

The current policy of ‘living with the virus’ is a recipe for disaster”:

Canadian education workers call for Zero COVID as deadly eighth wave gathers pace

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The following article, submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by two education workers, warns of the disastrous impact that Canada’s eighth wave of COVID-19 is already having in schools. Aviva is a Toronto teacher and Laurent is an education assistant in the Montreal area. In the face of the disastrous and homicidal pandemic response of the governments of Doug Ford in Ontario and François Legault in Quebec, and the complicity of their union leaderships in the imposition of the “live with the virus” policy, both Aviva and Laurent are fighting to build the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC). In contrast to the nationalism and provincialism promoted by Canada’s ruling elites and their allies in the education union bureaucracies, the experiences related by these workers demonstrate that education workers across Canada face the same workplace realities and the same fundamental political issues, including the pro-big business policies that promote the mass infection of school workers and students with the deadly coronavirus.

For more information about the CERSC, email ceresc.csppb@gmail.com or follow its account on Twitter.

Education workers entered the fall season under the threat of an 8th surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, with no protection from the deadly and debilitating new variants. Many experts say this wave has now already begun. Hospitalizations are on the rise in several Canadian provinces, including Quebec and Ontario, where the right-wing governments of former businessmen and multi-millionaires François Legault and Doug Ford continue to allow the virus to circulate freely in schools and in the community.

Governments and public health officers are forced to admit that with an increase of close contact in enclosed spaces as the cold season arrives, a new surge in infections is inevitable. Wastewater analysis, one of the last tools still available to predict relative levels of infection, indicates that

a significant increase in cases is underway. Yet Ford and Legault, loyal servants of the financial and business elite, are responding by eliminating all health measures to keep workers on the job so that big business can accumulate its profits.

Obviously, we do not know the exact rate of infection as governments have abandoned any form of serious data collection on COVID-19. Every day we see students suddenly leaving school because they have symptoms, but there is no way of knowing if it’s due to COVID because there is no systematic testing. In Ontario, we can’t even write “COVID” as the cause of students’ absence. In Quebec, the government had to reveal to the press that almost 4,000 students were absent from school due to COVID as of October 12, a number much higher than last June (less than 3,000).

Meanwhile, many pandemic experts such as Ryan Gregory, professor of evolutionary biology in the Department of Integrative Biology at the University of Guelph, warn that the next wave poses a serious risk to public health as the new Omicron sub-variants currently present in Canada, such as BA.4.6, BA.2.75 and BQ.1, are believed to have the ability to evade immunity acquired through prior infection or vaccination.

The current policy of “living with the virus” is a recipe for disaster, with many hospitals and emergency rooms across the country already at breaking point. For the ruling class, however, as long as hospitals and morgues have rooms for the sick and the dead, the capitalist economy must run at full speed, at all costs.

In schools, there are no basic measures to improve ventilation like HEPA filters or Corsi-Rosenthal boxes. In Quebec, classrooms are equipped with CO2 readers, but they are useless because there are no remedial measures if levels prove elevated. While scientists recommend a level of 700-800 particles per million (ppm) of CO2, the government tolerates a level of 1,500! In reality, the level can easily

exceed 2000 ppm after an hour of class without windows open in our small, crowded and poorly ventilated classrooms.

Governments and public health departments are hiding the extent of the current infection level and the real health risks of SARS-CoV-2 infection and/or reinfection for all individuals. There are currently no mitigation measures in place, including masks. There is no vaccination mandate for children and, in the context of an anti-science campaign nourished not only by far-right anti-vaxx forces but by the governments themselves, the booster-shot percentages among both children and adults are very low.

To add insult to injury, the Ford and Legault governments have eliminated the five-day isolation requirement when a person tests positive for COVID-19. This measure was already extremely limited considering that most people are still contagious after day 5, but now infected people—whether they are aware of it or not because they are asymptomatic—will transmit the virus exponentially. As governments and school boards have eliminated the 5-days of extra leave introduced to promote isolation during a COVID infection, many workers will be forced to return to work while contagious for fear of losing their regular leave and income.

All of this is psychologically painful for those who take the safety of workers and students seriously and who continue to enforce minimal sanitary measures such as masking. We feel ostracized, as we are seen as “paranoid.”

The responsibility for this situation—including the emergence of new variants that fuel the endless waves—lies entirely with bourgeois governments around the world, including in Canada, which have forced the reopening of schools and workplaces and abandoned all protective measures against COVID-19. These homicidal policies were fully endorsed by the education trade unions, which blocked us from protesting collectively against the sacrifice of human life on the altar of private profit.

Having voluntarily submitted to the reactionary demands of the fascistic “Freedom Convoy” that paralyzed downtown Ottawa in February 2022, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the provincial governments subsequently eliminated all anti-COVID protections in schools and the community. They have no intention of reinstating life-saving measures, as these are seen by big business as a brake on their profit accumulation.

The result is catastrophic. In Canada, 46,000 people have needlessly died from COVID-19, more than half of them in Quebec and Ontario. According to a recent study, 15 percent of Canadians have suffered or are suffering from Long COVID, which would represent a conservative figure of 1.4 million people. This is one of the factors in the labour

shortage that plagues the education and health sectors.

Our governments could never have pursued such a policy without the crass complicity of the union apparatuses, which have suppressed the class struggle in every province and acted as the ruling class’s policemen by sending us back to work without adequate protection against the virus.

Education workers in Ontario and Quebec are in direct confrontation with Ford and Legault as their contracts have either already expired or will do so in the coming months. In Ontario, 55,000 support staff voted 96.5 percent to strike if their demand for wage increases is not met. But the Ontario School Board Council of Unions, affiliated with CUPE, has no intention of leading the fight required to defeat Ford, whose government has vowed to criminalize any strike even before it begins. Showing how out of touch the union bureaucrats are with the rank-and-file, they have not raised a single demand related to COVID protection in bargaining.

There is a lot of dissatisfaction among workers with the union bureaucracy, whether it be OSSTF, CSQ, CUPE or others. We are tired of their repeated betrayals at every contract struggle and their refusal to protect us in the face of the pandemic.

It is high time that we workers take our struggles out of the hands of the bureaucratic union apparatuses, so that we can advance demands and a fighting program that meet our needs and those of our students. The only solution is to organize independently of the pro-capitalist unions through education workers’ rank-and-file committees linked in a network across Canada. The CERSC was created in 2021 for this purpose. We want to extend our fight in defense of public education, for high-quality jobs and increased protection from the pandemic to other sections of the working class across Canada and internationally. That is why we are fighting with our class brothers and sisters in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Education workers of all sectors and provinces, join us!

For more information on how to join the CERSC, email cersc.csppb@gmail.com or fill out the form below, and the WSWs will put you in touch with the committee.



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