

Canada: British Columbia's New Democrat government defends corporate interests as coronavirus runs rampant

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British Columbia's ostensibly progressive John Horgan-led New Democratic Party (NDP) government is proving incapable of protecting the population from the devastating medical and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Canada's third most populous province has reported over 1,500 coronavirus cases to date and at least 75 deaths.

In recent days, the rate of increase in daily cases has reportedly halved, from 24 percent to an average daily increase of 12 percent. The number of serious hospitalized patients has stabilized, dropping gradually from 72 on April 6 to 58 this Tuesday. This appears as promising news when compared to the two largest eastern provinces—Quebec which has skyrocketed past 15,800 infections and 625 deaths, and Ontario, where recent modelling has projected between 3,000 and 15,000 COVID-19 deaths by the end of the pandemic in 18 months to two years.

However, the daily press briefings by BC health officials delivering the latest hopeful figures are a travesty, given the province's COVID-19 reporting and testing practices

The provincial Center for Disease Control (BCCDC) only reports "lab-confirmed" and not "presumptive" cases, which sharply reduces the actual number of cases and trajectory of infection. Moreover, the pandemic has spread to long-term care facilities, temporary migrant worker camps, and the province's prison system, which are all areas in which the fatality rate is likely to increase. Yesterday, Correctional Services Canada reported that an inmate at the Mission Institution, where there are more than fifty COVID-19 cases, had died of complications related to the disease.

At the outset, the BCCDC restricted its COVID-19

testing to patients suffering from respiratory illness who require hospitalization, healthcare workers, and those part of an investigation. Last week, BC authorities revised their testing criteria, but reports indicate many people exhibiting symptoms are still not being tested.

Provincial health officer and virus expert Dr. Bonnie Henry told CBC Radio's The Early Edition on March 31 that asymptomatic cases in the province were "not enough to be concerned about." Such casual oversight has led to an explosion of COVID-19 infections in at least 21 care homes around Vancouver.

At the Lynn Valley Care home in North Vancouver, where the first case in the province was reported on January 27, 18 elderly residents have already died from COVID-19. At the Haro Park care centre, more than 40 residents and 25 staff have been infected, and nine residents have died.

After a Washington-based CDC study found that half of one care home's residents who tested positive for the virus were asymptomatic, Henry was forced to admit, "[the virus] was not detected at its early stages, and it was well advanced by the time it was recognized." Despite this acknowledgment, hospitals across the province are being ordered to turn away symptomatic patients seeking a diagnosis.

Sean Wormsbecker, a doctor at Royal Columbia Hospital in New Westminster, posted a YouTube video March 30 in which he reported that during every shift he sends three or four likely COVID-19 cases home without testing. "Based on our current resources," said Dr. Wormsbecker, "we are very much under testing the population."

BC's "stay home" policy for ill patients is proving disastrous. One elderly man was reportedly hospitalized and induced into a medical coma due to COVID-19

complications after being advised by the operator on the COVID-19 information phone line to just stay put. On April 9, a 47-year-old children's care worker died in his home 11 days after he was advised to self-isolate by a drive-through clinician who tested him positive for the virus.

Henry has also sought to reassure frontline workers that there are "no issues" with the supply of personal protective equipment. A different story is told by the fact that more than 50 infections have been recorded among health care workers. A survey carried out by Safe Care BC, which represents workers in long-term care facilities and community care, found that 70 percent expect to run out of face masks by the end of next week. 52 percent of respondents said they have no N-95 masks, while a further 25 percent said they only have enough to last three days.

Shockingly, the province is purported to have only 384 ventilators available for critical care and only 206 ICU beds (according to statistics published by the *Tyee*) for a population of 5 million. The province claims to have ordered 120 new ventilators on March 5, but so far it has secured just 15. Although British Columbia has the second lowest beds per capita in Canada, the government only began on March 27 to free up extra beds in chronically overcrowded hospitals by cancelling elective surgeries, shuffling patients to other facilities, and searching for potential locations for makeshift hospitals.

The extreme medical shortages across the province shouldn't come as a surprise to officials. Henry served as an associate medical officer of health in Toronto during the SARS epidemic there in 2002-03. She co-authored Canada's Pandemic Preparedness Plan, which identified "important elements" for pandemic preparedness including adequate supply of N95 respirators. It also called for special attention to be paid to "critical care planning and preparation for high demand for ventilators or other specialized equipment".

Since taking office in 2017, the BC NDP government has failed to make good on its promise to reverse the Liberals' 15-year reign of healthcare devastation that has brought hospitals to these crisis levels. Health care spending was increased by a negligible 3.4 percent last year, barely enough to keep up with inflation, and an aging and increasing population.

More broadly, the NDP has prided itself on sticking to a balanced budget, with its spending plans based on the austerity framework laid out by its Liberal predecessor. Just weeks before the pandemic hit, the NDP tabled a

budget and fiscal plan that contained balanced budgets for three years starting from April 1, 2020. Even with starved hospitals and long-term care facilities, a rampant housing crisis, and other social ills, the NDP had \$1.5 billion of unallocated funds in the budgetary year that expired on March 31, and an additional \$1 billion in the current financial year.

The NDP's pro-corporate stewardship of the province's budgetary and financial policies has found expression in a growth of investment from major global players. Last November, Amazon, which has spent recent weeks covering up COVID-19 cases from its workforce and firing anyone who dares to complain about dangerous working conditions amid a pandemic, announced plans to triple its office space in downtown Vancouver from 300,000 to 1.1 million square feet.

In line with the callous capitalist policies at all levels of government across the country and elsewhere, the NDP is subordinating workers' health to corporate greed. On March 16, the province banned gatherings of over 50 people, but exempted a slew of loosely defined "essential services", including the construction sector, forcing workers to choose between protecting their health and earning a paycheck. The same day, a state of emergency was declared, bolstering law enforcement but stopping short of the closure of all non-essential business. One major company, Teck Resources, has come in for sharp criticism for its refusal to halt or reduce production at its major coal mines. One local resident attacked the company for playing "a game of Russian roulette" with its thousands of employees, their families, and the local community.

On March 23, the NDP unveiled the \$5 billion COVID Action Plan, of which only \$2.8 billion will go to "helping people." One of these measures is the BC Emergency Benefit for Workers, which is a one-time payment of \$1,000 for workers who lose their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Finance minister Carol James indicated workers would only be able to apply for the benefit in May, meaning working people with no savings will have to wait weeks if not months for the assistance to arrive.



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