Alberta’s hard-right premier dismisses coronavirus as “influenza”

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Jason Kenney, Alberta’s hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) premier, has taken a leaf from the playbook of the fascistic presidents of the United States and Brazil, Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, and dismissed the coronavirus pandemic as an “influenza.” Kenney’s callous remark, delivered during a parliamentary debate last week, is part of his government’s reckless back-to-work policy and underscores the broad support within Canada’s ruling elite for a criminal “herd immunity” strategy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking in the Alberta legislature on May 27, Kenney declared, “We cannot continue indefinitely to impair the social and economic—as well as the mental health and physiological health of the broader population—for potentially a year for an influenza that does not generally threaten life apart from the elderly and the immunocompromised.” All but asserting that those who succumb to COVID-19 were on the verge of death anyway, Kenney added, “The average age of death from the influenza in the province is 83, and the average life expectancy in the province is 82.”

Kenney’s remarks show the criminal indifference to human life that pervades his UCP government. Alberta has witnessed repeated workplace COVID-19 outbreaks, including one of the largest in all North America at the Cargill meat packing plant in High River. A third death resulting from that outbreak, which has sickened well over 1,500 people, was recently reported. Benito Quesada, 51, a union shop steward who had worked at the Cargill plant since 2007, contracted COVID-19 in mid-April and spent weeks on a ventilator in a medically induced coma.

The first two deaths linked to the outbreak were Hiep Bui, a 67-year-old Vietnamese immigrant who worked at the plant since 1996, and Armando Sallegue, the 71-year-old father of another worker at the plant. Sallegue’s son, who fell sick after contracting the virus at the Cargill plant, tragically passed him the virus, while he was on a visit from the Philippines.

In total, Alberta has recorded over 7,000 COVID-19 infections and 145 deaths.

Kenney’s contempt for the lives of these workers is far from unique within ruling circles. Governments across the country, from Francois Legault’s right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Quebec regime in Quebec to Doug Ford’s hard-right Progressive Conservative government in Ontario, have enforced the return to work of hundreds of thousands of workers to workplaces where little to nothing has been to protect them from the contagion, and as COVID-19 infections and deaths continue to rise sharply.

This back-to-work policy has been greenlighted and overseen by the federal Liberal government. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his union and NDP-supported Liberal government have focused their response to the pandemic on guaranteeing the wealth and investments of the rich and super-rich. They have funnelled more than $650 billion into the financial markets and big business, while placing the millions of workers who have lost their jobs and incomes on what amounts to temporary rations under the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. It pays just $2,000 a month, or less than the rent for an average two-bedroom apartment in Toronto and other cities.

Provincial governments have exploited the resulting economic distress among workers to force them back to their jobs even though the infection risk remains high.

Kenney’s comments are of a piece with Legault’s, who declared during the initial stages of Quebec’s “reopening” campaign that his government wants people to get sick. “It may sound frightening,” said the Quebec premier, “but once Quebecers understand the concept of herd immunity they will see it is the best way out of the current pandemic.…What we are saying is people who are less at risk, people who are under 60, can get a natural

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immunization."

Neither Kenney nor Legault care to admit that wherever "herd immunity" policies have been pursued, they have proven catastrophic. Anders Tegnell, the epidemiologist who designed Sweden's murderous policy of refusing to implement lockdown measures so businesses could keep on generating profits, was forced to admit last weekend that the authorities should have done things "differently." Sweden has one of the highest coronavirus death rates in the world, with over 4,500 deaths in a country with a population of just 10 million.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro's dismissal of the virus as a "little flu" and his constant attacks on officials who refused to rescind lockdown measures have played a major role in that country having the second-highest total of infections worldwide. Over 32,000 Brazilians have lost their lives, with more than 1,000 now dying daily.

Kenney's effort to dress up his back-to-work policy with alleged concern for the "mental health and physiological wellbeing" of Alberta's population is no less hypocritical. It comes from the head of a government whose first full budget, tabled last fall, included sweeping cuts of up to 10 percent in real terms to health care, social services and education. The spending plan will result in over 6,000 layoffs, including hundreds of health care workers, teachers, and social services staff. In its contract negotiations with the province's 180,000 public sector employees, the UCP government is demanding wage cuts of up to 5 percent.

While Kenney claims to be concerned about Albertan's health and well-being his government is targeting the most vulnerable, no doubt causing acute distress. To give but one example, the UCP government has eliminated annual cost-of-living increase for recipients of the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped. AISH recipients who receive the maximum $1,685 each month will in real terms receive approximately $30 less per month this year. By 2023, the reduction will be $120 a month per month, providing annual "savings" of more than $200 million for the provincial government.

Kenney's fall 2019 budget was based on a report prepared by a task force headed by former Saskatchewan New Democratic Party Finance Minister Janice MacKinnon, which advocated savage austerity and authoritarian methods to suppress popular opposition. These included the use of the anti-democratic "notwithstanding clause," the outlawing of strikes, and the imposition of concessionary contracts by government decree.

Significantly, just days after Kenney's UCP government tabled its class war budget and Trudeau won re-election by posturing as an opponent of Conservative cuts, the Liberal prime minister publicly embraced Alberta's premier as the legitimate representative of "Western interests."

Now in response to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and a further steep decline in oil prices, Kenney has appointed a second blue-ribbon committee, this one an advisory council on Alberta's "economic recovery." It is to lay the political groundwork for further sweeping attacks on working people, from the gutting of labour standards and environmental regulations to the privatization of health care

The 12-member council includes former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, WestJet co-founder and former chairman of the board Dick Beddoes, Canadian Western Bank CEO Chris Fowler, ATCO CEO Nancy Southern, six other corporate bosses, and as a token representative of "labour," Bob Blakely, the ex-head of Canada's Building Trades Union.

The council is being chaired by Jack Mintz, a University of Calgary economist and *Financial Post* columnist who has long claimed that Canada's shrunken public services are financially "unsustainable" and its tax rates for business and the rich are a "disincentive" to investment. He recently published a rant against public sector workers in which he claimed that in the name of "equity" they must be compelled to make "sacrifices."

As for Harper, who Kenney long served as a cabinet minister, he recently published a column in the *Wall Street Journal* in which he decried a supposed "new age" of "big government," and insisted that governments must quickly transition to making massive spending cuts. If they "fail to practice mild austerity proactively," declared Harper, "a brutal kind will be thrust upon them."

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