

Canadian education worker infected by COVID-19 speaks to the Global Workers Inquest: “An indifferent, sociopathic regime equal to any despotic cabal in any era”

Malcolm Fiedler

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The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established by education workers in March 2021 to oppose the mass infection of staff and students in schools due to the criminal policies pursued by governments at all levels. CERSC members are gathering testimony for the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic from supporters and contacts across Canada about the impact of the ruling elite’s homicidal prioritization of corporate profits over the safeguarding of human life on their working conditions and well-being.

Malcolm Fiedler, a leading CERSC member from British Columbia (BC), recently spoke with Tadhg, a former education worker, about his experiences during the pandemic. To tell your story to the Global Workers Inquest, contact us at CERSC.cspbp@gmail.com.

Malcolm Fiedler: Could you please describe where you live and what you do for a living?

Tadhg: I live in Vancouver where, until contracting COVID in September 2020, I worked for the Vancouver School Board (VSB) with students designated as having “special needs.”

MF: Can you tell us about your experience during the first wave in the spring of 2020? How did your employer react? Did you feel that adequate precautions were taken to keep staff safe?

T: When COVID-19 arrived in the spring of 2020, I was initially pleased about the steps taken by health authorities—the lockdown and closure of schools—to mitigate transmission. This state of affairs did not, however, last more than eight weeks before the BC New Democratic Party (NDP) government began a slow yet steady erasure of protective measures in worksites and social environments.

Returning to school in June 2020, it was immediately apparent that the VSB had failed to take adequate steps to protect staff or students, and instead were maintaining a propaganda campaign of half-truths and outright falsehoods.

Beyond placing hand sanitizers here and there, there were no concrete measures taken to ensure a safe working or learning environment: no mask mandate, no enforcement of safety protocols, in short, only a lip-service response. My appeals to the unions, both the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 15, were met with the parroting of government positions and declarations made by BC’s public health officer that were in direct contradiction of World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations.

Disturbed and disheartened by the disinterest and failure of both the employer and unions to ensure safe working conditions and concerned about my personal risk due to age and medical history, I sought an opinion from my physician, who recommended in writing that I should not be in close physical proximity to students or staff as I was at elevated risk of developing complications if exposed to COVID. In August 2020, I submitted this medical documentation to my employer, requesting an accommodation to work remotely until such time as a vaccine became available or whenever the VSB could ensure safe working conditions. My request—with a physician’s written recommendation—was denied within hours with an explanation that “no remote learning was going to be offered.” I submitted a second request several days later, repeating the health risk I was at, which was again quickly denied.

When I requested support from my union, CUPE Local 15, they responded with a reiteration of the employer’s position rather than a defence of my right to safe working conditions. The VSB communicated that, if I was “unfit” to work, then I should seek medical care!

I thus, reluctantly, returned to work September 8, 2020. On the first day, I spoke to no less than 5 teaching staff who were not wearing masks in common areas, such as hallways, as was required. I communicated my concerns to the school principal.

Three days later, I tested positive for COVID. I informed my colleagues I had been in contact with and was subsequently

reprimanded and threatened by the principal over the telephone for warning my co-workers of the possibility they could be infected! I reported the principal's conduct to CUPE Local 15, and was told they would "talk to the principal." No grievance and no proof of such a call was ever given to me.

Over the following weeks, as my physician had warned, I developed serious complications from COVID that left me unable to work. The VSB, which just weeks earlier had declined my request for accommodation, cut off my medical benefits when my sick days were exhausted! So, I was denied a medically justified request for accommodation. Then, when incapacitated by the very malaise I had asked to be spared exposure to, I was left too sick to work and without medical benefits. Again I sought assistance from CUPE Local 15, even contacting the president, Warren Williams, directly, all to no avail. Their responses were indistinguishable from the employer, virtual word-for-word parroting. Not only did CUPE Local 15 fail their stated mandate of ensuring safe working conditions for members, they then failed to represent me or pay for my medical benefits, suggesting only that I should "see about CERB." [Canada Emergency Response Benefit: a \$2,000 per month payment made by the federal government to workers unable to work during the early stages of the pandemic.]

That was 20 months ago. I have never returned to work, being left with permanent lung damage that leaves me breathless going up stairs or walking in the street. Undoubtedly this is leading to an abbreviated life expectancy.

MF: What impact did the BC government's denial of the airborne transmission of COVID-19 have on your workplace? Were you and your colleagues made aware of the need to wear high-quality masks to prevent infection by aerosols, which are small particles that can linger in the air like smoke?

T: The BC NDP's coordinated denial of airborne transmission had a profoundly negative impact on both working conditions and worker morale in my school. As educators, we strive to foster critical thinking, encouraging students to question rather than blindly accept authoritarian statements at face value. Even students as young as 13 were cognizant that the position of John Horgan's government on aerosol transmission was contradicting WHO guidelines, leaving students and staff struggling with cognitive dissonance in attempts to reconcile BC's outlier status. This was especially true for those international students who had exposure to other, more scientifically consistent approaches.

For staff, morale sunk to an all-time low. They were betrayed by the government, media and their own politically compromised unions, isolated and forgotten, exposed to viral infection on a daily, hourly basis, and threatened by administrators merely for requesting enforcement of the few mandated health protocols. School Board communications consistently downplayed the functional value of masks, preferring instead to insist upon farcical and theatrical sanitization exercises and obsessive repetition on the

eradication of "droplets."

MF: What's your opinion of the political response to the pandemic, both at a provincial level, with the BC NDP, and at the federal level, with Trudeau's Liberals?

T: The measures taken by federal and provincial health authorities have been insufficient, failing to meet WHO criteria. Rather than adopt significant protocols to mitigate transmission, Premier Horgan, Health Minister Adrian Dix, Education Minister Jennifer Whiteside and the entire BC NDP Caucus have hidden and manipulated data, downplaying the risk to people, and engaged in messaging outright lies via the BC Centre for Disease Control and public health officer Bonnie Henry. Their actions—criminal negligence in both word and deed—have been, and remain, tailored to ensure economic health over the personal health and well-being of citizens. This includes the sacrifice of children's health, with many children being too young for any possible respite offered by vaccination.

It is not enough for Horgan, Dix and Henry to be removed from the offices they hold, their actions and communications must be investigated. But this is difficult to do when the BC NDP has erected a wall of silence surrounding public access via freedom of information requests. Charges of criminal negligence causing death should, in all likelihood, be laid. The spectacle of a laughing premier, health minister or public health officer in the midst of a lethal pandemic that has killed more than 3,000 BC citizens as they continue to allow transmission via lax measures and inadequate protocols is that of an indifferent, sociopathic regime equal to any despotic cabal in any era. If Horgan, Dix and Henry are not moved by 3,000 plus deaths, they will not suddenly be moved by 100,000 dead souls.

I have filed a complaint with the BC Human Rights Tribunal against my employer, the VSB, for failing to take steps to ensure my health and safety in response to a written request for accommodation. The complaint is pending.



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