

Canada's health care system overwhelmed by COVID-19 surge

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The health care system in Ontario and Quebec, Canada's two most populous provinces, is on the verge of collapse following an unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases.

Ontario recorded 3,945 new infections on Sunday, a record. Over the past four days, the province has reported more than 14,700 new cases and 216 COVID-19 deaths, including 89 on Thursday, making it the deadliest day in the province since the start of the pandemic.

"This is the most serious situation we've ever been in, ever, since the start of this pandemic," Ontario Premier Doug Ford told a press conference Friday. Unsurprisingly, Ford failed to add that his Conservative government's policies have made a major contribution to this disaster.

According to the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA), the province's hospitals are at 85 percent of capacity, while critical care beds are 78 percent occupied, and close to 100 percent in some areas. Even more worrisome, 100 percent of the province's basic ventilator beds are now occupied.

On January 1, the Ontario government issued a directive to hospitals to increase their capacity to 115 percent. Meanwhile, there is a shortage of health care staff and the available staff is burned out.

The Windsor Hospital is transferring patients to other centers in southwestern Ontario and using a temporary morgue erected in the spring to deal with the excess number of deaths. At London Hospital, a refrigerated trailer was installed last week after the regional morgue reached full capacity.

The heavy burden of treating COVID-19 patients has resulted in a drastic reduction in other health services across the province. According to Anthony Dale, the president and CEO of the OHA, once the mark of 350

patients in ICUs (intensive care units) is reached, it will be very difficult for hospitals to provide other vital services.

Yesterday, the province reported that there were 388 COVID-19 patients in ICUs, 266 of whom were on ventilators. Dale warns that by early February, the number of COVID-19 patients requiring an ICU bed could be in the range of 500 to 800.

"Hospitals in Mississauga, Brampton, York Region, parts of Toronto, London and Windsor-Essex," Dr. Dale explained, have already cancelled "heart and cancer treatments," which "could have an impact on life quality and expectancy."

The situation is no less dramatic in Quebec, which, during the first wave of the coronavirus last spring, had one of the highest per capita mortality rates in the world.

On Sunday, January 3, Quebec had a record 2,869 new cases of COVID-19. During the ensuing week the daily number of new cases averaged over 2,500, before hitting a new record high of 3,127 cases on Saturday, along with 41 deaths.

All COVID-19 indicators in the province have turned red. With 1,392 hospitalizations, including 206 in intensive care units, Quebec's National Institute of Excellence in Health and Social Services has warned that the province's health care system could collapse in the next three weeks.

More than two-thirds of the beds reserved for COVID-19 patients in the Greater Montreal area are now occupied. In the province overall, the rate is close to 60 percent. Emergency departments are overflowing everywhere, with an occupancy rate of 102 percent in the province and 115 percent in Montreal, according to the website indexsante.com. On Saturday, January 2, the emergency departments of more than half a dozen

hospitals in the Greater Montreal area had emergency room occupancy rates of between 131 and 160 percent.

Many hospitals are also now battling COVID-19 outbreaks, compounding the crisis.

With emergency rooms overflowing and beds filling up at breakneck speed, it is becoming increasingly difficult for exhausted health care workers to provide services to the population.

“We’ve been operating at almost 200 percent capacity since the beginning of the holiday season, with staff shortages and staff stretched to the limit,” said Dr. Antoine Delage, a pulmonologist at Charles-Le Moyne Hospital in Longueuil, a southern suburb of Montreal. “We have lost control of the epidemic.”

Quebec is now having to consider resorting to “triage,” as was done in Italy last spring. That is, faced with an overflow of very ill patients, selecting those that are to be given access to a life-saving ventilator and those who will be left to die. On November 10, public health authorities quietly released an updated “National Prioritization Protocol for Access to Critical Care (Adult) in the Context of an Extreme Pandemic,” which states that triage would be implemented once the occupancy rate of critical care beds exceeds 200 percent.

Although this rate has not yet been reached, the threat is real and growing. Asked about the likelihood of triage, Dr. François Marquis, head of intensive care at Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital in Montreal’s impoverished east end, replied, “Honestly, it’s definitely yes. All it takes is a major outbreak at one of Montreal’s major hospitals to derail things.”

Even with the advent of coronavirus vaccines, the situation remains perilous across the country. Into the fourth week of the vaccine’s rollout, less than 0.5 percent of Canadians have received a first dose of the two doses required for both the Moderna and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines.

In the face of this unprecedented medical emergency and social crisis, the ruling class is pushing ahead with its back-to-work and back-to-school campaign. This homicidal policy, aimed at keeping profits flowing at the expense of human lives, is being implemented by the provinces with the political blessing of Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government.

The minimal restrictions announced by the provincial governments of Ford in Ontario and François Legault

and his CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) in neighbouring Quebec are utterly inadequate to halt the spread of the virus.

While most retail businesses, restaurants and recreational facilities are closed, the main vectors of community transmission—factories, construction sites and many other non-essential workplaces and schools—remain open. The reopening of schools has only been delayed by one week in Quebec. In Ontario, elementary school students will return to the classroom in northern regions today, while elementary school students in the south and secondary school students across the province are scheduled to return to the classroom in two weeks.

Legault’s “*électrochoc*” (shock therapy) in the form of a province-wide curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. for all but those working or seeking medical treatment is nothing more than a symbolic gesture. It is meant to divert attention from his government’s disastrous handling of the pandemic, and its determination to keep open many non-essential production facilities and the schools, so parents can be forced to pump out profits for big business.

The curfew will do little to nothing to halt the spread of the pandemic. It may actually increase the risk of contamination, since workers who are forced to go to work will have to buy essential goods during a reduced time period, increasing the number of people present in stores at the same time.

The current health and socioeconomic disaster is the result of the class policies implemented by the ruling elite in Canada and internationally to place the profit interests of the corporate and financial aristocracy before human lives.

This raises the urgent need for the working class to intervene as an independent political force. Workers must form rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, to demand the immediate shutdown of all schools and non-essential workplaces, with full financial compensation for all affected workers and small businesses.



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