

Ontario's hard-right Ford government failed to distribute PPE stockpile during more than two-and-a-half years of the pandemic

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For more than two-and-a-half years, the hard-right government of Ontario Premier Doug Ford has been sitting on a stockpile of personal protective equipment (PPE) that could have been utilized to stop the spread of COVID-19 and save lives. Throughout multiple waves of the pandemic and a profusion of virus variants, 100,000 elastomeric respirators have lain dormant in a warehouse as infections and deaths mount.

From the beginning of the pandemic, engineer Nicolas Smit has worked to get governments across Canada and in the United States to recognize that COVID-19 is primarily transmitted via aerosols, small particles that can remain suspended in the air for long periods of time, and make workers, unions and employers aware that high-quality PPE is essential to stop its spread. His efforts continue to be met with silence from Ford's government. The official opposition New Democrats and Liberals have wholeheartedly adopted the government's position that the pandemic is now a non-issue.

Smit has been waging an uphill battle because Canada's entire ruling elite pursued a homicidal policy in response to the pandemic. The prioritization of corporate profits over human lives, shown most clearly in the reckless back-to-work campaign, led to well over 50,000 officially recorded deaths from COVID-19 nationwide and in reality, tens of thousands more. Smit documented the Canadian authorities' disastrous pandemic response in an extensive interview for the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The federal Liberal government refused to publicly admit that COVID-19 is transmitted via aerosols through the air until November 2021. When it finally did so, the announcement was contained in a Friday afternoon tweet and no effort was made to explain to the population how they could use this knowledge to avoid infection. In particular, no campaign was launched to explain the appropriate types of masks to wear, with the result that many people continued to use medical-grade masks, which only provide limited protection against an airborne pathogen.

Elastomeric respirators consist of a reusable mask, made with synthetic or natural rubber, that offer a vastly superior fit to medical-grade masks and even N95 respirators. Full-face versions can also protect the eyes. They are used with changeable filters and are designed to last for years. They were first used in a health care setting to protect workers from Tuberculosis in the 1990s and were recommended by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) during the SARS outbreak in 2003 and H1N1 pandemic in 2009.

While originally designed for industrial use, elastomeric respirators

offer a lower risk of transmitting infection between patients in a health care setting, can be easily cleaned and could potentially replace thousands of disposable masks.

After SARS hit Ontario hard in 2003, causing 44 deaths, the provincial government began stockpiling medical equipment in 2007 to prepare for a future epidemic. But ten years later, 80 percent of the 26,000 pallets of supplies, including 55 million N95 respirators, face shields and needles, had expired. Storage costs were running at more than C\$3 million a year, but no one ensured that the supplies were given to hospitals before their expiration and then replaced. Officials simply threw out the out-of-date stock, which was one of the main reasons why hospitals and long-term care facilities ran out of PPE in the COVID-19 pandemic's early stages.

The Ontario government acquired at least 100,000 elastomeric respirators in June 2020 and distributed some to long-term care homes. But the bulk of them remain in storage to this day.

In 2021, the Ontario Nurses Association engaged in a court battle with the province to get access to respirators for all health care settings. At the same time, a coalition of doctors and other specialists demanded that the federal and provincial governments step up their COVID-19 precaution efforts in line with the recommendations of the Ontario SARS Commission report of 2006.

Speaking to CBC News, Dorothy Wigmore, an occupational hygienist, said, "there's no excuse for not giving those who need them real respirators. And this doesn't just include health care workers. It includes anyone who is in an enclosed space with a number of people for something beyond a few minutes."

Her comments came a year after a paper published by the *International Journal of Emergency Medicine* entitled "Elastomeric respirators are safer and more sustainable alternatives to disposable N95 masks during the coronavirus outbreak," which stated:

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)-approved respirator masks have three nonpowered particulate filter efficiency classes: 95, 99, and 100, for 95%, 99%, and 99.97% filtration of particulates down to 0.3 µm, respectively. There are three levels of oil-particle resistance, N for no resistance, R for some oil resistance, and P for being completely oil proof. For most aerosols in healthcare settings, filter efficiency of at least 95% with no oil resistance is generally accepted. Each user needs to be fit-tested for these

respirator masks to be effective. However, several studies show that healthcare professionals that do not frequently use N95 masks or wear masks for an extended duration tend to have inadequate seal. Nearly half of healthcare professionals who repeat a fit test 3 months after passing a fit test end up failing the second fit test. Another study finds that 4.0-7m particulates were detectable inside respirator masks using portable aerosol spectrometers after only 10 min of body movements during nursing procedures. This is an indication that the seal is easily lost during extended use. Compared to disposable respiratory masks of the same filter efficiency, elastomeric respirators have been found to have 60% higher filtration performance and better seal. Although not as effective as powered airpurifying respirators (PAPRs), elastomeric respirators are still superior and preferred options over disposable respirators, especially given the severe shortage and increasing cases of healthcare professionals infected with coronavirus.

By January 2022, the Ford government was faced with serious health care staff shortages due to fatigue caused by nearly two years of overwhelmed hospitals and a surge of COVID infections during the Omicron wave. The provincial government proposed sending workers who were potentially sick and/or infectious with COVID-19 back to work with the minimal condition that they wear a well-fitting medical-grade mask, i.e., a face covering that provides limited protection against airborne infection and transmission.

In response, the President of the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU)/CUPE and the President of SEIU Healthcare sent a letter to the Premier, Health Minister and others in which they warned: “This completely disregards evidence that surgical masks are inadequate to prevent transmission of Omicron even in non-high-risk settings, and even amongst people who are not known to be sick or infectious. The document fails to recommend PPE appropriate to the situation of extreme risk that it contemplates. At a minimum, an elastomeric respirator, which has a higher rating than an N95 mask, must be standard for anyone returned to work who may still be contagious.”

Still the stockpile of elastomeric respirators remained untouched as the unions dutifully submitted to government policy. Throughout the pandemic, the unions repeatedly intervened to block efforts by rank-and-file workers in education, health care, and other sectors to take collective action to oppose dangerous working conditions.

Six months later, as the Ford government removed the last mitigation measures across the province in line with the demands of the fascistic “Freedom” Convoy, the President of the OCHU wrote another letter, this time directly to the Chief Medical Officer of Health. It stated:

The numbers of infections and deaths amongst health care workers lays bare the extreme cost of the failure in provision of adequate PPE in this province. In Ontario, the most recent PHO weekly epidemiological report which reports the statistic identified 54,019 infected health care workers since the start of the pandemic. Since June 4, 2022 the weekly report has not reported on this statistic, making the sacrifice of health care workers even more invisible and disrespected.

Health care workers, those most directly exposed to the dangers of the virus, continue to be let down by their so-called representatives in both the government and the unions. Infections and deaths have continued while governments at all levels doubled down on their “forever COVID” strategy. The abolition of all COVID public health measures was overseen approvingly by the Trudeau Liberal government, which maintains the closest political ties to the unions of any Canadian government in decades. These decisions made 2022 the deadliest year of the pandemic in Canada so far.

The fact that Canada’s entire political establishment is implicated in the PPE scandal was shown once again in October 2022, when Smit spoke with NDP MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam concerning the details surrounding the elastomeric respirator stockpile. The conversation, which was recorded and posted on YouTube, consists of Smit patiently trying to explain the result of the Ontario government’s refusal to release the stockpile since 2020.

Smit outlined that because of the Ford government’s negligence, the health care system was on the verge of collapse. Workers were unnecessarily infected and suffered mental health issues, anxiety and depression. He also pointed out that many of the problems in the economy, including worker shortages due to Long COVID, could have been avoided if the PPE that was already available had been distributed to those who needed it most. Additionally, the failure to utilize elastomeric respirators reinforced the false perception that they are unsafe for health care settings, even after both the CDC and Health Canada have long since approved them.

Smit recounted how he reached out to various NDP politicians who knew about the issue but refused to get involved either because it was not in their political jurisdiction or their allies in the union leadership were not making it a priority.

Wong-Tam responded by jumping through hoops to find an excuse not to advocate for the release of the critical public health equipment. She claimed that the Ford government, with its larger majority in the Ontario Legislature—secured with the lowest voter turnout in the province’s history—is too dominant to challenge. She also asserted that there is no public appetite to review the failures of the response to the crisis, which is a flat-out lie given the large number of families still grieving the loss of loved ones. To top it all off, the NDP MPP declared that there is significant sympathy for the goals of the “Freedom” Convoy to eliminate all COVID-19 mitigation measures.

In January 2023, as Smit once again tried to bring attention to the ongoing negligence in the provincial response to the most serious public health crisis in a century, Twitter censored posts he made about the elastomeric respirator issue, deeming them too controversial.

The government, their political “opposition,” unions, public health officials and the social media giants are determined to make the Covid-19 pandemic taboo as they ignore the public health catastrophe, and instead turn their attention to the need for austerity and attacks on working conditions to fund Canadian imperialism’s major role in the US-led war on Russia.



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