

Education workers across Canada must link the fight for Zero COVID to the growing working-class challenge to capitalist austerity and imperialist war

**Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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As we approach the third anniversary of the detection of COVID-19 in the Chinese city of Wuhan, workers across the world are confronting a third winter of mass infection, collapsing health care systems, and mass death. In Canada and many other countries, a conflux of respiratory viruses—primarily influenza, RSV and COVID-19—are causing overcrowding of already overstretched and chronically understaffed hospitals. This is the product of both the ruling elite's criminal "forever COVID" policy, which has seen the abandonment of all efforts to combat COVID's spread, and four decades of austerity policies that have starved budgets for public services.

The crisis facing children's hospitals is especially acute. In Ontario, the emergency room at Toronto's Sick Kids Hospital is operating at 120 percent. Last week, a four-year-old boy from Simcoe had to be flown 350 kilometres to Kingston, Ontario for treatment, due to overcapacity. Doctors and emergency physicians are warning that the health care system is overwhelmed, placing patients' health and lives at grave risk, while leading epidemiologists and immunologists are desperately calling on governments to reintroduce protective measures against COVID, including masks in schools. The French-language daily *La Presse* reported as early as November 23 that in Quebec, 150,000 students, or 12 percent of the total, were absent from school, more than at the peak of the Omicron wave. One in four children hospitalized with a respiratory virus is fighting more than one infection.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, schools are serving as a key vector for the transmission of COVID, RSV, and the flu. The dilapidated and poorly ventilated buildings, overcrowded classrooms, and overworked staff create the perfect conditions for infections to flourish. Teachers, EAs, custodians, secretaries and all school personnel are currently surrounded by viruses that affect their general health. COVID is a debilitating virus that can cause death or long-term damage to anyone's cardiovascular system, brain or virtually any other organ of the body. Moreover, its ongoing mass transmission in Canada and around the world is providing the virus with optimum conditions to mutate into a still more virulent or immune-evasive strain.

In the face of this disaster, governments are doubling down on their policy of mass infection. In Quebec, François Legault and his hard-right CAQ (Coalition Avenir Quebec) government recently 'recommended' the wearing of masks in public places while explicitly stating that this was 'not recommended' in schools and daycares. In Alberta, the Conservative government of far-right Premier Danielle Smith, an ardent anti-vaxxer and strong supporter of the fascistic Freedom Convoy, has adopted new regulations banning mask mandates in schools and preventing school boards from turning to online learning to curb viral transmission.

The present catastrophe confirms the warnings that the Cross-Canada Education Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) has made since its formation in March 2021. Teachers and education support workers set up the CERSC to fight the ruling elite's "let it rip" pandemic policy. We have repeatedly insisted that eliminating the virus in schools and across society is the only way to safeguard the health and well-being of education workers, students, parents and the population at large. The CERSC fights for a policy of Zero COVID on a global scale, which is the only way to put an end to the pandemic, stop the spread of other infectious diseases, and prevent ongoing waves of death and the permanent debilitation of large numbers of workers and young people.

The struggle against the pandemic is first and foremost a political and class struggle. If COVID has killed over 20 million people worldwide, it is not because we lack the scientific knowledge and wherewithal to eliminate it, but because the health and lives of working people have been systematically subordinated to the accumulation of corporate profit and the geopolitical interests of capitalist governments. This can only be reversed through the independent intervention of the working class to fight to prioritize the health and lives of the vast majority of the population, not the bank balances of the financial oligarchy.

The ruling elite's support for mass infection goes hand-in-hand with its attacks on working people

Scribblers in the corporate media, politicians, and a section of scientists who have sold out to the powers that be claim that the present situation is the result of an "immunity debt" that must be paid, since the mitigation measures against COVID prevented kids from getting infected with viruses for two years. There is no evidence to support this pseudo-scientific drivel. It is on a par with the far-right's arguments early on in the pandemic about the benefits of "herd immunity," and assumes that society must accept a state of perpetual illness and debilitation.

The current catastrophic situation is the direct result of the murderous "forever COVID" policy promoted by every government in Canada and facilitated by the trade union bureaucracy. For the ruling class and its political hirelings in the provincial and federal governments, there must be no obstacle to the accumulation of private profit. They insist that schools and daycares must remain open at all costs so that parents can go to work and generate profits for big business. Toward that end, they have abandoned even the most limited anti-COVID public health mitigation

measures and, with a view to convincing workers that the pandemic is a thing of the past, have dismantled all mechanisms for systematically tracing the evolution of the pandemic.

At the same time, to pay for the massive multi-billion-dollar bailouts extended to the banks and major corporations at the beginning of the pandemic, and fund Canadian imperialism's major role in the US-NATO war on Russia, governments at all levels are conducting what is cynically labelled "post-pandemic" austerity.

These criminal policies are supported by all political parties, from the nominal "left" to the far-right. The elimination of what remained of anti-COVID mitigation measures was overseen by the union and NDP-backed Trudeau Liberal government earlier this year, in what amounted to the implementation of the far-right Freedom Convoy's pandemic program. The result is that 2022 is already the deadliest year since the pandemic began, with over 18,000 COVID deaths registered, out of Canada's official pandemic total of more than 48,000.

The education trade unions have opposed any collective worker action to protect the lives of workers and students; cheered on and assisted with the scrapping of what anti-COVID protections there were; and continued to minimize the dangers of the pandemic. Although unions in Ontario and British Columbia have been bargaining new contracts for hundreds of thousands of teachers and education workers over recent months, they never raised a single demand for the protection of workers against COVID or other infectious diseases. This underscores the utter indifference of the union bureaucrats, with their six-figure salaries, for the health and safety of the workers they claim to represent.

Throughout the pandemic, the education unions have actively combatted all efforts to mobilize education workers and the public to demand adequate ventilation and other protective measures in school settings. They have facilitated the imposition of corporate and state demands to get workers back to work as soon as possible, even without adequate protective equipment.

The same alliance of governments and union bureaucracies that has overseen the mass infection of education workers and students with COVID, RSV, and the flu is collaborating to impose savage austerity on public education budgets and "wage restraint" on workers. In British Columbia, the BC Teachers' Federation, BC General Employees' Union and other unions colluded with their friends in the NDP provincial government to ram through a below-inflation pay "increase," i.e., a pay cut, on hundreds of thousands of teachers and public sector workers.

In Ontario, the education unions cooperated closely with the hard-right Ford government to impose concessionary contracts on 55,000 education support workers, who had waged a courageous struggle that galvanized mass working class support against Premier Doug Ford's attempt to enforce a pay cut by government decree.

After Ford tabled Bill 28—which used the authoritarian "notwithstanding clause" to rob workers of their democratic right to strike and imposed "collective agreements" with annual pay increases of just 2.5 percent—the workers defied the government in a powerful two-day strike. Their stand won enthusiastic support from teachers, who rebelled against the teacher unions' outrageous decision to order their members to cross the support workers' picket lines. Workers from all economic sectors rallied to back the education workers as demands grew for a general strike, which would have raised the questions of bringing down the Ford government and putting an end to austerity.

It was at this point, when the working class was beginning to flex its immense social power and had pushed the government onto the ropes, that the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, and Canada's other major unions intervened to torpedo the strike and rescue the Ford government. They threw Ford a lifeline, immediately calling off the strike, without so much as bothering to consult the striking education workers, in exchange for his repeal of Bill 28. While the union

bureaucracy celebrated its "victory" because its well-paid functionaries returned to their comfortable seats at the "bargaining table," workers' demands for "catch-up" wage increases to compensate for a 20 percent cut in real wages since 2012 and for better working conditions were tossed aside with contempt. Less than two weeks later, CUPE lead negotiator Laura Walton announced her bargaining team's acceptance of a rotten sellout containing a miserable 3.6 percent annual wage increase, about half the rate of official inflation. Walton's announcement was the signal for CUPE's entire apparatus to get to work browbeating and bullying the workers into accepting this betrayal as a victory.

The working class must lead the fight for Zero COVID

The Ontario education support workers' struggle demonstrated the immense social power of the working class when it is mobilized in struggle. In less than two days, a developing movement of workers led by school caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators and administrative staff was able to force the Ford government into a precipitous retreat, exposing the mainstream media's lie that this hard-right thug has broad popular support.

The great weakness of the struggle, however, was that rank-and-file workers were unable to seize control of the fight from the union bureaucracy through the establishment of rank-and-file committees. The building of a network of these committees with links to every school, a policy fought for by the recently-established Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee, would have created the means for workers to countermand the CUPE bureaucracy's betrayal and broaden their struggle into a political mass movement to secure their wage demands, fight for Zero COVID, and stop capitalist austerity.

Similar lessons apply to the fight by education workers against the policy of mass infection. Over the past three years, there has been no shortage of determination on the part of teachers and support staff to stop the spread of COVID, protect their students and loved ones from the potentially deadly disease, and fight for a policy of COVID elimination. But these efforts by individual workers or ad hoc groups have repeatedly run up against the organized opposition and outright hostility of the union bureaucracy, which has strangled protests and other initiatives at every turn.

The conditions to change this are rapidly emerging. The Ontario education workers' strike marked a new stage in the resurgence of class struggle in Canada, which must develop with ever greater clarity as a direct rebellion of the rank-and-file against the stifling control of the corrupt, anti-democratic union apparatuses. As we enter 2023, the task for workers opposed to the capitalist elite's criminal pandemic and health policies is to draw the political lessons of the past three years, and unify the fight for COVID elimination with the struggles throughout the working class against poverty wages, miserable working conditions, public spending austerity and imperialist war. This requires the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every school and education institution across Canada as part of the Cross-Canada Education Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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