

Amid cross-Canada protests against back-to-school drive, Trudeau announces \$2 billion to fund school reopenings

Roger Jordan
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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced last Wednesday that Ottawa is providing \$2 billion in additional funding to the provinces to support their reckless drive to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The funding will enable hard-right premiers like Francois Legault in Quebec, Doug Ford in Ontario, and Jason Kenney in Alberta to force millions of students, teachers and education staff into overcrowded school buildings in the coming weeks and underscores yet again that Trudeau Liberals government is spearheading the corporate elite's drive to "reopen" the economy, irrespective of the cost in human life.

In announcing the funding, Trudeau stressed that reopening schools is "critical to restarting the economy, since it allows parents to return to work without stressing about the health of their children." "No parent," Trudeau continued, "should be losing sleep because they have to go back to work, but aren't confident schools are properly prepared."

The fact that reopening schools has nothing to do with the hypocritical concerns offered up by politicians about the welfare of children and their right to education and everything to do with the interests of big business was underscored by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce's full-throated support for Trudeau's announcement. "Our members have repeatedly stated that the biggest impediment to more fulsome participation by women in business is access to reliable and affordable childcare and safe, full-time return to school policies across the country," said Leah Nord, the director of workforce strategies and inclusive growth for the Chamber, which is a right-wing mouthpiece for Canadian big business.

The Trudeau government's spearheading of the homicidal reopening of the economy is in keeping with its

policy throughout the pandemic, which has been based on defending the wealth of the super-rich and big business at the expense of working people. With the support of its trade union allies, the Liberal government crafted a \$650 billion bailout for the financial oligarchy and big banks in March, while placing millions of workers who lost their jobs on rations. It is now exploiting the social crisis produced by these policies to bully workers back to their jobs, eliminating the CERB (Canada Emergency Response Benefit) and slashing government aid to the jobless, so that the ruling class can continue to enrich itself through stepped up exploitation.

Provincial governments have prepared for schools to function as little more than holding pens for children so that their parents can be forced to return to unsafe workplaces. Decades of budget cuts have led to dilapidated school buildings, shortages of teaching and education staff, outdated equipment, and a lack of resources to implement even basic hygiene measures. Yet provincial governments from Quebec's right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Quebec regime to British Columbia's New Democrats have announced no more than a handful of one-off spending pledges that do not even come close to addressing the basic health and safety needs of students and education staff. (See: **Canadian authorities to reopen schools, facilitating COVID-19 spread**)

They have also made clear that they have no intention of closing schools or childcare facilities, even when the inevitable increase in COVID-19 infections takes place.

Quebec's Health Minister Christian Dubé bluntly informed the population on the province's first day of school last Thursday that they should prepare for a spike in cases, and by implication more deaths. "I need people to understand," said Dubé, "that we might start with a few

teachers who have to be isolated, but later on there will be outbreaks. We have to expect it and take the required steps.”

Referring to the province’s childcare facilities, Families Minister Mathieu Lacombe added, “We do not intend to shut down the entire childcare network as we did in the first wave. A second wave is more than probable, but with our plan, we are ready.”

This is similar to neighbouring Ontario, where the Ford government has all but ruled out local or district school shutdowns. It has handed over to local school boards the decision on whether to keep open individual schools facing COVID-19 outbreaks, with specific instructions that total school closures should be avoided as far as possible. Government guidelines even state that if a school must be shut down due to an outbreak, it can reopen before the outbreak is declared over.

The education unions are complicit in the government-big business drive to reopen the schools and the placing of students, teachers, support staff, and parents at grave risk. Across the country, the unions have suppressed any opposition to the school re-openings, while promoting illusions that the capitalist state can oversee safe conditions for teachers and students. In Ontario, for example, the province’s four education unions have vowed to challenge the Ford government’s reopening plan at the Labour Relations Board, which has dismissed hundreds of workers’ complaints about unsafe working conditions related to COVID-19. Meanwhile, the unions have refused to organize strikes or any other form of protest. (See: **Ontario’s teachers unions facilitate right-wing Ford government’s reckless back-to-school drive**)

There is growing opposition across the country to the recklessness and contempt for the lives of students, teachers and parents being shown by the federal and provincial governments, big business, and the trade unions.

In British Columbia, concerned parents have established the group Safe September BC. The group held a rally in Vancouver earlier this month to call for major changes to the NDP’s school reopening plan.

In Ontario, over 200,000 people have signed a petition that demands the Ford government’s reopening guidelines be substantially revised to take account of the safety and wellbeing of students and teachers.

In Quebec, 150 physicians, epidemiologists, and other scientists signed an open letter to the Legault government denouncing the school reopening. “The current back-to-school plan in Quebec needs to better consider all the

available scientific evidence to prevent outbreaks in schools, to avoid jeopardizing the safety of our children, teachers and parents, as well as, to prevent a resurgence of SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) in our community,” the letter states. “It needs to be promptly reviewed and revised to ensure a safer return to school for all.”

The mass popular opposition to the ruling elite’s back-to-school drive and premature reopening of the economy must be mobilized into a working class political movement to put the protection of human life ahead of corporate profit. The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, set up by teachers in the United States to organize the opposition to reopening schools, has stressed that under present conditions, there can be no safe return to in-person learning.

What is required is the allocation of billions of dollars to purchase equipment to ensure all students have access to high-speed internet and online learning, the hiring of thousands of teachers and support staff to provide the best possible education to students amid the pandemic, and guaranteed full income for parents forced to stay at home to look after their children. Information on COVID-19 infections at schools and other education institutions must be made public to assist with containing the disease and contact-tracing, and there must be an end to all persecution of whistleblowers who expose the appalling health and safety conditions in their schools.

To fight for these demands, teachers, parents, students, and their supporters must organize rank-and-file committees in schools, other education institutions, and neighbourhoods independently of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. These committees should coordinate education workers’ struggles, establish links with other sections of workers confronting dangerous working conditions, and organize and politically prepare job action up to and including a nationwide general strike to stop the reckless reopening of schools. We strongly urge all of our readers who agree with this program to read the Educators Rank-and-File Committee statement and sign up to the WSWs Educators Newsletter to receive further information on how to get involved.



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