Alberta's UCP government plans field hospitals as it allows COVID-19 infections to soar

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The COVID-19 pandemic is surging out of control across Canada. The 7-day daily average of new infections has exceeded 6,000 every day since Dec. 2, and 5,000 every day since Nov. 23. Deaths have also climbed from a couple of dozen or less per day in early October to close to 100 per day in the first five days of this month.

The situation is particularly grave in Alberta, where the criminal policies of Jason Kenney's hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government have led, as health professionals long warned they would, to a dangerous surge in infections. With a population of just 4.4 million, the province is consistently registering more than 1,500 new COVID-19 infections daily, and on Saturday set a daily record of 1,879 new cases.

Between Nov. 2 and Dec. 2, Alberta's total cases more than doubled from 27,644 to 61,169. Alberta now has more than 18,000 active COVID-19 cases, more than Ontario, which has a three times bigger population, and Quebec, which has almost double Alberta's population. With a rate of active infections of well over 300 per 100,000 people, Alberta has by far the highest provincial infection rate.

All these numbers, however, seriously understate the gravity of the actual situation, since at least 85 percent of new infections can no longer be traced, because of the collapse of the province's contact tracing system.

For months, Kenney turned a deaf ear to the repeated warnings of health professionals and scientists that the health system risked being overwhelmed and that strict public health measures had to be imposed to prevent large scale death. As late as June, the Alberta premier was still comparing the virus, which has claimed over 1.5 million lives worldwide, to the flu. (See: **Alberta's hard-right Premier dismisses coronavirus as "influenza"**)

As a result of his government's refusal to implement containment measures, even as the number of cases surged over the past six weeks, Alberta's health system is now buckling. While just 70 intensive care beds have been set aside for COVID-19 patients, there were 97 people infected with the novel coronavirus in ICUs on Wednesday. The province has already taken the step of double-bunking some patients in ICU rooms. But worse is all but certain to come.

Underscoring that Kenney has been well aware for some time that hospitalizations will far exceed Alberta's health system's capacity, CBC reported last week that his government sent a request to the federal government and the Red Cross on Nov. 28 for the setting up of field hospitals to treat 750 COVID-19 patients. According to the plan, sent on November 28 but clearly developed well before, two or more facilities will be set up, with at least 375 beds each, in Calgary and Edmonton for patients with mild-to-moderate symptoms. Patients requiring intensive care are to remain in city hospitals. However, considering that hospitals are already overrun, patients in need of intensive care will likely end up in these temporary facilities as well. Health experts are already pointing to the challenge represented by the provision of oxygen to patients in facilities not purpose-built for this procedure.

The document also said that the military could be called in to assist with staffing due to chronic staff shortages. These shortages are the result of decades of job cuts and the large number of health workers who have become infected for want of proper personal protective equipment (PPE).

The plan for field hospitals, similar to what one would witness in a war zone, is a clear indication of the failure of the Alberta government to manage the pandemic. Kenney, however, refused to admit this, declaring at a press conference, "No, I think it's a sign of responsible planning on our part for [a] potential extreme scenario."

Like his right-wing provincial counterparts, such as François Legault in Quebec and Doug Ford in Ontario, Kenney has consistently downplayed the risk posed by the pandemic. The UCP government, however, has distinguished itself as the most irresponsible of all in its opposition to the closure of all nonessential production and

in-school learning, although it knew full well this would lead to mass infections and deaths. Kenny has openly touted the nostrums promoted by Trump and the far right in the US and Canada that lockdowns constitute a "massive invasion of the exercise of people's fundamental rights."

The government has spurned, and continues to reject, serious lockdown measures. It waited until November 24 to impose the limited social distancing measures that even the hard-right, pro-corporate Quebec and Ontario governments imposed weeks ago. Meanwhile, elementary schools remain open, as well as restaurants, bars, casinos, gyms, and many stores. Alberta's tar sands oil operations and most other industrial workplaces, including meat packing plants, have largely remained open throughout the pandemic, even amid major local outbreaks.

Mike Parker, president of the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, which represents 27,000 health care workers in the province, denounced Kenney for putting Albertans' lives "at grave risk," and said his government's measures were "inadequate." Parker was among more than 400 doctors and health policy experts who signed a letter to the premier last month calling for stricter measures and mandatory paid sick leave.

While the Kenney government has been the most vociferous in its refusal to adopt any measures to contain the pandemic, the policy of letting the virus run rampant is endorsed by the entire political establishment in Canada. Governments of all political stripes, from that formed by Kenney's hard-right UCP to British Columbia's New Democrat Party government, have all embraced the criminal concept of "herd immunity," which prioritizes profits over human lives. This is being spearheaded by the federal Liberal Trudeau government, which declared in September that further COVID-19 restrictions should be "short-term" and implemented at the "local level."

Like governments around the world, Kenney's UCP is using the pandemic to intensify the assault on the working class by implementing its long-planned agenda of privatization and corporate tax cuts for the rich and austerity for workers. The ruling class is determined to make workers pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars the Trudeau government funneled to the banks, big corporations and investors last March through its bailout measures.

The criminality of the Alberta government is underlined by its October announcement that it will eliminate more than 10,000 health care jobs through outsourcing and job cuts. This prompted a workers' revolt, with thousands of workers at hospitals and other health facilities across Alberta joining a wildcat strike at the end of October. The Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) refused to defend the workers against a draconian back-to-work order issued by the provincial labour relations board and assumed responsibility for forcing the strikers back to work.

The trade unions' main concern is to block any independent struggle by working people against the ruling elite's criminal policies. This was underscored last month when the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) and various AFL affiliates issued a lengthy statement containing various proposals to curb the spread of COVID-19, including a "circuit breaker" lockdown for two to three weeks. The resolution was politely addressed to the Kenney government, i.e., the same government that has let the virus rip through workplaces and schools, and now proposes to set up field hospitals to deal with the "collateral" damage from its drive to keep the economy "open." The union statement contained not a single proposal, let alone call, for workers to take up a struggle against the pandemic.

To protect their lives and their livelihoods, workers need new political organizations of struggle organized independently of and in opposition to the corporatist trade unions. Rank-and-file safety committees must be built in every workplace, school and neighbourhood to launch a worker-led counter-offensive aimed at shutting down all nonessential production with full compensation for all workers until the pandemic is brought under control.

Vast resources exist to combat the pandemic and provide healthcare and financial security to every working family, but they are monopolized by the super-rich. In opposition to the claims of Kenney et al. that workers have to choose between working in dangerous conditions or face impoverishment, the working class must take up a political struggle to seize the ill-gotten gains of the capitalist oligarchy and deploy them to meet social needs, above all the provision of high-quality health care and financial security for all.

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