

Health care calamity looms as COVID-19 cases surge across Canada

Frédéric Charlebois
14 April 2021

Health experts and even government officials now admit that the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada is at its most dangerous stage to date, with the pandemic's third wave threatening to be the most lethal yet.

As a direct result of the criminal policies of all levels of government, which have prioritized corporate profits over human lives, COVID-19 has already killed more than 23,400 Canadians and infected 1.08 million.

With more contagious and deadly variants of COVID-19 becoming prevalent in Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and the Prairie provinces, the numbers of infections and hospitalizations are soaring.

Last Friday, for the first time since the pandemic's earliest days, Canada's per capita rate of daily new infections surpassed that of the United States, long the epicentre of the global pandemic. So virulent are the new variants, some experts are characterizing the country's third wave of COVID-19 infections as a "new pandemic."

In Ontario, where the second wave took more than three months to reach the 2,500 daily case threshold, that mark was reached in just 30 days during the ongoing third wave. The province has averaged more than 3,500 cases per day for the past week, with a record 4,456 cases on Sunday.

Currently, a record 605 COVID-19 patients are being treated in the province's intensive care wards, an increase of over 40 percent in just two weeks. Ontario's COVID-19 Science Advisory Table predicts that by the end of this month that number could surpass 800. As the second wave reached its peak at the beginning of the year, Ontario authorities warned that if the number of intensive care patients rose above 350 it would be impossible for the province's hospitals to continue to provide regular care to all patients.

The situation is not much better elsewhere in the country. In neighboring Quebec, the acceleration of infections is also notable. In the greater Quebec City area, the average number of daily cases has risen from 100 to 400 in just two weeks, with a peak of 630 new infections in a single day.

Across the country, there is an exponential increase in new infections, with multiple records being broken in the Western provinces. British Columbia reported 1,293 new infections on Wednesday, April 7, while neighboring Alberta reported 876 new variant cases last Saturday, also a record. Considering that Alberta's test positivity rate was 9.9 percent last Friday, the

severity of the situation in the province and the country as a whole is undoubtedly underreported.

The new variants have certainly contributed to the acceleration of the third wave. But it is the political establishment's mercenary drive to keep schools and nonessential businesses open that has allowed the variants to run rampant.

When new infections started to fall in the second half of January due to the limited lockdowns hastily instituted at the end of 2020, all levels of government rushed to reopen businesses and schools creating the conditions for a resurgence of mass infection. Rather than pursuing measures aimed at ending the pandemic by bringing the number of new infections down to zero, the capitalist ruling elite has prioritized "keeping the economy open," i.e., profits flowing. "Open schools" are central to this mercenary policy, because if kids are herded into classrooms, their parents can be forced to work, churning out corporate profits, amid the pandemic.

As a result, the new variants now account for 40 to 50 percent of new infections, rising to 70 percent in Ontario. The B.1.1.7 variant, first seen in the United Kingdom, accounts for 94 percent of the 25,000 cases of variants sequenced across the country. But two other variants, the B.1.351, first identified in South Africa, and especially the P1, first seen in Brazil, are also responsible for many outbreaks.

Canada is possibly unique in having community transmission of all three of the major COVID-19 variants, and this was no doubt a major reason that the US Centers for Disease Control last week issued its highest-level advisory against travel to Canada.

The variants are sending ever larger numbers of younger patients to the hospital. According to Quebec's health institute (INESSS), while people 70 and over represented more than 70 percent of hospitalizations in January, they now represent just 30 percent. People in their 50s and 40s, and even some in their 20s, are now routinely having to be put on ventilators and intubated.

This massive influx of patients into hospitals and Intensive Care Units threatens to overwhelm the health care system. Triage, which describes a situation where doctors must determine who to care for and who to leave to die, is openly being discussed.

Because of the "extreme pressure" on the health care system, the Ontario Public Health Agency sent a memo to the vast majority of the province's hospitals late last week ordering them to stop performing all but emergency and life-saving surgery starting this Monday.

The hard-right provincial government led by Doug Ford has

boasted that it intends to add a further 1,000 critical care beds to deal with the surge in desperately ill COVID-19 patients. However, medical experts point out that due to the lack of trained personnel—a product of decades of cuts to health care and social services—such promises are all but meaningless.

“We can line up all of the beds in the world, but if you don’t have someone who is healthy, capable, able to help you and provide the care to you when you are there in that bed, the bed doesn’t matter,” Dr. Shelly Dev, an intensive care physician at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, told CBC. Referring to medical personnel who have already endured over a year of delivering pandemic-related care, she added, “They are physically broken by how hard they’re working. The worry among all of us workers is that our ability to provide that kind of top-of-the-line care—that we’re so proud to provide in our health-care system—is waning.”

In Quebec, according to INESS, “dedicated hospital capacity, particularly in intensive care, could be reached within the next three weeks” outside of Montreal. In Alberta, health officials expect to see more than 1,000 hospitalizations by the end of April.

Despite the acceleration of the crisis, nothing is really being done to prevent another massive wave of deaths. Schools largely remain open and, apart from some localized shutdowns, industries and factories continue to operate as if nothing has happened. In Ontario, the Ford government was forced to make an about-face on Monday and announce a temporary shift of all schools to online learning. But there is no indication how long this will last, and no support is being given families now struggling to manage childcare and work responsibilities.

If vaccines demonstrate the potential of science to help stop the pandemic, their rollout could not be more chaotic. In what can only be described as a complete mess, vaccination in Canada has been marked by logistical problems, lack of doses and lack of access for many vulnerable groups. As if this was not enough, the ruling class is invoking the prospect that the population can be inoculated against COVID-19 as yet another argument to immediately get rid of virtually all remaining public health restrictions.

As of April 13, some four months after Canada’s inoculation drive began, only 20.79 percent of the population had received at least one vaccine dose, and just 2.2 percent was fully inoculated. While Premier Ford announced with great fanfare last week that 18 to 49-year-olds in COVID-19 hotspots were now eligible to be vaccinated, they are currently unable to register to do so. Yesterday, health authorities in the Toronto borough of Scarborough had to cancel 10,000 vaccination appointments due to a lack of vaccines.

Faced with the inaction of governments, several groups of doctors and scientists are speaking out. In Quebec, the Stop COVID Collective, which includes nearly thirty health experts, is calling for a lockdown before the crisis escalates further. “We are really behind schedule,” declared Dr. Marie-Michelle Bellon, a specialist in internal medicine assigned to the COVID-19 unit at Montreal’s Notre-Dame Hospital. “That’s why lockdown needs to be implemented now.”

A shutdown of all schools is among the critical measures that

must be taken to stop the virus’ spread. Not only are schools responsible for a quarter of all infections. Studies have shown children have played a critical role in spreading Canada’s second and third waves, infecting their parents. And contrary to the claims of the ruling elite and the corporate media, children are themselves at serious risk from COVID-19, accounting for two percent of hospitalizations. Each wave of the pandemic has been accompanied by an increase in cases of post-infectious multisystem inflammatory syndrome, which sends many children to intensive care. At the Sainte-Justine Children’s Hospital in Montreal, a 16-year-old girl died last week of COVID-19.

As the deadly third wave of the pandemic unfolds, the ruling elite is united in opposing any measures to curb the pandemic that challenges the “right” of the corporations to continue raking in profits. Right-wing Quebec Premier François Legault and his so-called “progressive” New Democrat counterpart John Horgan of British Columbia are blaming youth and private gatherings. In fact, it is their inaction and insistence on keeping schools and businesses open to protect private profit that is fuelling the current health and socio-economic crisis.

The federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau is no less responsible for Canada’s ruinous handling of the pandemic. It took no action in the critical months at the beginning of 2020, waiting until March 10 to even ask the provinces about potential shortages of ventilators, PPE (personal protective equipment) and other critical supplies; and it has strongly promoted the ruinous back-to-work/back-to-school drive.

In last September’s Throne Speech, the Liberals sent a clear signal to big business that no new lockdowns comparable to those implemented under the pressure of working class protests in the spring of 2020 would be imposed. Instead, the Trudeau government declared that in the face of a resurgence of COVID-19 infections any restrictions should be “local” and “short-term.”

The working class must draw the lessons of the previous two waves of the pandemic. If a scientific response to the pandemic that prioritizes saving lives over big business profit is to be implemented, the working class must mobilize its social power and intervene as an independent political force. Rank-and-file safety committees must be established in every workplace and neighborhood in order to enforce the public health measures and secure the social support necessary to halt the pandemic’s third wave and protect working people’s lives and livelihoods.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact