workers and youth.

My experience, which thousands of others have shared, illustrates the authorities’ indifference toward our health.

For the past two weeks, cases of COVID-19 have been spreading like wildfire in schools. Last Sunday, I learned that there were two cases in the classroom where I work most of my days. The class was closed, but no one warned me. Why? Apparently because staff are not considered “at risk” because we wear surgical masks. This is despite the fact scientists have shown that with an airborne virus like SARS-CoV-2, these masks are utterly inadequate. So, I was ordered to be at work the next day, without even being tested.

In the end, I had to stay home the next day. Not because

there were two additional cases reported in my classroom, but because my own children’s school had to close entirely after six teachers and several students tested positive. The union, which has completely abandoned workers in this pandemic and submitted to all the directives of the Legault government, informed me that my forced absence would have to be drawn from my regular sick days and no longer from the “COVID” ones (which have been virtually eliminated).

There is no doubt that transmission in schools has strongly contributed to the Omicron variant’s meteoric rise in the community. While there were about 500 cases daily in early November, Quebec recorded 5,000 new cases last Tuesday, more than 6,300 new infections on Wednesday, 9,300 on Thursday and over 10,000 on Friday. The recording of more than 10,000 daily cases Friday took place almost a week ahead of the estimates from experts that 10,000 daily infections would be recorded by early January.

According to the Quebec Ministry of Education, as of December 17, 1,555 elementary and secondary schools had at least one case of COVID-19, representing more than half of all schools in the province. At that time, there were more than 7,500 active cases in schools, the highest rate since the beginning of the pandemic. Since September, more than 20,000 students and staff have become infected.

Deaths are up, as are hospitalizations, which have jumped 80 percent in three weeks. Many hospitals, already struggling with staffing shortages and patient overload, are planning to cut back on surgeries deemed non-emergency by 50 percent. According to Dr. Gaston De Serres, medical epidemiologist at the Quebec National Institute of Public Health, “the 800 beds reserved for COVID cases could be exceeded.” In the meantime, test

centers are overwhelmed, and public health authorities are unable to trace contacts.

While Quebec has become the epicenter of the new wave of the pandemic in Canada, the situation is similar for school staff and all workers in other provinces, including neighboring Ontario. It is only a matter of time before the entire country, as well as the entire globe, is overwhelmed by the new variant.

This situation was entirely predictable, and it was foreseen by scientists. In September, even before Omicron appeared, Public Health Canada warned that the “peak” of the next wave of the Delta variant would arrive in January. Instead of taking preventive measures, government officials lifted the remaining health measures, allowing the virus to circulate freely in schools and workplaces.

The current crisis is not the result of poor judgment or “bad choices” by policymakers, but the result of the “profits before life” policy adopted by all levels of government—federal and provincial.

In light of the urgency of the situation, the program advanced by the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) has taken on added significance. As we reiterated in our last statement, “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.”

This strategy is scientifically possible, as demonstrated by the case of China, where the pandemic has been controlled for more than a year by rigorous testing, contact tracing, isolation and treatment of cases. The improvised decision in some Canadian provinces to postpone the resumption of face-to-face classes for a week or two after the holidays is only a desperate half-measure that will prove ineffective in the long term.

Like the Biden administration in the US or Boris Johnson’s government in Britain, the ruling class in Quebec and Canada is determined to reopen schools as quickly as possible so that parents can get back to work and generating profits for big business. Their chief priority is not public health, but corporate profit-making. If there are deaths, hospitalized people, Long COVID victims or other dire consequences related to the virus, so be it!

The working class, including teachers and school staff, must reject this policy of “malign neglect” and advance

its own independent solution to the health and social crisis.

Working people must also reject the vulgar attempt to place the blame for the government fiasco on refugees. Last Monday, in a tweet reeking of racism, Labour Minister Jean Boulet urged the Trudeau government to “close the Roxham Road” through which “irregular” migrants fleeing the United States attempt to find refuge in Canada. “We must all mobilize in the face of the rising number of COVID-19 cases [due to] Omicron [sic] so as not to overload our health care system!” he wrote.

An elimination strategy is only possible if workers organize independently of the moribund union apparatuses. Instead of protecting us by fighting to close schools, unions are working hand in hand with the government and big business to keep schools and companies open in the midst of a pandemic. They accept that we work with inadequate PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) and parrot the government’s lies—that schools are “safe” and must be kept open to insure the “mental health” of young people.

The unions have also greenlighted the elimination of limited measures such as ten days of COVID-related absences, which will only discourage workers from getting themselves tested for fear of using up their regular sick days. The president of my union even refused to allow workers to discuss the pandemic at a meeting on contract negotiations.

I call on all my colleagues to organize themselves into rank-and-file committees in their schools and to join the CERSC, which will support them in organizing these independent committees to impose a science-based response to the worst public health crisis in a century. I also urge you to participate fully in the *World Socialist Web Site’s* Global Workers’ Inquest on the pandemic.

Governments are playing with people’s lives in a vicious cycle of lifting coronavirus restrictions, followed by minimal measures when hospitals overflow. Workers can only rely on themselves. The international working class is the most powerful social force and the only one capable of imposing a progressive solution to the COVID-19 pandemic!



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