How Canada's homicidal let it rip policy paved the way for the catastrophic Omicron wave

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Canada's Omicron-driven wave of COVID-19 infections has swept across the country like a tsunami, with official case numbers now dwarfing anything previously seen. Last week, the 7-day rolling average for new daily cases surged past 40,000 or more than four times its peak number in any of the four earlier waves of the pandemic.

In the first 40 days following the identification of the first-case of Omicron in Canada on Nov. 29 there were more new infections than in all of 2020.

The efforts of the federal and provincial governments and corporate-controlled media to portray the new variant as "mild" are quickly being exposed to be a lie, as the lagging indicators of hospitalizations and deaths rise sharply. The number of patients in hospitals and intensive care units have risen from 1,446 and 451 respectively on December 15, to 4,425 and 665 on January 7. The 7-day average for deaths has quadrupled since mid-December, with 239 new deaths reported just on Wednesday and Thursday of this week.

Despite the increasing tendency among the media and the government to speak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the past tense, the virus is spreading unabated and wreaking havoc on the population. The spike in Omicron cases represents the fifth wave of the pandemic in Canada and the third distinct wave since the introduction of vaccinations and widespread inoculation of the population began in late 2020.

Approximately 15,000 Canadians officially died of COVID-19 in 2021, effectively matching the figure of around 14,700 for 2020. These official death figures undercount the actual toll by a significant margin when excess deaths are considered. The pandemic has now claimed more lives since the vaccine rollout began on December 14, 2020, than in the period prior to it. This horrific toll is the result of the government's abandonment of all non-pharmaceutical interventions based on the lie that vaccines alone could end the pandemic—itself a thin cover for the ruling class' murderous profit before lives agenda.

Elimination vs. mitigation

Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary explained at the *World Socialist Web Site*'s Oct. 24, 2021 webinar, "How to end the pandemic," that all community transmission of COVID-19 could be halted relatively quickly if a comprehensive range of public health measures—including the temporary closure of all schools and non-essential businesses, mass-testing, and systematic contact-tracing—were combined with mass vaccination. She further explained that even prior to the development of vaccines, it would have been possible through the application of well-established public health measures to keep the reproductive number (Rt), which shows how many people on average an infected person passes on the virus onto, below 1 for two to three months and thereby eliminate any new infections.

This Zero-Covid strategy has been successfully implemented, most notably in China, but also until recently in New Zealand and at varying times in Canada's Atlantic provinces and northern territories.

In contrast to this, the majority of Canada's governments, including those in the four most populous provinces (Ontario, Quebec, BC, and Alberta) that are home to more than 85 percent of all Canadians, pursued throughout the pandemic's first four waves a "mitigation" policy, where restrictions were only implemented when health care systems were on the verge of total collapse. These limited measures often had the effect of temporarily bringing Rt below 1, but they were sabotaged by the political establishment long before community transmission was halted because they represented a drain on corporate profits.

With the emergence of Omicron, even the pretense of preventing infections has been dispensed with. The advocates of mitigation have now emerged as open proponents of "herd immunity," arguing that the virus should be allowed to rip through the population on the spurious grounds this will result in widespread long-term immunity and that efforts to suppress and eliminate COVID-19 are "too costly."

The third wave

Canada's second and third waves were severely exacerbated by the emergence of highly communicable variants of concern, first Alpha, then Gamma. The rollout of the vaccines, which still proved efficacious against these mutated versions of the coronavirus, combined with (half-hearted) lockdown measures as well as (belated) closures of in-person schooling, resulted in a sharp decline in new infections in most parts of the country by early summer 2021.

An example of this development is provided by Ontario, Canada's most populous province. The hard-right Ford government, facing public pressure and the impending collapse of the hospitals, issued lockdown orders to bring the third wave under control last spring. The closure of many workplaces and schools brought Rt from a high of 1.23 in early April to as low as 0.70 by the end of May.

Government officials responded by quickly abandoning the limited public health restrictions and pushing through a re-opening program in three stages. The province entered the last stage in July even as Rt exceeded 1 and nearly two-thirds of cases nationwide were being caused

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by the more transmissible Delta variant.

Increased vaccine uptake continued throughout the summer, helping mitigate the spread of the virus. Governments across the country went ahead with the return to in-person schooling in the fall, even though the vast majority of children had yet to be vaccinated. The result was an increase in cases as the burden of the pandemic shifted to kids. By mid-September, schools had become the most important vector of COVID-19 transmission, outpacing even workplaces.

Official government spokespersons at all levels continually downplayed the risk the virus posed to children up until they became eligible for vaccinations, at which point they quickly made an about-face and pointed to the urgent need to get the jab into as many young arms as possible.

More than 250 children across the country have been admitted in to intensive care over the course of the pandemic. Children now make up 21.9 percent of new cases despite constituting only 10.8 percent of the population.

According to Statistics Canada, 35 percent of excess deaths between March 2020 and May 2021 (a period which includes all most all of the first three waves) occurred among those under 65 years of age compared to approximately 7 percent of official COVID deaths attributed to that cohort. While many of these excess fatalities can be attributed to the worsening opioid epidemic, this also indicates the degree to which COVID deaths among younger people are being underreported, a phenomenon that has likely increased with subsequent waves.

The fourth wave

The fourth wave was deadliest of all in the Prairie provinces, where hard-right governments eliminated virtually all public health protocols last summer and vaccination rates were lower than the rest of the country. The Delta-driven fourth wave nearly collapsed Alberta's hospitals in the fall, with several health regions implementing care-rationing measures, known as triage, in September. This disaster was prepared two months earlier, when Alberta Premier Jason Kenney removed all public health measures at the beginning of July and declared the province "open for summer." The government ended masking requirements and contact tracing, with its chief medical officer Dr. Deena Hinshaw declaring that Albertans would have to learn to "live with COVID-19." This criminal indifference to public health led to a crisis, with federal intervention necessary to prevent the outright collapse of the hospital system.

Nationwide ICU occupancy rates during the fourth wave nearly eclipsed the peak of the second wave, despite the fact that almost two-thirds of the population was by that point fully vaccinated. Despite the experiences of the earlier waves, virtually nothing was done by governments to prepare health care systems for the fourth wave.

In Saskatchewan, under the right-wing government of Scott Moe, the repeal of restrictions in the summer led to a sharp rise in cases and hospitalizations in the fourth wave. Hospitalizations peaked in mid-October 2021 at nearly 350. Whereas there had been just once COVID death in the entire month of October 2020, there were 156 in the same month in 2021.

In early July 2021, the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) government in British Columbia ended the state of emergency that had been in place since the pandemic's start in March 2020 and relaxed public safety measures along with it. Mask mandates were rescinded for those who had two vaccine doses. Even as the government recognized that cases were rising, they doubled down on their vaccine-only strategy, while herding children back into schools last September. The BC NDP government has continued to shroud school transmissions in secrecy by refusing to release figures on the numbers involved in school-based outbreaks.

In Québec, Premier François Legault of the Coalition Avenir Québec was among the first to call for an explicit herd immunity policy during the first wave. His government continued to keep children in overcrowded and poorly ventilated schools throughout 2021.

Across the country, the strain on health care systems caused by the virus is degrading the capacity to provide other services. Last September, 395 public health services were cut in Saskatchewan as a result of the province's growing fourth wave. All regions of the country are reporting that severe burnout of staff and staff shortages threaten the provision of basic services. A study published in the spring in the *Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that the delivery of cancer screening tests in Ontario fell by 41 percent from 2019 to 2020. This trend likely repeated itself in 2021, with enormous implications for public health in the future. According to a report issued last month by the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the pandemic resulted in 560,000 fewer surgeries being performed across Canada between March 2020 and June 2021.

Trudeau government responsible for policy of mass infection

The federal Liberal government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has spearheaded the policy of mass infection during the pandemic, which has officially claimed over 31,000 lives to date. Trudeau has strongly supported and promoted the back-to-work/back-to-school drive, while cynically using the constitution's division of powers to leave day-to-day management of the pandemic to the provinces, so as to deflect responsibility for the resulting mass infection and death.

In its September 2020 throne speech, the Trudeau government declared that all future public health restrictions in response to COVID-19 should be "short-term" and at the "local level," a framework that allowed the hard-right provincial governments to let the virus rip. It twice slashed federal aid to workers impacted by the virus, first from the measly sum of $500 per week to $400 in June 2021, and then further to $300 this November. Unveiling the latest cutback, which also included provisions designed to prevent most workers from accessing any financial aid at all, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland declared that the change would be the "final pivot" toward phasing out all government pandemic support entirely.

The federal government stubbornly resisted admitting that COVID-19 is transmitted through tiny airborne particles known as aerosols for almost two years. In November, the government did unveil new masking guidelines after belatedly conceding the airborne nature of the virus. However, no effort was made to inform the public about the necessity of using high-quality N-95 masks or elastomeric respirators, let alone to provide them to all workers or even those on the frontlines.

In November, the federal government even announced that the requirement for negative tests would be phased out for Canadians and permanent residents returning from trips less than 3 days long (the exemption was ultimately abandoned due to the surge in Omicron infections). Demonstrating who really calls the shots, Perrin Beatty, president and CEO of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, commented approvingly that the tests for travelers were "unnecessary and outdated" and that scrapping them would "help Canada's businesses get back to work—and compete."

When Omicron emerged, the Trudeau government sat on its hands while it spread like wildfire. Despite scientists rapidly identifying Omicron's more transmissible and vaccine-evading capabilities, and Canada already experiencing an expected late-November uptick in infections as people

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spent more time indoors with the approach of winter, the Liberal government took no action apart from imposing travel bans targeting southern Africa. Indeed, the prime minster waited a full three weeks before even addressing the public on the emergence of omicron.

Following Trudeau's lead, provincial governments have stubbornly refused to reintroduce even the piecemeal efforts used against Omicron's less transmissible cousins, promising even more morbidity and mortality. The variant's ability to evade vaccine immunity has limited the benefit of fully vaccinating three-quarters of the population. Transmission is through the roof in every province with Rt no lower than 1.36 in Nova Scotia and as high as 1.70 in Saskatchewan by one early-January count. Case numbers have exploded in regions that previously had success in eliminating transmission, such as the Atlantic provinces, the northern territories and First Nations reserves.

Contact tracing has collapsed in most provinces, with Manitoba asking residents who test positive to notify those whom they may have exposed. PCR testing is also being abandoned as provinces push the public to rely on the rapid antigen tests with their corresponding high-false negative rates, or to not test at all.

In Ontario, testing numbers have now approached the figures at the height of the second wave. The increasing test positivity rate, which was 26.9 percent according to the latest figures, points to the degree to which community spread under Omicron has run rampant. The World Health Organization advises that a test positivity rate of more than 5 percent indicates that the virus is spreading out of control.

While claiming that vaccines alone can end the pandemic, Canada's government has bungled the rollout of the third dose. Despite evidence indicating the waning effectiveness of the vaccine against the Delta variant and the threat of another winter surge, administration of booster shots was virtually non-existent outside of the most severely at-risk populations until Omicron produced a mad scramble last month. By December 1, only 3.4 percent of the population had received a third dose. The administering of the pediatric vaccine to children between 5-11 is also increasingly coming under criticism for its slow rollout, with only 39 percent having received a single dose so far. Governments have devoted precious little in resources to accelerate the campaign. In Nova Scotia, the premier has now appealed to Ottawa to send the military to assist with the vaccine rollout. Last week, Canadian Armed Forces personnel were deployed to Quebec to assist with vaccinations there.

All pretenses of a public health policy guided by science are now being dispensed with as the ruling class openly shows its hand by sabotaging attempts to curtail the spread of Omicron. The Retail Council of Canada openly applauded Ontario's recent reckless decision to reduce the period of self-isolation from 10 to 5 days as they struggle with staffing issues caused by COVID-induced absences.

As we begin the third year of the global pandemic, workers in Canada and around the world must resolve to put an end to COVID-19 once and for all. This requires that the social power of the working class be systematically mobilized against the "profits before lives" pandemic policy of the capitalist governments and financial oligarchy and in the fight for the only viable, science-based strategy to end the pandemic and the threat of new waves—a policy of global COVID-19 elimination.

Strict lockdowns covering all nonessential production and in-person learning must be paired with financial support for workers and small businesses as well as high-quality remote education, and the mobilization of society's resources to support a global campaign to eradicate COVID-19.

The ruling class is hoping that pandemic fatigue and its incessant propaganda will deter workers from demanding a scientific response to the pandemic and acquiesce to a situation of "endemicity." In reality "living with the virus" means accepting tens of thousands of more preventable deaths just in Canada, and the ever-present threat of the emergence of new, even more lethal COVID-19 variants.

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