

As deaths from Omicron surge across Canada, opposition mounts to in-person learning

Roger Jordan, Jake Silver
21 January 2022

Opposition among educators, school support staff and students to the ruling elite's reckless drive to resume in-person learning continues to grow following Monday's walkout by hundreds of high school students in Winnipeg and across Manitoba. Schools in British Columbia and Ontario have been hit by protests in recent day as teachers invoke their right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions.

Five teachers at Bloor Collegiate Institute in Toronto began a work refusal Wednesday, declaring that they were protesting "poor ventilation and packed corridors with mask-less students during lunchtime."

The protesting teachers made clear that they saw their action as impacting all education staff and students. "This is the situation in high schools all across the province," one protesting teacher told the *TorontoStar*. "We're no different. There are lots of high schools with well over 1,000 students who are eating in cafeterias, hallways and stairwells every day. It's exacerbated by the fact that we have combined schools (in one building) so there's really absolutely no cohorting."

In Peel Region, a drama teacher filed a work refusal Wednesday, citing inadequate mask-wearing and a lack of rapid antigen tests. "I would like to see a genuine assessment of student safety," Mary Fraser-Hamilton told Global News, "...and that means reinstating track-and-trace, reinstating access to PCR testing, freer access to rapid testing."

Teachers at an elementary school in Armstrong in the BC Interior have also initiated a work-refusal, refusing to go to work due to the low level of mask-wearing in the building. Since the school was forced to close on January 14, at least three members of staff have tested

positive for COVID-19.

The work refusal process involves assigning an inspector from the provincial Ministry of Labour or workplace safety board and a trade union representative to examine the issue. The process is rigged in favour of the government and employers, as shown by the fact, noted by the *Star*, that since the pandemic began not a single teacher work-refusal in Ontario has been upheld. The teacher unions—which have enforced the back-to-school policy throughout the pandemic's successive waves—have touted the work-refusal process as a means to isolate teachers opposed to school reopenings, encouraging them to file individual grievances, while blocking all efforts by educators to take collective action through walkouts and strikes.

The growth of anger and opposition is being driven by the ruling elite's utter indifference to a dramatic acceleration of hospitalizations and deaths. Canada's Public Health Agency reported Friday morning that there had been 212 COVID deaths nationwide in the previous 24 hours, the fourth-highest daily total since the pandemic began. In Quebec, during the past week the daily mortality rate has been 7.3 per million inhabitants, more than the 5.9 per million currently being recorded in the US, where over 2,000 people are dying from the virus daily.

Hospitalizations and deaths are so high that the official figures, which were always undercounts, have increasingly lost track with reality. Ontario, for example, reported 75 deaths on Thursday, but noted that the figure included late notifications from the previous 19 days. This begs the question of how many COVID-19 deaths are now going unreported.

Due to shortages of tests and staff and pressure from

governments to promote “learning to live with the virus,” public health authorities have abandoned any attempt to measure the number of new COVID infections, with only the very ill and frontline health care workers who have been in contact with COVID-stricken patients being encouraged to get PCR tests.

Now, governments and their paymasters in the financial elite are similarly seeking ways to conceal the scale of death produced by their “profits before life” policy. In Ontario, public health officials are reportedly considering a proposal to distinguish in future between so-called “causal” and “incidental” COVID-19 deaths.

One of the key objectives of such accounting tricks is to cover up the devastating toll the Omicron variant is having on children. Over the past week alone, there were reports of three child deaths: a 4-year-old girl in Montreal, a 5-year-old in Ontario, and a child aged between 5 and 9 in Calgary. These tragic fatalities give the lie to the claim, incessantly promoted by the corporate media and politicians, that children are not at serious risk from the virus.

The demand to keep schools open under these conditions is nothing short of criminal. The principal concern of the ruling elite, its political parties, and their lackeys in the trade union bureaucracy, is that children must be confined to warehouse-like schools so that their parents are freed from childcare obligations and can go to work generating profits for big business.

Students, teachers and health care professionals have taken to social media to oppose the ruling elite’s lying claim that schools are the “safest place for students,” and that in-person learning is necessary to protect students’ mental health. Dr. Tyler Black, an expert in emergency child and adolescent psychiatry, wrote on Twitter, “It’s about safety... saving lives is the most trauma-supported thing we can do for kids... [N]ow is a world moment to both PROTECT and NOURISH their well-being. There is NO reason to require in-school education to accomplish those things.”

Kaden, a high school student also commented on Twitter, “Stop saying students need to be back in schools for our ‘Mental health’. None of you were advocating for our mental health until it helped push your Anti-lockdown & Anti-vaxx agenda.”

In a subsequent interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Kaden documented the dangerous conditions at his school, which prompted him to criticize the

reopening plans. “My school has a capacity of over 1000 students,” he said. “There’s not enough hall way space to ensure physical distancing between classes. Cases are at an all-time high and we haven’t reached the peak, we know about this because of expert projections. Schools are a high risk setting.”

Asked about the issue of student mental health, Kaden answered, “The best mental health support we can get is to know our environment is safe. The supports that are essential are not the supports we’re getting. The mental health of students is not safe in an unsafe environment.”

Turning to how he thinks the pandemic should be combatted, Kaden commented, “I believe Zero COVID is the best response. It’s the only response. Otherwise there will be a teacher shortage and they’ll have to close anyways, and we won’t receive a quality education. It will create a completely unsustainable system.”

The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) is seeking to build a mass movement of educators, support staff, students, and parents to fight for a global COVID-19 elimination strategy. The CERSC calls for the immediate closure of schools for in-person learning, the shutdown of all nonessential production, and full wages paid to all workers by the pandemic profiteers until infections are reduced to zero. Society must be reorganized to prioritize the protection of human life, not the accumulation of disgusting levels of wealth and profits.

The CERSC will hold its next public meeting on Sunday, January 23, at 1 p.m. Eastern Time. We encourage everyone who is interested to register today to attend by emailing the CERSC at cersc.csppb@gmail.com or visiting our Twitter or Facebook accounts.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact