

COVID-19 infections soar in Alberta as third wave continues to rampage across Canada

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Alberta had the highest per capita number of active COVID-19 cases of any region in North America last week, reaching 562 cases per 100,000 residents. If Alberta were a country, it would have the second-highest infection rate in the G20 behind only Argentina.

The rapid increase in infection rates across the province is part of Canada's surging third wave. In Ontario, the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care (ICU), currently close to 900, is more than double the upper limit set by the provincial government for providing regular levels of care. Manitoba has emerged over the past week as the jurisdiction with the third-highest infection rate in North America, behind only Alberta and Michigan. On Saturday, Manitoba reported the death of a woman in her 20s.

The main source of COVID-19 spread in Alberta, as across Canada, is workplaces. Many of the new infections are being registered in the province's tar sands oil operations around Fort McMurray. This is a direct product of the hard right United Conservative Party's open economy policy. Since the outset of the pandemic, Premier Jason Kenney has stridently refused to impose any restrictions on the activities of Alberta's oil corporations and related industries, with the result that growing numbers of young, otherwise healthy working-age people are being laid low by more infectious and deadly COVID-19 variants.

Newfoundland and Labrador is a major source of migrant labour for Alberta's energy sector. As of May 4, the Newfoundland government warned on its COVID-19 website of outbreaks at numerous worksites in northern Alberta. These included: CNRL Albion Oil Sands Site, CNRL Jackfish, Cenovus Foster Creek, Cenovus Sunrise Lodge, CNOOC Long Lake Lodge, IOL Kearl Waparu Oil Sands Site, Canadian Natural Resources Horizon Oil Sands Site, Syncrude Aurora, Syncrude Mildred Lake Oil Sands Site, Suncor Base Plant, Suncor Firebag, Suncor Fort Hills, Suncor MacKay River, Michels Canada, Oilsands Industrial Lodge, and Grand Prairie Royal Camp Services. Media outlets in Alberta have not reported these outbreaks.

The Kenney government's "profits before lives" strategy,

which is identical to that pursued by Ontario's hard-right Premier Doug Ford and British Columbia's New Democrat Premier John Horgan, is aimed at protecting the multi-billion profits of the province's energy, mining and meatpacking sectors at the expense of the health and lives of working people and their families. Reports have emerged that medical staff at the province's hospitals have been briefed on the triage protocol, which is when doctors and nurses have to take decisions about who should receive and be denied care based on their likelihood of survival.

Dr. Darren Markland, of the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton, told CHED 630 News, there "is truly a problem with imposing appropriate scientific measures to control health policy. The people we are seeing are young. They look like us or our children. And there is nothing else wrong with them, other than they are 'essential' workers who have been put into pretty untenable circumstances. This is clearly a failure of political will."

Markland was one of many doctors and pediatricians who signed an open letter to Kenney last week. The letter warned of a projection of between 300-320 COVID-19 patients in ICU by the end of May. "This whole concept of 450 ICU beds is really not a sustainable number because it can't be staffed and even if it could the level of care we deliver would probably not be our normal standard of care," he said.

The mounting health care crisis was illustrated April 30 when Lisa Stonehouse, a healthy 52-year-old widow, died of blood clots to her brain after being turned away by the Grey Nuns Hospital emergency room in Edmonton, several days earlier. Lisa's teenaged daughter insisted she seek medical care when she suffered persistent headaches immediately after getting her first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Alberta's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, said the death was confirmed to be linked to vaccine-induced immune thrombotic thrombocytopenia (VITT).

Kenney and his government have responded to the deepening crisis by slandering the population for its alleged non-compliance with COVID-19 restrictions. "It is as

astounding as it is aggravating,” the premier told a May 3 press conference, “that 14 months into this, more than 2,000 deaths in Alberta alone, that we still have many people in the province who don’t even believe that COVID is real, who think that it’s a big government conspiracy or hoax. The reason we are at this critical stage of the pandemic in Alberta, with record high daily case counts and intensive care numbers, is precisely because, for whatever reason, too many Albertans are ignoring the rules we have in place.”

This is rich coming from Kenney, who spent the first months of the pandemic describing COVID-19 as no worse than the flu; has systematically ruled out any effort to stop the spread of the virus in workplaces; and permitted far-right UCP members, who make up about a quarter of his parliamentary caucus, to agitate against any COVID-19 restrictions whatsoever.

Contrary to the portrayal of Kenney by the trade union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left hangers-on like Fightback as the single source of Alberta’s problems, the UCP government’s policy of mass infection and death is being carried out in close collaboration with the federal Liberal government. Last Wednesday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Kenney spoke on the situation in the province, with Trudeau stressing the necessity for “close federal-provincial collaboration on the vaccine rollout and managing the impacts of the third wave in the province.” Trudeau, whose government has fronted the Canadian ruling elite’s back-to-work/back-to-school policy and insisted in last September’s Throne Speech that any future lockdowns should be localized and short, said nothing about the mass infections in the energy sector or Kenney’s blaming working people for spreading the virus.

The unions have also played a central role in enforcing Kenney’s “open economy” policies. While the Alberta Federation of Labour has sharply denounced Kenney for his mishandling of the pandemic, this has not stopped the union bureaucracy from issuing pathetic appeals to the hard-right UCP government to protect workers. They have refused point blank to organize any industrial action to safeguard the health and very lives of the workers they claim to represent. On the odd occasion when walkouts and protests do occur, such as the one-day wildcat strike launched by health care workers last fall, the unions submit to the suppression of these struggles through the labour relations system, which victimizes the strikers by imposing fines and other individual penalties.

This suppression of worker opposition has given the UCP government a free hand to prioritize corporate profits over the protection of human lives. Kenney’s government relaxed public-health measures beginning in February, after a devastating “second wave” had grudgingly forced it to

impose limited restrictions. It permitted restaurants to open, expanded capacity for retailers and churches, opened salons, and allowed more activities in gyms. Despite warnings that a third wave was imminent, and pressure from teachers and parents, he refused to close schools. As predicted, when the rules were relaxed, infections skyrocketed. In early April, the province finally closed indoor dining, yet allowed patios to remain open.

Last week, in part due to the public outcry over the sudden death of a healthy 17-year-old girl in Calgary from COVID-19, the government shifted classes for junior and high school students to online learning and closed indoor fitness activities in hot spot areas.

Despite rising case counts, restrictions on community care and senior facilities were relaxed yesterday to allow indoor visits of up to four people and outdoor visits of up to five people. Residents are allowed to have up to four designated support people, as opposed to two, that visit to help staff care for them.

In an attempt to bolster public opinion, Kenney announced that anyone born on or before 2009 would be eligible to sign up for a first vaccine dose May 10, after weeks of rejecting the idea of giving students and school staff any priority for vaccinations. Kenney has focused on rolling out vaccines in his recent press releases, claiming they will give Albertans the “best summer ever.” Vaccines are, in fact, in short supply. On Monday, May 3, some first-dose vaccine appointments for immune-compromised individuals in Edmonton known personally by this author were cancelled on short notice due to lack of vaccine availability.

It is the same story in Calgary, where pharmacy owners cancelled hundreds of appointments. “Some weeks we don’t know when we’ll be receiving the vaccine or we don’t know how many vaccines we’ll be getting until weeks, sometimes days, before we receive [them]. It’s been a little challenging. Our phones just don’t stop ringing all day,” Crowfoot Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy owner Randy Howden told Global News. At Britannia Pharmacy, owner Susan Elzein cancelled hundreds of appointments when shipments were cancelled two out of the last three weeks. She told Global, “I had no choice but to cancel 150 people that I had and then the phones started ringing off the hook. People started dropping by the pharmacy angry at us.” She has asked people to redirect their frustration to the provincial government.



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