

Leaked government report warns of tens of thousands of deaths in one Canadian province

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Coronavirus cases continue to grow like wildfire across Canada, with the total number of cases surpassing 3,400 yesterday, almost five times the 727 cases reported just one week before. Deaths have risen from 9 to at least 31.

The rapid spread of the deadly virus has been facilitated by the policies adopted by the federal Liberal government. As cases have surged, Ottawa has focused its energies on funneling hundreds of billions to the banks and big business, rather than mobilizing society's resources, currently monopolized by the capitalist elite, to support the overstretched health care system and working people.

A warning of the catastrophe this threatens to produce was provided by a report drafted last week by the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) and leaked to the *Canadian Press* Tuesday. Unless urgent action is taken, says the report, Saskatchewan's health system will be overwhelmed by the surge in coronavirus cases. This, it estimated, could result in between 9,000 and 15,000 deaths.

That health authorities in Saskatchewan, with a population of just 1.17 million, little more than 3 percent of Canada's total, are warning of thousands of deaths underscores that hundreds of thousands of lives are at risk across Canada.

The internal SHA report says just 90 ventilators are currently available in the province's hospitals, with another 240 on order. But it said that between 500 and 600 ventilators would be required each day at the peak of the pandemic if the virus was allowed to spread rapidly and infect 30 percent of the population.

The report says that even under the best scenarios, where the curve of transmission is "flattened," the province's health system will be severely taxed in coming weeks and months.

"Demand for acute services," it warns, will "exceed existing capacity for hospital beds, ICU beds, ventilators, as well as creating a major burden on other acute services,

supports, HR [personnel], supplies, and equipment. ..[E]ven under conservative assumptions, COVID-19 will almost certainly overwhelm the health system."

There is growing criticism of the failure of the federal Liberal and various provincial governments to ramp-up testing and provide desperately-needed supplies for medical professionals across the country. Last weekend, doctors at the Royal Columbian Hospital in the Vancouver suburb of New Westminister warned in an open letter that urgent action was required by British Columbia's New Democratic Party government to prevent the emergence of a situation like that in Italy, where doctors are forced to ration care due to a lack of supplies and leave patients to die who could otherwise be saved.

Responsibility for this disastrous situation lies with the ruling elite, which did nothing for two months to prepare for COVID-19 despite the news of its deadly impact in China. The Trudeau government has made available a paltry \$1 billion in additional health care spending to combat the coronavirus, while trying to enlist manufacturing companies to produce urgently needed medical equipment that should have been stockpiled well in advance. This derisory response is compounded by the fact that Canada's health care system was vastly overstretched even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak due to decades of vicious austerity and privatization overseen by all the establishment parties, from the Liberals and Conservatives, to the NDP, Parti Quebecois and CAQ.

In Ontario, doctors are also raising concerns about the failure of the provincial authorities to publicize the explosive growth of community transmission. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, close to half of all COVID-19 cases in Canada have been passed on through local communities and are not related to travellers returning from abroad. Health officers in Ottawa and Toronto have issued warnings about the risk of

community spread, despite resistance from the province. “It would be very helpful for senior health leadership in Ontario to acknowledge that there is both travel-related and community-acquired cases of COVID-19, and that now, more than ever, it’s extremely important to adhere to the physical distancing measures recommended by public-health officials,” commented Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious disease physician at Toronto’s General Hospital.

As the health situation has deteriorated, the chief focus of the federal government and opposition parties has been to finalize the transfer of hundreds of billions of dollars to the banks and major corporations. In Parliament yesterday, the Liberal government, supported by the Conservatives, New Democrats, Bloc Quebecois and Greens, unanimously passed a \$107 billion COVID-19 Economic Response Plan. The legislation includes \$55 billion of tax deferrals, which will overwhelmingly benefit big business and the rich, and just \$52 billion of support for lower income Canadians and those who lose their jobs or cannot work because of the pandemic. Laid-off workers will receive just 55 percent of their previous income, while the millions of gig economy and other contract workers who don’t qualify for Employment Insurance (EI), and those who contract COVID-19, or have to go into quarantine or look after others impacted by the pandemic, are to be given a \$2,000 a month stipend for four months.

These sums are entirely inadequate to help workers and their families survive the economic crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. Just last week, 929,000 people—5 percent of Canada’s total labour force—applied for EI benefits.

Despite the dishonest efforts of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and all the opposition parties, the NDP included, to portray the \$107 billion bailout as the main support package, the reality is that the government and Bank of Canada have already funnelled upwards of \$500 billion into the banks and major corporations. Through a \$50 billion mortgage buy-back scheme, the halving of bank capitalization requirements and other “supports,” the federal government has demonstrated its determination to guarantee the vast wealth and profits of the super-rich during the pandemic.

Even more is to come, with Finance Minister Bill Morneau indicating Wednesday he will unveil a support package for the oil sector, rumoured to be of the order of at least \$15 billion, in a matter of hours or days.

In contrast to the unlimited generosity towards big

business, provincial governments across the country are forcing large numbers of workers in non-essential sectors to continue working even as the threat of infection increases. In Ontario and Quebec, where virtual lockdowns have been in place since Tuesday night, the right-wing provincial governments of Doug Ford and Francois Legault have defined “essential services” so broadly that large sections of manufacturing, construction and industry are continuing to operate, even when they have nothing to do with combatting the health crisis. A *World Socialist Web Site* reader in Ontario reported that the hot tub manufacturer where he works has been declared an “essential service.”

In Ontario and British Columbia, the construction sector is largely running at full pace. Protests from workers about unhygienic conditions and a lack of facilities for handwashing have grown. The anger among construction workers is so great that the Carpenters District Council of Ontario, which has over 30,000 members, demanded that the government order the shutdown of construction projects in the province.

A growing number of protest walkouts have also been reported, including 35 miners in Snow Lake, Manitoba, who walked off the job over health and safety fears related to COVID-19.

In Alberta, where a similar lockdown is being prepared, the province is declaring oil and gas workers an “essential service.” This is in spite of the fact that many thousands of workers in the industry live at close quarters in isolated work camps that create ideal conditions for the rapid spread of COVID-19. Moreover, the camps experience a high rate of turnover, with workers flying in and out every two to three weeks. Summing up the casual indifference to the fate of these workers within ruling circles, a report in the *Globe and Mail* noted in passing that “symptoms of the virus may be mild in the sector’s mainly young and physically healthy workforce.”

Alberta Energy Minister Sonia Savage summed up the main concern of the financial elite, which is that billions in profits and shareholder payments must be sustained during the pandemic. “The oil sands are strategically important to Alberta and Canada,” she wrote in an email to the *Globe*.



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