

No to another school year of mass infection and death! Mobilize Canada's education workers to fight for the global elimination of COVID-19!

Cross-Canada Education Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee
29 September 2022

The initial weeks of the 2022-23 school year have demonstrated that the ruling elite's incessant claims that the pandemic is over are a pack of lies. If education workers, students and parents are to avoid suffering through yet another year of mass infection and death, they must take up the struggle for COVID-19 elimination advanced by the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC).

Governments in every province, from John Horgan's New Democrats in British Columbia to the hard-right Ford Tories in Ontario, reopened schools at the beginning of this month after dismantling all remaining COVID public health measures. Students and staff members no longer even have to isolate if they are infected, guaranteeing the rapid transmission of the deadly virus through schools and its further spread into the community. Mask mandates, cohorting, and mass testing have all been unceremoniously abandoned.

The CERSC has already received reports from supporters in Quebec and northern Ontario of large numbers of infections among students and staff in schools, which are further exacerbating the long-standing staff shortages due to decades of vicious austerity supported by all governments. But the extent of COVID infection is concealed behind a wall of secrecy due to the fact that testing and contact tracing systems were scrapped by governments almost a year ago. The best estimate of the extent of transmission was provided by infectious disease specialist Dr. Tara Moriarty, who projected that as of September 16, close to 100,000 Canadians were being newly infected by COVID every day. Infection levels are higher this fall than they were at the same time in the previous two pandemic years. Around 50 people continue to die every day from COVID, a figure that is sure to rise as the weather gets colder.

This situation is the disastrous outcome of the ruling establishment's embrace of the pandemic policy advocated by the Conservative Party-promoted, far-right "Freedom" Convoy, which can be summed up as "let it rip."

Since the virus first emerged in 2020, the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government has overseen a "profits before life" strategy that included bailing out the banks and big business to the

tune of \$650 billion, and forcing workers and students back to work and school under totally unsafe conditions. They were supported in this reckless course by all provincial governments, regardless of their political stripe, and the trade unions, which smothered all opposition from education workers and other sections of the working class.

To the extent that some mitigation measures, such as mask mandates and contact tracing, remained in place during the early stages of the pandemic, this was due above all to the mass support of working people for suppressing COVID transmission and saving lives. To intimidate and silence this strong popular support, a faction of the ruling elite, led by the likes of Pierre Poilievre, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and Saskatchewan's Scott Moe, incited and built up the Convoy, whose instigators advocated the establishment of a dictatorship to abolish all COVID public health measures.

Whilst Trudeau postured as a defender of "democracy," his government, with the full support of its NDP and trade union allies, enforced the pandemic program of the most rapacious sections of big business and the far right. Within days of the Convoy's dispersal, the Liberal government green-lighted the rapid lifting of virtually every anti-COVID measure even as the country was ravaged by a sixth wave of COVID. And this week, the last remnants of any anti-COVID mitigation measures were done away with by Trudeau, as Ottawa lifted all vaccination and test requirements for entering Canada.

The ruling elite's determination to force workers to accept "forever COVID" is bound up with their insistence that the flow of corporate profits cannot stop for one moment, even if it requires the sacrifice of thousands of lives and that hundreds of thousands more be left to suffer the debilitating impacts of Long Covid. This strategy of subordinating the health and very lives of working people to the business interests of the corporate elite goes hand in hand with an intensified onslaught on the wages, benefits and working conditions of teachers, education assistants, support staff, bus drivers and school administrative workers across the country.

In Ontario, British Columbia and other provinces, provincial governments are collaborating closely with the education unions to

ram through rotten sellout contracts that include below-inflation wage “increases” as they maintain decades of budget cuts for the education sector. While Ontario Premier Doug Ford claims that a meagre 2 percent wage “increase” is all he can offer to education support workers earning less than \$40,000 a year, Canada’s federal Liberal government has, with NDP support, spent over \$600 million in waging war against Russia since February, and is pledged to waste a staggering \$40 billion on upgrading the bilateral NORAD continental defence system over the next 20 years, and tens of billions more on purchasing new fleets of warships and warplanes.

Having endured two-and-a-half years of a pandemic that has killed in excess of 45,000 people in Canada—fully a third of them in the first nine months of 2022—education workers must draw the political lessons of this bitter experience. First and foremost, this means recognizing that the trade unions are not vehicles for advancing a fight to protect workers from COVID infection, defend public education or secure improvements in wages and conditions. Rather, they are the principal obstacles to waging such a struggle. Education workers must break politically and organizationally from the unions, and the rigged “collective bargaining” system they defend, by establishing rank-and-file committees in every school, neighbourhood and region.

Workers must take the struggle into their own hands because the unions are hostile to the interests of working people. They prioritize their corporatist ties with the government and big business, which is why they all supported the criminal back-to-school campaign. Citing their defence of “collective agreements,” the teacher unions in Ontario denounced any attempt to take collective action in opposition to the government’s homicidal policies as “illegal.” Teachers who wore their own N95s to work instead of the useless medical masks issued by the government were threatened by the union bureaucracy with dismissal. During the ongoing contract talks in Ontario and British Columbia, not a single union has raised a demand related to protecting workers from COVID.

The CERSC applauds the establishment of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC). This is a pivotal first step in the struggle by education workers to break out of the NDP/Liberal/union straitjacket. Unshackled from the restraints of the contracts and pro-big business collective bargaining system that the union bureaucrats constantly invoke to smother any attempts at independent struggle, the OEWRFC is an organ of rank-and-file power. It provides education workers the political space to share experiences, discuss strategy, formulate their demands and decide democratically how to fight for them.

The second lesson that must be drawn is that COVID must be eliminated. Experience has demonstrated that lies of the ruling elite that the pandemic is “over” and that everyone must learn to “live with the virus” result either in death or constantly being exposed to the risk of long-term debilitation and disability. All the more so, as “forever COVID” creates the optimum conditions for viral evolution and the emergence of ever more virulent, vaccine-resistant strains of COVID.

Education workers must fight to appropriate the most advanced scientific understanding of the pandemic, which must serve as the

basis for the implementation of key public health measures, including N95 masks for all, air filtration in every classroom, and the reintroduction of contact tracing and quarantine rules. The experience of China, whose death toll of just over 5,000 is roughly one-ninth that of Canada’s despite China having a population more than 40 times larger than Canada, demonstrates that these policies, paired with targeted lockdowns, can suppress COVID-19 once and for all.

The third key lesson following directly from the second is that the elimination of COVID is viable only through an internationally coordinated effort based on a global strategy. Education workers across Canada must mobilize in support of a global program of COVID elimination, which can only be fought for through the unification of the working class around the world.

This is why the CERSC is affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which was established to unify workers fighting reckless pandemic policies, attacks on wages and conditions, and the devastating increase in the cost of living. The IWA-RFC exists to provide workers with the political leadership and organizational framework to wage a joint counter-offensive in every country for COVID elimination, an end to capitalist austerity, and improvements to wages, workplace conditions and benefits. Under conditions of a growing threat of nuclear war due to the imperialist powers’ reckless escalation of their proxy war with Russia, this fight must be connected to the building of a global anti-war movement in the working class. This international anti-war movement must demand that society’s vast resources be redirected towards fighting COVID and providing decent-paying, secure jobs for all, instead of funding death and destruction to advance the predatory interests of imperialism.

The CERSC pledges in the coming weeks and months to intensify its struggle to clarify these issues among education workers and to mobilize the working class as an independent political force. We urge everyone wishing to support this struggle to contact us today at **ceresc.sppb@gmail.com** or follow our Twitter account.



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