

Ontario warns of more than 10,000 COVID-19 deaths as pandemic spreads rapidly across Canada

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Ontario Premier Doug Ford and the president of Public Health Ontario, Dr. Peter Donnelly, presented projections Friday of the potential death toll from the coronavirus. In what they called a worst-case scenario, between 3,000 and 15,000 Ontarians could die from COVID-19 over the next 18 to 24 months.

The announcement came as coronavirus cases continued to rise rapidly across the country. More than 15,000 Canadians have now been infected, with most infections occurring in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. More than 275 have lost their lives, meaning Canada's fatalities have more than trebled over the past week.

Donnelly stressed that with the current health measures in place, which include social distancing guidelines and a ban on all public gatherings, as many as 15,000 people could lose their lives. He added that if the current measures had not been implemented there would have been up to 100,000 deaths. He went on to warn that a death toll of between 3,000 and 15,000 would require that "we all do a good job."

Underscoring that the coming three weeks will be horrendous, Donnelly admitted that 1,600 Ontarians could well be dead from COVID-19 by the end of April. This represents a 16-fold increase from the current number of fatalities in Ontario.

In their remarks, both Ford and Donnelly sought to downplay the devastating impact of the pandemic. Donnelly asserted that given that 1,500 Ontarians can die during a bad flu season, and that COVID-19 is 10 times more deadly, "this figure of 15,000 becomes entirely logical."

For his part, Ford sought to place the blame for the looming health catastrophe on the actions of the population. "At the end of this month, we could see as many as 80,000 people in Ontario inflicted with this

terrible virus. Over 1,600 people could be dead by the end of April. That's 50 per day, or two people every hour," he stated. "Each one could be your brother, your sister, your mother, your father, your grandparents. ... We all have to ask ourselves: What is the cost of a life? Is a life worth a picnic in a park? ... Is a life worth having a few cold ones with your buddies in the basement? The answer is no."

Experts agree that self-isolation and quarantines are an essential part of combating the disease, along with widespread testing and contact tracing to break infection chains. But for Ford to place the blame on the population for causing thousands of deaths by "going to the beach" or "having a few cold ones" is obscene.

The reality is that the responsibility for the potential deaths of more than 10,000 Ontarians, and by extension over 25,000 Canadians nationwide, will be borne by the ruling elite, which has shown a criminal indifference to human life in its response to the pandemic.

Ontario's Conservative provincial government, like the federal Liberal government, long trivialized the threat posed by the coronavirus and failed to take even the most basic preparatory measures to limit its impact. Even though warnings from the World Health Organization and other experts were issued about the global danger posed by a new type of coronavirus as early as January, Canada's federal and provincial governments took no steps to strengthen the country's overstretched healthcare system or to stock up on depleted medical supplies.

Scandalously, the federal government waited until March 10 before writing to the provinces to inquire about their medical supply needs. And only at the beginning of last week did the federal government announce a \$2 billion program to promote a "made in Canada" manufacturing program for medical masks, other protective personal equipment (PPE) and ventilators, with

no time scale provided on when they will be ready. Whereas a mere \$3 billion is being spent by the federal government to support hospitals and other medical services to combat the COVID-19 epidemic, the government, the Bank of Canada, and other state agencies are transferring more than \$650 billion at lightning speed into the hands of the big banks and business, to protect the wealth and investments of the capitalist elite (see: “Canadian government’s bailout increases banks’ control over economy and state”).

With reports emerging that hospitals are already rationing masks, which are critical to prevent medical professionals from getting infected, federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu stated last week, “I think federal governments for decades have been underfunding things like public health preparedness.” Ottawa “likely did not have enough” personal protective equipment stockpiled prior to the pandemic, she said. This amounts to a devastating self-indictment, given that the Trudeau government, like its Conservative predecessor, imposed below-inflation increases to the health care transfers made to the provinces since 2015, which resulted in real-terms spending cuts for health services.

For his part, Ford was asserting little more than two weeks ago that Ontarians should go off and enjoy the school spring break with their families. As case numbers began to shoot up, including as a result of the devastating spread of the virus through dozens of elderly care homes, he finally introduced a lockdown and social distancing measures on March 24.

But the official lockdown had more holes in it than a piece of Swiss cheese. The provincial government drew up a list of 74 businesses deemed “essential services,” including large swathes of the construction industry and manufacturing. The result was that hundreds of thousands of workers have been forced to continue attending their jobs, ensuring that the virus has had ample opportunity to spread across the province.

After mounting working class protests, including a petition signed by over 50,000 people demanding a shutdown of Ontario’s major construction sites, Ford was eventually compelled last Friday to order the closure of most large industrial construction sites for two weeks. However, residential building projects that have already begun will continue. The manufacturing industry continues to operate largely unhindered, including companies making luxury items such as hot tubs.

In keeping with the federal government’s massive corporate bailout, the Ford government has responded to

the pandemic by providing vast sums of money to business and a pittance to workers and healthcare. A \$17 billion package of Ontario government “anti-coronavirus measures” included fully \$10 billion in tax relief and loans directed towards businesses. Meanwhile the healthcare system, which was already bursting at the seams prior to the outbreak of the virus, can expect to receive just \$3.3 billion more than last year. This will barely keep pace with inflation and population growth.

In an attempt to conceal his government’s complicity in the unfolding health and social disaster, Ford sought over the weekend to wave the Maple Leaf in response to US President Donald Trump’s reactionary decision to ban the export of N-95 masks destined for Canada and for Latin America, where only rudimentary health services are available for much of the population. Ford, who has long enthused about his warm regard for Trump, declaimed, “We’re one big family, but they’ve cut out one part of the family now. It’s not right and absolutely I’d be all over government in the US and show them how important our relationship is. Still, I am so disappointed in what they are doing right now.”

Ford’s effort to place all the blame on Trump for the lack of masks in Ontario is thoroughly dishonest. It should be remembered that warnings were made over two years ago by the province’s auditor general about the expiration of the province’s stockpile of 55 million N-95 masks, which was established following the 2003 SARS outbreak. Neither the Ford government, nor its Liberal predecessors, did anything about replacing this critical reserve. On the contrary, successive governments have cut spending on health to the bone, with the result that a large portion of hospitals in Ontario were running at or above capacity even before the coronavirus hit.



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