

# Workers walk out at Ontario care home due to unsafe conditions amid coronavirus outbreak

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Virtually the entire staff at an adult disability care home in Markham, Ontario walked off the job on Thursday over concerns about the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the midst of a coronavirus outbreak at the facility. The workers took the job action after management announced that 10 residents and two employees in the 42-resident long-term care home had tested positive for the coronavirus.

“There was an audible scream in the room, and some gasps, and people were just devastated,” Executive Director Shelley Brillinger of the Participation House facility told reporters.

Shortly thereafter, evening and night shift workers left their posts leaving only six staff members to attend to the residents. Normally, 36 workers clock in over a 24 hour period. Emergency calls initiated by town officials eventually managed to secure eight additional attendants from the community to work at the home over the weekend after management belatedly began offering double the miserable minimum wage.

The minimum-wage attendants at the home, members of the Service Employees International Union, had earlier raised concerns regarding PPE shortages. Workers were only issued minimal PPE four days before the announcement of the outbreak.

Work at the home for physically and developmentally disabled residents requires close and extensive contact between caregivers and residents. Nonetheless, staff were expected to perform these tasks with virtually no protection, exposing both themselves and vulnerable residents to the potentially lethal virus. Such was the lack of protective equipment at the home that an emergency call went out over the weekend for more PPE for the newly installed skeleton crew.

To date, of the 660 COVID-19 deaths in Canada, half have been residents in long-term care facilities, including seven seniors at another Markham home and 29 in Bobcaygeon, Ontario. Ontario Conservative Health Minister Christine Elliott, however, has refused to initiate the recommended testing of all residents in care and their attendants. Limited testing of those exhibiting coronavirus symptoms and those in contact with them was only initiated in late March.

The events in Markham are part of mounting protests by health care workers and other sections of the working class across Canada and internationally over the unsafe conditions created by the criminally negligent response of ruling elites around the world to the global pandemic.

As shortages of personal protective equipment persist across the country, nurses in London, Ontario stopped work on 11 occasions in early April, citing their right to refuse unsafe working conditions.

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, established medical procedures require hospital staff to change masks and gowns before attending to each new patient. However, because of equipment shortages, London hospital authorities have allotted only four surgical or other basic masks per shift, a practice that threatens to result in the transfer of the virus from patient to patient and allow it to spread like wildfire through the medical staff. The superior N95 masks are reserved for front-line staff performing intubations and other specialized procedures.

The nurses’ action in London follows similar refusals to work in unsafe conditions in Alberta and Manitoba medical facilities over the past three weeks.

In recent days, reports have emerged that in at least

two Toronto hospitals protective masks are now rationed at two per shift for most doctors and nurses.

The drastic shortages of protective equipment as well as ventilators and dedicated intensive care beds are an indictment of federal and provincial governments of all political stripes over the past several decades. They have all imposed relentless cuts to health care services and the privatization of elder care infrastructure. In 2003, Toronto was among the main global clusters of the SARS epidemic, leading to 44 deaths. Yet recommendations for robust stockpiles of protective equipment and ventilators were quickly forgotten.

Today, Canadians are subjected to the daily obfuscations of Prime Minister Trudeau and the provincial premiers who put on sombre faces like well-kept graves, and in earnest tones assure the citizenry that sufficient and vital equipment for medical staff are “landing any minute” and that minimal testing volumes will “quickly ramp up.” Meanwhile, medical experts, not to mention those on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic, know this to be an outright lie.

At the same time as workers at Markham’s Participation House were walking off the job, the horrific events that recently transpired at a privately-owned seniors care facility in Montreal came to the attention of a stunned national audience. As initially reported by the *Montreal Gazette*, minimum wage, poorly equipped workers at the Résidence Herron, who were already grossly under-staffed and contractually restricted from divulging information, began leaving their jobs in the latter part of March after a virus outbreak was acknowledged. At least one person a day had been dying in the home since mid-March.

Eventually, 31 deaths would be recorded. However, the owners claimed only two deaths were the result of COVID-19. It required court orders to force the owners to release their medical files. A criminal investigation is now underway.

With most of the remaining staff departing in fear on March 29, public health authorities, alerted by workers to the unfolding calamity, entered the home and placed the facility under immediate trusteeship. Finding a veritable house of horrors, they described their experience as like entering a “concentration camp.” Some residents had gone unfed for days. Urine bags were overflowing and pooling on the floor. Some patients were lying in their own feces. Skin infections

were rampant. Two corpses lay undiscovered in their beds. Other patients were simply lying on the floor. Some patients were so dehydrated that they could not speak. It appeared that records of medications were falsified. In an institution riddled with coronavirus infection, there were only two orderlies for the entire 134 bed facility.

The Résidence Herron charges up to \$10,000 per month for a placement.



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