

Facing public outrage and Omicron catastrophe, Ontario government reluctantly delays school reopening

Dylan Lubao
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In response to an outpouring of public anger over their plans to reopen Ontario's schools for in-class instruction this Wednesday and a health-care catastrophe produced by an Omicron-fueled tsunami of COVID-19 infections, Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservative provincial government have backtracked and delayed the reopening of schools for two weeks.

At a press conference Monday, Premier Doug Ford announced that schools would switch to online learning until January 17. The decision came just four days after the province's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Kieran Moore, insisted that schools would reopen for in-person classes after the Christmas break, with just a two-day delay, on January 5.

Teachers, education staff, students and their families are understandably relieved by the Ford government's decision. But they must be warned. Workers across Canada and internationally have seen this movie before, with governments forced to adopt improvised, last-minute measures to prevent an explosion of social anger and a total collapse of the health care system. At each previous stage of the pandemic, these moves have been followed up by an even more reckless and aggressive reopening drive, which has fuelled a renewed surge of infections and deaths. To prevent a similar outcome this time around, education workers must take up the struggle to build a mass working class-led movement to fight for the elimination of COVID-19 and comprehensive social and financial support for families paid for by the pandemic profiteers.

Despite the brief delay in reopening schools, the government is not instituting a single meaningful safety measure to protect school workers or children from the virus once classes resume on January 17. A minuscule supplement of 3,000 HEPA filters for 4,900 public schools represents less than one additional filter per school. Promised N95 respirators for school workers have been widely reported as delayed, raising serious doubts about whether they will be available in less than two weeks.

Ontario and the rest of Canada are currently in the grip of a winter wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that has been dramatically worsened by the decision of the federal Liberal government and all provincial governments to keep schools and

nonessential workplaces open. Daily infection records have been registered repeatedly over the past week, with Ontario registering over 18,000 new cases on Saturday alone. The official figures are a gross underestimation of the true extent of Omicron's spread due to the stringent restrictions placed on COVID-19 testing.

Underscoring that the crisis is already totally out of control, Ford acknowledged at yesterday's press conference that Ontario's hospitals could be short by "thousands of beds" in the coming weeks. Moore ordered a suspension of all non-urgent medical operations and procedures.

Children are among the most at-risk groups for infection by Omicron, contracting Long COVID, whose debilitating effects may last decades, or even dying from COVID-19. Numbering 550,000, completely unvaccinated children under the age of five attend daycare or kindergarten, and only half of the 1.1 million children aged five to 11 are vaccinated. According to an open letter written by infectious disease epidemiologist Colin Furness, in which he argued for delaying school reopening by two weeks, approximately 2,750 children under 12 could be hospitalized during the current wave of the pandemic if schools reopen without additional safety measures.

Data from biostatistician Ryan Imgrund shows that Ontario's reproductive number, or R_t , sits at 1.50, which means 10 infected people are infecting on average another 15. In densely populated regions such as Toronto and Peel, individuals have a 50 percent chance of being exposed to the virus if they encounter 16 to 18 people over the next month. In other words, children and school workers packed into crowded and poorly ventilated classrooms are virtually guaranteed to get infected when classes resume.

To conceal the extent of the Omicron-fueled surge, the Ford government announced sweeping changes to testing and isolation protocols in the lead-up to the New Year. These changes are aimed at preventing the population from assessing the state of the pandemic, up until the point that hospitals are overrun by COVID-19 admissions, which lag initial infections by weeks.

As of December 30, publicly funded PCR tests are only

available to individuals deemed high-risk. Everyone else experiencing symptoms has been advised to consider themselves infected and self-isolate. Reporting on cases and outbreaks at schools has also been discontinued, with absences replacing positive tests as indicators of COVID-19 spread.

In effect, there will be no organized public testing or contact tracing for the majority of the population. At the same time, private testing clinics have emerged to profit from this disastrous situation, a further concession to the drive to privatize the public health care system.

Moore has also followed the US Centres for Disease Control's profit-driven decision to slash quarantine requirements for fully vaccinated adults and all children aged under 12 to just five days from 10. The CDC's move has no basis in science or public health. Rather it was taken in direct response to appeals from airline executives to loosen quarantine restrictions to allow the airlines to cash in on the highly profitable holiday travel season.

In response to Moore's reduction of the quarantine period, epidemiologist Raywat Deonandan pointed out that infected individuals can transmit the virus for as long as 12 days.

The corporate media has promoted a letter signed by 500 Ontario doctors asking Ford to keep schools open. The letter was signed by less than 4 percent of the province's family doctors and general practitioners, and employs scientifically debunked lies such as there being little to no COVID-19 transmission in schools. Yet it was widely cited by corporate talking heads to argue for the reopening of schools, even as the number of infections rapidly rose to quadruple the previous pandemic high at the height of the third wave last April.

Data from Ontario's public health units has, in fact, consistently shown that schools are, along with other workplaces, a leading source of outbreaks. The letter itself appears to be a dubious exercise, with one WSWS reader informing us that he was able to append the name "Dr. Dolittle" to the signatory list.

The explicitly right-wing arguments invoked to press for in-class instruction have also been promoted by nominally "left" organizations like the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP). As recently as December 17, the NDP, the official opposition in the Ontario Legislature, issued a statement demanding that the Ford government keep schools open.

Similarly, the province's four educators' unions and largest public sector unions issued a joint statement on December 30 insisting that "schools can be made safe," even as Omicron rages, by deploying a handful of health and safety measures. Until Ford's announcement yesterday, the unions were fully prepared to go along with teachers, students and support staff being crammed into overcrowded and ill-prepared school buildings this week. Throughout the pandemic, their principal concern has been to prevent any organized working class opposition to the ruling elite's policy of mass infection and death, and to smother any protests, especially in the form of job

action, when they break out.

Over the past several days, social media has been ablaze with furious and exasperated calls from teachers, school workers and parents to protect people's health and lives by shutting schools for in-person learning.

Twitter user @GillianHeather tweeted, "I am paralyzed with fear. Looking at my children today, I think are these the last few safe days I have with them? Will they make it through? Will I make it through? I will not survive without them! This is what movies are based on. A nightmare we cannot wake up from."

Twitter user @TorontoTeacherX tweeted, "Dear Teachers & ALL Educators, What do you say that we DONT go to work until we have those N95 masks; reduced class size; and policy mandating fully vaccinated students? Pass it on if you agree."

Directly replying to the joint union letter, Twitter user @cukate22 tweeted, "Mobilize your membership! Take action to defend and fight for safe schools. Your inaction is exactly what the cons [Conservatives] are banking on. A tweet does nothing. Take a lesson from history—call a general action—do something!"

The impassioned appeals of school workers, parents and scientists demonstrate that opposition to the capitalist ruling elite's homicidal policy of allowing the virus to run rampant—herd immunity in all but name—is widespread and growing rapidly. The working class has suffered through almost two years of a pandemic that has killed tens of thousands in Canada so that the corporations and super-rich could further swell their profits and wealth, and is searching for a means of putting the lives of working people and their children first.

But anger alone is not enough. The pandemic can only be ended through the application of a science-backed COVID-19 elimination and eradication strategy in Canada and around the world. This must be fought for through the independent political mobilization of the working class, organized independently of and in opposition to the political establishment and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

Educators, support staff and parents who want to fight for such a strategy should join the Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee and build a mass movement for the implementation of a zero COVID-19 strategy. *Contact the committee today at cersc.cspgb@gmail.com to learn more.*



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