Mass opposition to Monday's return to in-class learning in Ontario and Quebec

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The provincial governments in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia want to force millions of children, teachers, and support staff into classrooms on January 17, before the peak of the Omicron-driven fifth wave of the pandemic has even been reached. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges educators and all workers to resist this *homicidal* decision, which will produce hundreds of thousands of infections and thousands of additional hospitalizations, and deaths. They should prepare mass walkouts and strike action to close schools to in-person learning as part of a global strategy to eliminate COVID-19.

The imminent reopening of schools in Canada's most populous provinces, Ontario and Quebec, follows on from the decision of British Columbia's New Democratic Party and Alberta's United Conservative Party governments to resume in-classroom education last Monday.

The reopening of schools in western Canada has already triggered powerful resistance from educators. Four teachers at Armstrong Elementary School near Vernon, British Columbia, filed unsafe work claims this past week, citing poor classroom conditions and an inadequate supply of masks, forcing the school to close for two days. Teacher absence rates in the BC Interior rose sharply this week, no doubt due to a combination of increased COVID infections and opposition to the reckless reopening of schools.

In Alberta, the Calgary Board of Education reported a shortage of 681 teachers, with 208 remaining unfilled on the first day of class. In Edmonton, 454 teachers and 252 teaching assistants were absent on the first day. While many of these absences are undoubtedly related to COVID-19 infections, many other educators are manifestly voting with their feet.

Public anger among parents and education workers has been at the boiling point in response to the nakedly pro-business justification for sending children back to crowded and poorly ventilated classrooms that are primed for spreading the virus. Governments' total disregard for children, education workers, and their families has struck a raw nerve within the working class, which is rapidly moving into open struggle against these herd immunity policies.

As one Twitter user, Mat Wright (@matpVI), from Nanaimo, British Columbia, tweeted, "This is not Public Health—it's Public Death. Do better… DBH [BC Chief Medical Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry] is setting up generations for the harm of Long COVID."

With the blessing and encouragement of the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government, the provinces are determined to keep schools open in the midst of an unprecedented tsunami of infection and spiralling hospitalization and death counts so that parents are freed from childcare responsibilities and can go to work producing profits for corporate Canada. Government officials and public health officers argue ever more openly that mass infection is a positive good because it will produce "herd immunity." In truth, allowing the virus to spread so rapidly has brought the health care system to the point of collapse, forcing hospitals to ration care at the expense of patients' health and lives, while creating perfect conditions for it to mutate, potentially producing even more virulent variants.

The only conclusion one can draw upon reviewing the school reopening rules is that the provincial governments in Toronto and Quebec City want as many educators and students to get infected as possible. The Ontario government announced earlier this month it will no longer collect or report cases among students and staff. The authorities in Quebec are similarly scaling back case recording, and it remains unclear whether they will continue to report cases in schools publicly. Parents in Ontario and Quebec will no longer be notified of outbreaks in their kids' classes. If an infection is recorded in a school, students in the same class will no longer be sent into quarantine. The Ontario government claimed public health authorities have said a notification will be issued to parents only if over 30 percent of staff or students are absent.

A memo from the Ontario Ministry of Education to school boards cynically declared that in the event of "high rates of expected absenteeism" among staff, schools could "combine classes and assign students to different classes to ensure supervision." In other words, the Ministry is ordering schools to create superspreader events by increasing already large class sizes of 25 or 30 students to 40, 50, or 60 in poorly ventilated rooms.

In Quebec, where the government admits "very large" numbers of school staff will be stricken with COVID-19, schools are being ordered to develop contingency plans to bring

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in parents with absolutely no teacher training "to keep an eye" on classrooms. This proposal alone explodes the lying character of the ruling elite's claims that schools must be kept open to in-person learning for the sake of kids' education and mental health. The dirty truth is that the political establishment and corporate-controlled media view schools as warehouses where students are "supervised" by anyone who can "keep an eye" on them while their parents produce profits at work for big business.

The Coalition Avenir Québec government is also refusing to provide N95 masks to teachers and justifying this with the lying claim that surgical masks are just as good. Teachers may also be ordered to run two classes at once with the support of a parent in the event of staff shortages.

This murderous class war agenda threatens a health care catastrophe far worse than anything yet seen since the pandemic began. If the ruling class has its way, pediatric hospitalizations and deaths will surge, and countless children will suffer from the still poorly understood effects of Long COVID.

Cases of COVID-19 caused by the Omicron variant have been shown to cause more severe illness among children. Due to federal government foot-dragging on approving vaccinations for children, the majority of Canada's children are either unvaccinated or have only received one dose of the vaccine, rendering them more susceptible to the disease.

Even before schools reopen, the situation in Ontario and Quebec is dire.

In Ontario, hospitalizations and ICU admissions sit at 3,814 and 527, respectively, a steep jump from the week prior. The same figures for Quebec are 3,085 and 275. Ontario recorded 46 deaths on January 12, and Quebec 62 deaths on January 11, both highs for the current wave that approach the peaks of previous waves, when a far lower proportion of the population was vaccinated.

Rejecting all calls for remote learning, the trade unions have responded to the homicidal reopening plans by complaining that they were not involved in drafting the rules for keeping schools open. At the same time, they have made clear that they will do absolutely nothing to mobilize their members to protect their health and very lives. This is in keeping with the unions' role throughout the pandemic, which has been to spearhead the back-to-school push by the ruling elite and sabotaging all opposition to dangerous in-person learning by educators and workers. They are once again working to police a return to school, even though this will mean infection, the crippling effects of Long COVID, and death for many of their members.

In Alberta, three public sector unions, including the Alberta Teachers' Association, issued an open letter to hard-right United Conservative Party Premier Jason Kenney this week pleading for him to impose what they called "circuit breaker" measures. These measures are anything but the lockdown needed to halt the virus' spread. The unions explicitly ruled out closing schools, saying children should be sent home for remote learning only as a "last resort" if all else fails. Also exempted were the manufacturing and resource extraction sectors despite numerous outbreaks. Predictably, the Kenney government immediately dismissed this appeal with a wave of its hand.

The working class around the world is entering into open confrontation with the government purveyors of mass illness and death and their trade union lackeys.

A walkout by thousands of Chicago teachers, outraged at being sent into class as the Omicron variant broke daily infection records, led to the closure of schools for several days until the Chicago Teachers Union negotiated a miserable agreement with a Democratic Party city government that sent teachers back to work before they even had a chance to vote on it.

Across the United States, both education workers and students have staged walkouts and sickouts to demonstrate that they will not be led like lambs to slaughter for the sake of corporate profits. A one-day national strike of teachers in France on Thursday was animated by the same sentiment.

Educators in Ontario, Quebec, and across Canada must join this movement, and seek to make it the spearhead of a much broader mobilization of the working class. What the first two years of the pandemic have demonstrated is that the struggle against the virus is a political struggle—a struggle against big business and their political hirelings who in pursuit of their own selfish economic and geopolitical interests seek at every point to block the science-based measures needed to save lives.

Mass walkouts and strikes must be prepared to close all schools to in-person learning as part of a Zero COVID strategy that includes the shutdown of all nonessential production with full wages paid to all workers, and a comprehensive program of public health measures to stamp out transmission of the virus and care for the sick.

We strongly appeal to all teachers wishing to fight for this program to contact the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee at cersc.csppb@gmail.com and make plans to attend its next public meeting on Sunday, January 23 at 1 p.m. Eastern Time.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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