

Ontario takes over five nursing homes after military exposes systematic negligence

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The right-wing Ontario government of Premier Doug Ford invoked an emergency power Wednesday to assume control of five long-term care homes where massive coronavirus outbreaks have killed hundreds of residents. The move came after an explosive report released by the Canadian Armed Forces documented horrifying conditions, neglect and cruelty in the for-profit facilities.

The military investigation began after Ford was forced to appeal for help from the armed forces in late April to run the homes. Underpaid and precariously employed staff were overwhelmed by the pandemic, for which no serious preparations had been taken by the political establishment at the provincial or federal levels.

Decades of austerity, privatizations, a dearth of protective equipment and the gutting of workers' wages and conditions created a situation in which the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a catastrophic loss of life at long-term care facilities across the country. One observer to the tragic conditions at the Residence Herron in Montreal, which made international headlines in early April after over 30 residents died, likened conditions to a "concentration camp."

The death toll at the five homes, all of them in the Greater Toronto area, now under provincial control are even more staggering. Orchard Villa in Pickering recorded 77 deaths as of Monday; Altamont Care Community in Scarborough, 52; Eatonville in Etobicoke, 42, as of Saturday; Hawthorne Place in North York, 43; and Camilla Care Centre in Mississauga at least 61 deaths.

This is merely the tip of the iceberg. In Ontario alone, outbreaks have been confirmed at over 250 of the province's 626 long-term care homes. In Ontario, 1,587 deaths, about 75 percent of the provincial total, were care residents. In Quebec, the death toll among long-term care residents is 2,700. Across Canada, approximately 80 percent of coronavirus deaths have been residents of such facilities.

The military's report documents in painful detail how the five long-term care facilities became killing fields. Incidents of abuse were also noted, with residents choking as they were improperly fed and others left in soiled bedding for

days at a time.

Medical equipment was routinely reused for coronavirus positive and negative residents, while staff and doctors misused personal protective equipment. Infected patients were housed alongside residents who did not have the virus. Insects, cockroaches and ants were found in the homes. All of this prompted the report's authors to note, "Protocols in place have a near 100 percent contamination rate for equipment, patients and overall facility."

Residents frequently called for help for up to two hours without receiving a response. When they did get treatment, staff became aggressive with patients during medical procedures.

A separate military report provided grisly details on the deplorable state of 25 care homes in neighbouring Quebec. The report identified many instances of staff moving between so-called "hot" and "cold" zones, i.e., areas designated for COVID-19 patients and sections of homes where residents were not infected. Chronic staff shortages continue to be a problem, with one home in Laval largely being operated by untrained volunteers. At the Grace Dart Extended Care Centre in Montreal, where 61 residents have died, staff often disappeared during their shifts.

The inhumane treatment of elderly residents documented in the two reports provides brutal confirmation of the Canadian ruling elite's criminal indifference to death on a mass scale amid the coronavirus pandemic. The main thrust of the Trudeau Liberal federal government's response, with the support of the opposition parties, big business and the trade unions, has been to bail out the banks and corporations to the tune of more than \$650 billion, while placing the health care system and workers on rations. As soon as this vast transfer of wealth into the pockets of the financial oligarchy was organized, governments at all levels and the corporate-controlled media began orchestrating a reckless back-to-work campaign, which has now culminated in hundreds of thousands of workers being forced to return to unsafe workplaces as the virus continues to spread widely. It is therefore only a matter of time before death and suffering

on a mass scale like that which has already ravaged Ontario and Quebec's elderly care homes reemerges.

Responding to the Ontario report, Ford asserted that he found it "gut-wrenching." He added, "We need boots on the ground. I want eyes and ears in the homes that we're most worried about."

Coming from the head of the hard-right Tory government, Ford's remarks are deeply cynical. After winning power in the 2018 provincial election, Ford imposed ruthless austerity budgets on social services and health care. Part of the cuts included the gutting of inspections for elderly care facilities. According to Jane Meadus, a lawyer with the Advocacy Centre for the Elderly, just nine of Ontario's 626 care homes were subjected to a full inspection in 2019. At such a pace, the province would take almost 70 years to inspect every long-term care facility.

Responsibility for allowing the current tragedy to unfold lies not just with Ford, however. Over the past three decades, the entire Canadian political establishment has embraced savage austerity for public services, the privatization of critical social infrastructure, and low taxes for the corporations and super-rich. The federal Liberal government in the 1990s imposed the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history in conjunction with Ontario's Mike Harris-led Conservative government and Lucien Bouchard and his Parti Quebecois government in Quebec. The New Democrats showed they were no less committed to savaging public spending under Bob Rae in Ontario and Roy Romanow in Saskatchewan, whose government balanced the budget on the backs of health care workers and hospitals. Until Ford came to power in Ontario, the province was ruled for 15 years by a Liberal government that enforced social spending cuts, while further reducing taxes on big business.

This record shows the hypocrisy of Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's attempt Wednesday to present himself as an advocate for the improvement of care for the elderly. "We need to do a better job of caring for seniors. They raised us, they built this country, they deserve better," declared Trudeau, who vowed to take up the issue with the premiers at last night's online meeting of federal and provincial first ministers.

The reality is that since coming to power in 2015, the Trudeau government has maintained with slight modifications Stephen Harper's tight purse strings on transfers to the provinces for health and social services. Health transfers have increased by a mere 3 percent per year, a rate that barely keeps pace with inflation and does not even cover the rise in health care budgets driven by an aging population.

Trudeau's repeated insistence that elderly care is a "provincial matter" further underscores that his bluster about

reforming the sector will go nowhere.

The fact that Trudeau is able to posture on this issue at all is thanks chiefly to the role of the trade unions, which recently initiated a cynical campaign touted as a push to "transform long-term care into a publicly funded, universal health care system." In reality, the Canadian Union of Public Employees' pathetic initiative amounts to calling on its 60,000 members in long-term care facilities to write "Dear Justin" letters to the prime minister and appeal to MPs for a change of course.

CUPE and the rest of the union bureaucracy are in truth bitter opponents of any genuine struggle to defend or expand public services of any kind. Whenever major working-class struggles have developed over the past four decades in opposition to social spending cuts—from the mass movement against the government of Mike Harris between 1995 and 1997, to the wave of protests against the Campbell government's austerity drive in British Columbia in the early 2000s and the 2012 Quebec student strike—the unions invariably intervened to shut them down.

Now, with the ruling elite's response to the pandemic producing a vast escalation of social inequality and paving the way for further rounds of austerity to make workers pay for the huge bailouts given to the banks and big business, the trade unions have cemented a corporatist partnership with Trudeau's Liberals and the leading representatives of Canadian capital (see: "Canadian unions cement anti-worker corporatist alliance with government and big business").

These developments underscore that to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and defend and expand public services, including elderly care, workers must build new organizations of struggle that will mobilize their social power and fight for a socialist program.



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