

Toronto caretaker speaks out against school reopenings: “Schools are not safe for in-person learning as long as COVID is not eliminated”

Our reporter
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Ontario schools resumed in-class learning this week in spite of record levels of COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations in Canada’s most populous province. Premier Doug Ford and his hard-right Progressive Conservative government have pressed for the reopening of schools under regulations that virtually guarantee Omicron will run rampant among school staff and students, as have provincial governments from coast-to-coast.

Opposition among education workers and students to this reckless policy is growing. On Monday, students in Winnipeg and other parts of Manitoba walked out of school to protest unsafe conditions. On Wednesday, several teachers in Ontario’s Peel Region launched work refusals over concerns about dangerous working conditions. In a letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Sterling, a Toronto school caretaker, denounced the precipitous reopening of schools and called for a mass, worker-led movement to fight for the implementation of a Zero COVID policy.

Caretakers, teachers, support staff, and students are being forced back into overcrowded and poorly ventilated buildings with virtually no protections. Ontario has taken the criminal decision to slash the isolation period for infected people from 10 to five days, even though Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, admitted Wednesday that Omicron remains infectious for 10 days.

The authorities have also instructed schools to combine classes, as needed, to compensate for a wave of staff absences due to the highly infectious virus. This could result in groups of up to 50 or 60 kids being crammed together in classrooms, creating superspreader events.

Sterling’s letter gives voice to the mounting anger among working people towards this ruling class agenda of mass infection and death.

Let’s begin by debunking a major lie emanating from the politicians, unethical public health officials and their lackeys in the corporate press. The lie is that “Schools are safe.” Fact: COVID is an *airborne pathogen* transmitted through *aerosols*, which are small particles that float in the air like cigarette smoke. These aerosol particles can stay in the air for hours and move around easily in poorly ventilated indoor spaces, like school buildings. Thus, the conclusion from this scientific fact is clear: *schools are not safe for in-person learning* as long as COVID is not eliminated.

As a caretaker for a school board in Toronto, I do not feel safe going to work knowing I am forced to be exposed to COVID everyday. The reason is clear: the criminal capitalist ruling elite and their political representatives want kids in school to allow their parents to be exploited at work to generate profits for the Bay Street sociopaths.

In the evenings when students and teachers have gone home, I know COVID is still in the air because schools are not adequately ventilated, despite the HEPA filters. I wear a KN95 mask during my shifts—from a box I bought myself. The KN95 masks are better than no mask but they are still inadequate protection from COVID aerosols. The school board refuses to provide adequate masks such as the N95, which offer the best protection from inhaling COVID aerosol particles.

The school board is ordering caretakers to do more disinfection of surfaces in schools, which is a complete

waste of time because COVID is *transmitted through the air*. Over the winter break, caretakers did the extra cleaning that normally we don't have time to do, such as cleaning walls, windows, and general maintenance.

During the first two weeks after the Christmas break, caretakers were still forced to go to work in a clean, empty school essentially to baby sit the building. Supply caretakers were kept home without pay.

Our feckless union—CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees)—refuses to fight for the health and safety of its 700,000-plus membership, while it continues to steal workers' money via union dues. CUPE has left us to fend for ourselves. The school boards, the unions and the government—the troika of mass infection and death—have left us education workers no choice but to organize into rank-and-file committees in every school independently and in opposition to the troika. By organizing and joining the committees, education workers will be in a powerful position to force school closures and a shift to online learning as part of a broader Zero COVID strategy until COVID is eliminated. The independent rank-and-file school committees should also join the Cross Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC), whose mission is to connect the struggle of education workers across Canada and internationally against the criminal policies of the capitalist elite. By appealing to our colleagues across Canada and around the world, we will be able to impose rational, science-based policies through a Zero COVID strategy to protect the lives of children, school staff and members of our communities from preventable disease and death.

All power to the workers,

Sterling

We urge everyone to participate in the CERSC's next public meeting on Sunday, January 23, at 1 p.m. Eastern Time. To register to attend, email the CERSC at cersc.csppb@gmail.com or visit our Twitter or Facebook account: https://twitter.com/cersc_csppb and <https://www.facebook.com/cersc.csppb>.



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