Record-breaking heat wave results in over 486 deaths in British Columbia

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The prolonged and deadly heat wave that is scorching Western Canada and the Pacific Northwest in the US has at the time of this writing resulted in more than 486 deaths in British Columbia (BC) alone. The “sudden and unexpected” deaths, reported over the five-day period between Friday and 1 p.m. on Wednesday, account for a staggering 195 percent increase in the usual number of deaths reported in such a time frame.

While the death toll is the direct product of unprecedented temperatures due to climate change, the devastating loss of life is also the result of the savage attacks on social infrastructure and public services implemented by governments of all political stripes at the federal and provincial level going back decades.

British Columbia Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) ambulances responded to 187 heat exhaustion and 52 heatstroke calls between June 25 and 28. A staggering 15,300 911 calls were taken in the province between June 26 and 27.

The emergency services were overwhelmed. There is a major backlog in calls and delayed response times, with some emergency services forced to leave behind the bodies of victims as police and ambulances continued to respond to other calls. Due to the horrifyingly high death count, even the response times of coroners is being severely delayed.

“We’ve never experienced anything like this before in Vancouver,” Vancouver Police Department Sergeant Steve Addison told reporters in a Tuesday press conference.

Addison said that a surge in calls occurred on Tuesday morning as “people are showing up in their parents’ house or relatives’ house and finding them deceased.”

The abnormally intense weather is the result of a “heat dome,” which is a large area of high pressure that extends well up into the atmosphere. The high-pressure system traps sinking air that becomes hotter as it lowers and approaches the ground. This is compounded by heat becoming trapped within the dome, resulting in a “bubble” that prevents rain and cold fronts from entering and cooling down the temperature.

East of BC, Alberta Health Services have also reported an increase in heat-related emergency calls, with about six calls per day in Edmonton and 10 in Calgary.

BC’s Chief Coroner Lisa Lapointe stated in a press release that the number of deaths will increase as the data continues to be updated. “It is important we do not lose sight of the fact that each reported death is a person with a family and people who cared about them,” Lapointe said at a press conference on Wednesday.

Across BC, Alberta, Yukon and the Northwest Territories, over 103 heat records were shattered on Monday alone.

The village of Lytton, located at the north end of the Fraser Canyon, broke the all-time record for the highest temperature ever recorded in Canada for three straight days in a row. At 5 p.m. on Tuesday, the Lytton Climate Station reported an astounding temperature of 49.6 degrees Celsius (121 degrees Fahrenheit). This surpasses any temperature ever recorded in Las Vegas, Nevada, located in the Mojave Desert some 1,300 miles to the south in the United States.

At 6 p.m. on Wednesday evening, the village’s population was forced to evacuate without warning as a fast-moving wildfire was driven towards residences by winds of up to 71 kilometres per hour. People were forced to immediately flee the small town in all directions. Around 90 percent of the village’s buildings have been destroyed in the fire.

“It's dire. The whole town is on fire,” Lytton mayor Jan Polderman told CBC News. “It took, like, a whole 15 minutes from the first sign of smoke to, all of a sudden, there being fire everywhere.”

Lytton’s fire joins 9 other newly reported wildfires that have been sparked in recent days, bringing the total number of active provincial wildfires to 26. An abnormally dry spring and low humidity levels have primed the forests for such an occurrence, and the never-before-seen temperatures have set alight portions of the tinder-dry land.

In southern Alberta, the heat has set fire to the wheat fields in some places and is compounding a severe drought in the province. The result is a jeopardized harvest and major agricultural losses.

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As well as wildfires, the heat is causing rapid glacier melting and massive snowmelt from the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Flood warnings are now in effect for the upper Fraser Valley area, and homes in the Pemberton Valley have already been evacuated due to the fast-rising river waters.

Across British Columbia's mainland and gulf islands alike, cooling centres and spray parks offering shade, water, misting fans and cooling supplies have been established to keep community residents cool. Schools across the province were forced to close due to insufficient ventilation and cooling infrastructure. Many COVID-19 vaccination sites have also closed.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the heat wave's devastating effects in the states of Washington and Oregon, where some 20 million people have been affected. As in BC, these regions are usually temperate and rainy, meaning that many residents do not have air conditioning in their homes.

The British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority reported that the rate of air-conditioned households is even lower in British Columbia than in Seattle and Portland, which have, respectively, the first and third-lowest percentage of air-conditioned households among major metro areas in the United States.

Despite marked increases over recent years, it is estimated that only 34 percent of households in BC had cooling appliances. The most recent data available for Vancouver indicates that just 19 percent of households are equipped with air conditioning. Hotels in the city are currently booked to capacity with people paying for rooms to escape the heat of their own homes.

Working class people and the poor are placed at especially high risk, as lower-income households are far less likely to have air conditioning. Workers are often forced to work in conditions that make it impossible to escape the heat, especially in labouring jobs that may require them to endure hours of blistering heat outdoors.

The contempt felt by the political establishment towards the most vulnerable sections of the population hit hard by the heat wave was summed up Tuesday by BC Premier John Horgan of the New Democratic Party (NDP). The social democrat Horgan callously stated during a press conference that "fatalities are a part of life."

Horgan added that the public was "acutely aware" of the imminent period of extreme heat, and remarked that "it was apparent to anyone who walked outdoors that we were in an unprecedented heat wave and again, there's a level of personal responsibility."

A backlash followed, with many residents of the province taking to social media to express their shock and disgust that an elected official would make such brazenly insensitive remarks during the overlapping crises of both the pandemic and the deadly heat wave.

Horgan's outrageous words are of a piece with his government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was to keep workplaces and schools open while blaming working people for spreading the virus. His total indifference to the significant loss of human life is reminiscent of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who infamously declared in face of a surging pandemic, "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high!"

The devastating developments in BC this week are only a foretaste of what is to come over the years ahead if serious action to combat climate change is not undertaken. Canada's Changing Climate Report, published in 2019, warned that the effects of climate change were set to intensify over the coming years. "These effects include more extreme heat, less extreme cold, longer growing seasons, shorter snow and ice cover seasons, earlier spring peak streamflow, thinning glaciers, thawing permafrost, and rising sea level," the report noted.

Despite innumerable climate pledges made by governments at the provincial and federal levels in Canada and their counterparts across the world, the capitalist system is wholly incapable of resolving the imminent threats faced by the planet and its population. Whether it is Horgan's NDP in BC, Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, or the Democratic Biden administration in Washington, they all place the accumulation of corporate profits ahead of any genuine attempt to protect working people from the social and environmental ravages of climate change.

The steps urgently needed to combat the climate crisis cannot be taken within the capitalist profit system, which exists to defend the accumulation of wealth and private profit by the ruling classes, and fosters nationalist rivalries and divisions. The existential threats facing humanity and the planet can only truly be resolved on the basis of an internationally coordinated plan guided by a socialist program.

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