

“We were asking people to come to restaurants and risk community health, just to ensure businesses stayed open”

Canadian restaurant worker speaks to the Global Workers Inquest

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Restaurant workers have suffered severely during the more than two years since the COVID-19 pandemic erupted. Often paid low wages and with few employment protections, many workers were left to fend for themselves on meagre government assistance programs when lockdowns were imposed. When governments of all stripes across Canada moved to recklessly reopen the economy amid a still raging pandemic, hospitality workers were given the choice of returning to poorly ventilated, COVID-stricken workplaces or being plunged into poverty.

Robin, a hospitality employee from Vancouver, recently spoke to the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic about dangerous working conditions in the hospitality sector and his experience with being infected by COVID-19 twice.

Like many in his industry, Robin began his career in the back of a restaurant washing dishes. He was drawn to the profession by values of community sustainability. By the time the pandemic hit, he had worked his way up to a position as a restaurant manager. “I started in the industry at 18, and became a food and water advocate by the time I was 20-21, in the farm to table movement. I believed,” he continued, “in the ethos of community development and developing sustainable cuisine.”

Robin spoke about the pandemic’s initial impact and the lack of response from his employer. “When the pandemic hit in 2020, of course we had to shut down,” he explained. “I individually called all of my staff to let them know we’d be in touch. Although the restaurant’s owners have a reputation for being very ethical, there wasn’t a lot of communication to the rest of the staff from them when we did shut down.”

Robin recalled what it was like for hospitality workers

returning to work in the late spring of 2020, after the pandemic’s first wave. “When we reopened, even while restaurants in Ontario and Quebec did not, it made many people wonder why. Is there some sort of special jurisdiction in British Columbia? By late July, early August,” he observed, “there were multiple scientific articles by eminent aerosol specialists around the world suggesting that restaurants were in fact not safe. There was a scientific consensus around that.”

“During that period of time, everything I believed in was undermined,” Robin explained. “About community and respect to the guests, and for the folks you work with, you know, your team. I felt that by asking people to come to work, and potentially risk their own health, and their families’ health and our community, I just felt that was antithetical to what I believed we did. That’s not hospitality. It was the opposite of hospitality. We were asking people to come to restaurants and risk the rest of the community, really just to ensure businesses stayed open.”

Upset by the lack of safety precautions at his workplace and the prioritizing of profit over health and lives, Robin left his job and enrolled for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), something that he described as a poverty wage. “It was about a third of what I was used to making a month,” he said. “Living in Vancouver, one of the most expensive cities in the world, it was survivable. But in terms of the quality of life that I was used to, it was not even in the same realm.”

When forced to return to the restaurant business in the fall of 2021, he felt that the COVID-19 mitigations in place “were all a bit of theater.” At the time, the province was being battered by the Delta variant, vaccine efficacy against infection was beginning to wane, and the BC New

Democratic Party (NDP) government and its public health officials continued to stubbornly refuse to admit that the virus was primarily spread through aerosols, tiny particles that can float in the air for hours.

Of the province's vaccine passport system and its use by restaurants, Robin said, "It didn't mitigate the spread. If anything, it just created a false sense of security. Of course, the vaccines have mitigated death and severe illness, but in terms of limiting spread, it hasn't done much."

Turning to the mask mandate, Robin said, "In terms of how it was in place, it was preposterous. You take your mask off when you sit at the table. Then when you get up and go to the washroom you have to put it back on. But that does nothing to stop aerosol spread.

"There were two things about mask mandates in the restaurant workspace: one was that the guests were sitting at their tables, talking and eating, and not wearing a mask for 90 percent of the time they were in the restaurant. The second thing was that we wore supplied surgical masks at the workplace. But if you're not wearing an N95 mask and having to work a seven-eight-hour shift in a confined area with hundreds of people coming and going, it was more or less pointless, to be honest."

The government's policy of mass infection has resulted in Robin getting infected with COVID-19 twice. Speaking on his infections, Robin commented, "When Omicron hit, it was kind of laughable how they were trying to mitigate the spread. It was just harming employees, so I quit, but at the time, I started seeing somebody who continued to work there and I got COVID from her. That was earlier in the year.

"Both times I got COVID it was in essence because workplaces did not have any meaningful protocols in place. This last time was much more egregious because there was no communication from management about employees that had actually gotten COVID.

"When I had COVID, earlier this year in February, it was much more intense, the symptoms were more significant. This time around it's been kind of odd. I got a small bout of it and thought I was all right, because I didn't have very many symptoms. But then some symptoms have returned in the last three or four days, so I'm feeling very fatigued now. All in all my energy levels are really low."

Throughout the pandemic, the BC NDP government has attempted to foster an aura of celebrity, even hero worship, around the province's public health officer, Bonnie Henry. She has been lionized by a fawning corporate

media and awarded various honorary university degrees and governmental titles and awards, such as the Order of BC. Robin has drawn important conclusions about the social forces shaping the province's pandemic response. "There are media monopolies in Canada and they are going to report without much scrutiny or speculation what Bonnie Henry says, because what she has been saying is in line with the interests of capital. That's clearly what's been happening," he stated.

Robin expressed his deep frustration with the gaslighting and manipulation that the province has used to justify its profits-over-life pandemic response. He especially takes exception to the BC NDP's claim that their lack of COVID mitigation measures has benefited the most marginalized and disadvantaged in society. "It's frankly criminal," he said. "I don't understand how you can be a person who works within health care and then doesn't actually give any commentary on the institutional power and elements of society that create vulnerability for large swathes of the population. They double down on the institutional framework, instead of acknowledging that the pandemic has given us impetus to make radical changes. Them doing nothing about that has cost people's lives. It's killed people."

Robin was asked to comment on a zero-COVID policy, which will only be implemented through the mobilization of the working class across Canada and internationally to fight for science-based policies to suppress COVID-19 on a global scale. "I completely agree," he replied. "COVID Zero is the only real way out of this pandemic. It will not end without a coupling of international vaccination and mitigation of the spread of the virus, along with support for the poor and working class internationally."



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