

Alberta government's reopening policies lead to spike in COVID-19 cases

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The number of active COVID-19 infections in Alberta has risen rapidly in recent weeks as a result of the federal Liberal and United Conservative Party provincial government's drive to "reopen" the economy.

As of Tuesday, there were 1,398 active infections across the province, with 164 new infections recorded in the previous 24 hours. Per head of population, this is one of the fastest-growing infection rates across Canada, which registered 477 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, according to figures from Worldometers.

Alberta's capital, Edmonton, which has a population of just over 1 million, has been especially hard hit. Last week, the city recorded 56 active cases per 100,000 people. Toronto, Canada's largest city, with a population of 2.9 million, currently has an active infection rate of 8.93 per 100,000 residents.

Edmonton infection data also point to the fact that lower income neighbourhoods are being disproportionately impacted. Northeast Edmonton had an infection rate last week of 136.1 active infections per 100,000, followed by central Edmonton Northgate (94.7 per 100,000) and northwest Edmonton Castle Downs (92.2 per 100,000). Edmonton's north side is largely working class and contains the city's poorest neighborhoods.

The resurgence of COVID-19 in Alberta is the direct product of the hard-right United Conservative Party's rapid reopening of the economy, which has seen almost all of the public health measures put in place to contain the pandemic removed. On Tuesday, Alberta Chief Medical Officer Dr. Deena Hinshaw took this policy a step further by announcing that when schools reopen this week, they will not be required to ensure social distancing among students.

The Kenney government has combined its reckless

reopening drive with savage attacks on working people. In March, it announced the layoff of around 25,000 education staff, including bus drivers and administrative employees. It has also implemented authoritarian measures that allow the government to criminalize protests on public property, a measure that is above all aimed at suppressing working class opposition, including to its savage public spending cuts.

The danger that the Kenney government's policies could lead to a further escalation of infections and deaths is underscored by recent COVID-19 outbreaks and several deaths at two Grey Nuns Community Hospitals. At Misericordia Hospital, where a complete shutdown was necessary on July 8 due to a "full facility" COVID-19 outbreak that has killed 11 patients to date, many patients and staff have been infected. The hospital's emergency department has been forced to close. Another two hospital staff at the Grey Nun's Hospital in Millwoods, in south Edmonton, recently tested positive for COVID-19. Dr. Hinshaw said the staff were working in a unit caring for three patients who had contracted the virus in the community.

As of late August, there were two additional deaths and 9 active cases of COVID-19 among residents at the Good Samaritan Southgate Care Centre in South Edmonton, where 31 elderly residents have died so far, and 8 staff members remain infected. 39 residents and 25 staff have recovered since the outbreak began on June 13.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a worker who asked to remain anonymous, about conditions in her Edmonton workplace, CapitalCare Dickinsfield—an Alberta Ministry of Health seniors' facility, where two nursing staff and one nursing student had just tested positive. She said all staff were tested and the facility attempted to have nurse aides fill in for the qualified

nurses, but the workers refused and the facility was forced to hire replacement nursing staff. Staff have now been given sufficient PPE in an attempt to avoid a repeat of what happened at the Southgate seniors' facility.

Outbreaks also continue to emerge at multiple Alberta meat packing plants. At Cargill Case Ready in northeast Calgary, five workers out of a workforce of 500 recently contracted COVID-19.

In an Aug. 19 interview with the *Edmonton Journal*, the head of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 401, sought to downplay the significance of the new outbreak, labelling it an "anomaly" that won't require a full plant shutdown. "We haven't asked for a closure of the Cargill plant," said local president Thomas Hesse. "The company is showing a measure of co-operation, certainly. Our representatives have had a presence in the plant, there's been testing happening ... and the plant is well-fitted with PPE."

Another case of COVID-19 was also confirmed at an Olymel meat processing facility in Red Deer, where 13 employees were sent home as a precautionary measure and are being tested for the virus. Rushing to management's defence, Hesse said, "Olymel, I would say, has done their very best thus far to act responsibly and still be able to maintain production." Referring to the meatpacking companies, including Cargill, Hesse added, "I think they've all come some distance as a result of advocacy and public pressure. There are some encouraging signs that some of these workplace cultures may have shifted."

In reality, the UFCW is carrying out a despicable cover-up of the criminal role being played by the UCP government and meatpacking companies, who are insisting that production continue at all costs. Just how fraudulent Hesse's claim that the "culture" has "shifted" was demonstrated last Friday when an Alberta government official ordered the Sofina Foods chicken processing plant in Calgary to remain open even though 18 workers there had been infected. A company spokesman subsequently confirmed that the total number of infections later rose to 27.

Also last Friday, the infection of 38 workers at the Harmony Beef processing plant in Balzac, north of Calgary, was reported. The plant recorded two previous outbreaks in March and May.

The refusal to shut down Cargill's High River

processing plant earlier this year resulted in over 1,000 infections and at least three deaths in what is the worst coronavirus outbreak to date at any single workplace in Canada. The company was ultimately forced to accept a temporary shutdown of the facility due to widespread public anger and outrage among the workers.

Despite widespread opposition among the highly-exploited workforce at being forced back to work under unsafe conditions, the UFCW explicitly opposed waging any struggle to defend workers' health and lives. Demonstrating that the union bureaucracy prioritizes its cozy relationship with corporate management over the lives of the workers it claims to represent, Hesse adamantly opposed workers taking job action to protect themselves from the pandemic, on the grounds such action would be "illegal" under the state-designed, pro-employer collective bargaining system.



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