

The devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canada's young people

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Never in the modern history of Canada have the country's children and youth been sacrificed on such a scale as the past two and a half years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through seven waves and multiple variants of the virus, at least half of Canada's roughly 13 million young people aged 29 and under have been afflicted with COVID-19.

The pandemic's deadly trajectory has been orchestrated by the capitalist ruling class, its government representatives at the federal, provincial and territorial levels, and the leadership of the trade unions. Declaring that the population had to learn to "live with the virus," capitalist governments have forced public schools to remain open with virtually no protections in place for one simple reason: to ensure parents could go to work and generate profits for the country's banks and corporations.

With schools set to return from summer break in the coming weeks, the political establishment is once again preparing to subject children and their families to a policy of mass infection and death. Ontario's Progressive Conservative government announced earlier this week that there will not even be a mask mandate in the province's schools, let alone any more substantial measures to curb COVID's spread.

These mass infection policies were opposed by young people and workers over the past year, both in Canada and around the world. It is high time for workers and young people to draw the political lessons of these struggles in order to launch a political fight to put an end to wave after wave of infection by eliminating COVID-19 globally.

Lisa Diaz, a parent in the United Kingdom, organized a school strike on October 1, 2021, urging parents to keep their children home from school to protest governments' forced infection of children around the world. Many parents in Canada took up her call and the hashtag #SchoolStrike2021 became one of the highest-trending on Twitter.

In Ontario, biostatistician and educator Ryan Imgrund called for a protest on October 14, 2021 against the education unions' refusal to permit education workers to wear N95 respirators in COVID-infested schools. Illustrating the union leadership's hostility to the rank-and-file membership, Imgrund was publicly censured by his union, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association. Other unions, like the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, warned their members that

participating in the protest would be grounds for dismissal.

The emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant in November and its rapid spread throughout the world prompted governments, including in Canada, to declare it "mild." No additional measures were taken to protect the population and families were encouraged to gather over the holiday break. Except for brief delays, schools were reopened after the holidays in the midst of record infection rates.

Across the world, both students and education workers fought back. Throughout Europe, thousands of students marched at the beginning of January in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Greece, demanding that schools remain remote and that governments do more to protect the population from the disease. Teachers in France went on a nationwide strike to protest the mass infection policies of the widely-reviled government of President Emmanuel Macron.

Thousands of students and education workers protested across the United States. High school students in Chicago demanded that the Democratic Party-led city administration step down for its role in spreading the virus. Chicago teachers went on strike to resist the reopening of schools. Here too, the pro-capitalist orientation of the Chicago Teachers Union bureaucracy revealed itself, as it colluded with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to reopen schools in defiance of the wishes of rank-and-file teachers and students.

Hundreds of students across Canada protested as well. At Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, dozens of students walked out in January, backed by over 4,600 who signed a petition urging the university administration to reverse its reopening plan. At McGill University in Montreal, hundreds of students went on strike to demand that the administration provide remote learning options, which the administration relented to after a public backlash. Hundreds of high school students from 90 schools in Manitoba also walked out of class to demand safer classrooms.

Despite the militancy and courage of the students and education workers, government pandemic policy only worsened. The dismissal and sabotage of these protests by the union bureaucracies politically disarmed young people and the broader working class, enabling provincial governments to dismantle mass testing capacity in January.

At its height, the fifth wave put almost 11,000 Canadians in hospital simultaneously, which is still the highest number on record. Between mid-December, when the fifth wave began, and its end in mid-March, over 7,600 people were killed, making it the third-deadliest wave even though the majority of the population had received at least two doses of the vaccine.

The far-right Freedom Convoy, incited and built up by the official Conservative Party opposition, occupied Ottawa's Parliament Hill in February and demanded the end of all COVID-19 public health measures. Provincial governments of all political stripes promptly complied, while the federal liberal government green-lighted the elimination of virtually all remaining public health measures.

A sixth wave of the pandemic, driven by the BA.2 Omicron subvariant, subsequently ripped its way through completely defenceless schools. The sixth wave established a startling new baseline for infections and hospitalizations even during the warmer spring and summer months. At the low point of the sixth wave in mid-June of this year, over 3,000 Canadians were hospitalized with COVID-19, triple the number during the same periods in 2021 and 2020. Deaths, peaking at a seven-day rolling average of 82 on May 21, eclipsed the third and fourth waves.

The BC Centres for Disease Control found in March that 60 percent of children had tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies. Quebec's Coalition Avenir Quebec government nonchalantly announced that at least one-third of the province's 1.5 million children contracted COVID-19 during last winter's fifth wave. Children's hospitals have been pushed to the breaking point as COVID-19 and other infectious diseases have come roaring back, courtesy of governments dismantling of public health measures that previously kept them at bay.

Perhaps the most accurate and damning figures come from researcher Dr. Tara Moriarty at the University of Toronto, because she has regularly exposed vast government undercounts of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. Dr. Moriarty estimates that 57 percent of the Canadian population had been infected with the Omicron variant by April 5, 2022. Because schools are major drivers of viral transmission, it can be reasonably inferred that at least half of all children have been infected with Omicron, in addition to those infected with earlier variants.

According to official figures, 52 youth under the age of 20 have died of COVID-19 and 133 young adults between 20 and 29 have succumbed to the disease. Millions have been infected and an unknown number have been hospitalized with mild to severe symptoms. Tens of thousands of young people have lost parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts and friends—many of whom would be alive today had they not been forced to “live with COVID-19.”

Demonstrating the immense toll the pandemic has taken on the mental health of young people, a University of Calgary

study of 80,000 youth across the globe discovered that rates of anxiety and depression among young people have doubled since the pandemic began in 2020.

A growing body of evidence shows that potentially hundreds of thousands of young people across Canada are suffering from the effects of Post-Acute COVID-19 Syndrome, also known as Long Covid. Given that an estimated 10 to 30 percent of all those infected go on to develop this life-altering chronic illness, an entire generation of young people has been deprived of their childhood and health by capitalist government policy.

These policies hearken back to an earlier historical period where children's lives were cut short by forcing them to work in factories and mines. The great 19th century socialist Friedrich Engels coined a term for these kinds of brutal conditions: “social murder.” They are a part of a decades-long social counterrevolution by the capitalist ruling class against the entire working class, which includes millions of working class youth.

The growing struggles of the international working class for social equality also point the way forward for young people. The youth must turn to the working class and link their struggles, because the fight for public education and a future free from disease is part of the fight for social equality.

What is required is a political fight by the entire working class against a whole socioeconomic system, capitalism, that has nothing progressive to offer the world's population. Young people must take up the struggle for socialism, which will place political decision-making power into the hands of the vast majority of society, not the wealthy few. Societal decisions will then be oriented to serving social need, not private profit.

To take up the struggle for socialism, young people should establish chapters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at their schools, colleges, and universities across Canada. To learn more about the IYSSE, email iysseincanada@gmail.com.



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