

Remaining public health measures abolished as ruling class intensifies Canada-wide reopening drive

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On July 1, all remaining COVID-19 public health orders were lifted in the province of Alberta. Hard-right Premier Jason Kenney deliberately chose the date to coincide with Canada Day and precede the beginning of the Calgary Stampede, which is expected to bring hundreds of thousands of visitors to the province in what can only be described as a criminally reckless policy of mass infection and death.

The Kenney government's announcement is merely the most extreme example of the rapid reopening campaign underway across every province and territory in the country.

The across-the-board retraction of what little public health measures remain comes in the wake of a newly published report by the Royal Society of Canada that estimates that the number of COVID-19 deaths in the country is likely significantly higher than the officially reported fatality count.

The report's findings indicate that the actual death toll in Canada may be as much as two times higher than the 26,000 COVID-19 deaths accounted for to date. It estimates that, by March 31, 2021, some 3.5 million people living in Canada might have been infected with SARS-CoV-2, as opposed to the 1.42 million cases on record. The report stated that the deaths that have not been counted have most likely occurred in low-income neighbourhoods and among essential workers.

Reopening in the light of these findings only underscores the complete disregard for the working class by the Canadian ruling class, and the dire consequences of the profit-before-lives agenda that has been pursued throughout the pandemic.

Ardent attempts are being made to justify the reopening drive by citing an increase in the percentage of provincial populations that have been vaccinated. The threat of the Delta variant is seldom acknowledged when these inoculation figures are touted at press conferences, even though the highly transmissible strain reduces the effectiveness of one dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine and mRNA vaccines (such as the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines) to just 33 percent.

Furthermore, the widespread prevalence of cases in a given population can undermine the protection that vaccines provide. In Israel, initial data suggests that the efficacy of the Pfizer vaccine has declined due to a surge in Delta variant cases. This has occurred despite 56 percent of eligible Israelis having received a full dosage of the vaccine.

As of July 6 in Alberta, 73.5 percent of the population aged 12 and over had received one shot of a vaccine. Only 49.6 percent of the eligible population are fully vaccinated as of this writing, meaning more than half of the province's residents are still at appreciable risk of contracting the life-threatening virus.

As of this same day, there are a reported 763 active cases of the virus in Alberta, with 138 people hospitalized and 32 of those people in intensive care units.

Yet, on July 1, all remaining health restrictions were lifted in Alberta as Stage 3 of the "Open for Summer" plan was implemented. There no longer stands a capacity limit on any kind of indoor gathering, and restaurants, bars, gyms and retail stores are permitted to resume normal operation with full occupancy loads. Mask mandates are now nonexistent for indoor public spaces, except for a few settings such as on public transport.

Alberta chief medical officer of health Dr. Deena Hinshaw delivered her final regularly scheduled COVID-19 briefing on June 29, noting that cases and vaccination numbers would no longer be reported on weekends. Pandemic updates would only be provided "when needed," she added.

While Alberta public officials have claimed that the impact of the reopening will be closely monitored, Kenney has said he does not plan to bring back restrictions and that the province is not only open for summer but "open for good."

In neighbouring British Columbia, John Horgan's New Democratic Party (NDP) government entered the third step of its reopening plan on July 1. Mask mandates were scrapped and outdoor gatherings of up to 5,000 people were permitted.

Restaurants and pubs in BC are allowed to operate at 50 percent capacity, and this same rule applies to casinos and nightclubs, which were allowed to reopen on July 8 after closing at the start of the pandemic. These last, minor restrictions will be done away with in entirety on September 6, a mere eight weeks from now.

Under Horgan's leadership, the BC NDP has rammed through this reopening with complete indifference to the fact that, for the eligible population aged 12 and over, only 36 percent of people were fully vaccinated as of July 5. There are a reported 652 active COVID-19 cases in the province, with 87 people hospitalized and five active outbreaks in long-term care facilities.

Another province that has repealed its public mask mandate is Saskatchewan. On July 11, Saskatchewan will follow in Alberta's

steps and lift all of its remaining public health orders, including mask mandates.

While mask mandates remain in place in Ontario, other restrictions are being significantly relaxed. As of July 16, social gatherings of up to 100 people will be permitted outdoors, while nightclubs will be allowed to welcome 250 guests. Indoor dining will be allowed without any restrictions on table occupancy, while outdoor sporting events can be attended by 15,000 people.

In Quebec, all regional alert levels were lowered to “green zone” status on June 28. New rules pertaining to fully vaccinated Quebecers went into effect on June 25, meaning that those who are fully inoculated can now forgo wearing a mask and do not need to physically distance themselves. Gyms and restaurant dining rooms were allowed to reopen in the province last month, and sporting events and festivals are currently allowed to host up to 3,500 attendees.

At a press conference this week, Quebec Health Minister Christian Dubé categorically ruled out any return to lockdown measures—even if cases soar in coming weeks due to the Delta variant.

Dubé stated that the province has no intention of returning to a full-blown lockdown, all the while acknowledging that a resurgence of cases is indeed possible.

“At some point, we’ll need to make choices as a society,” he told reporters. “If there’s an important increase in cases in September, we can’t re-confine people after what we have lived through over the past 15, 16 months.”

At Dubé’s press conference, he addressed the severe overcrowding taking place at two Montreal emergency rooms, explaining that residents were asked to avoid the Maisonneuve-Rosemont and Santa Cabrini hospitals last weekend. Dubé said that the hospital was overwhelmed not due to a surge in patients, but due to extreme staffing shortages. In late June, Gatineau Hospital was also forced to close its emergency department in the daytime, as so few staff were available that an adequate level of care would have been impossible to provide to patients.

A tragic example of the consequences of this drastic overcrowding and understaffing in Quebec’s hospitals is the case of Anne Pommainville, a 58-year-old Gatineau woman who went to Hull Hospital’s emergency room complaining of extreme stomach pains. Pommainville was in too much pain to sit in a chair, but there were no beds available and so she was forced to lie on the ER floor for hours awaiting treatment.

Pommainville eventually saw a doctor. However, she was transferred to a different hospital for surgery without her family’s knowledge. Almost 48 hours later, her family was informed of her transfer—at which time her husband was told that she had died.

Such staffing shortages are becoming increasingly common in the health care sector. Emotionally drained nurses and other health care workers have been forced to work in horrific conditions throughout the pandemic. Bearing witness to unprecedented rates of death and illness, they were thrust into the pandemic with severely inadequate personal protective equipment supplies.

In caring for the global population, health care workers have risked contracting the virus themselves and spreading it to their loved ones.

As these exhausted workers take their deserved leave, the chronically understaffed hospital settings are unable to cope. This crisis in the public health system existed long before the start of the pandemic, as governments have slashed health care funding for decades. All parties that have come to power—from the social democratic NDP to the Liberals, Conservatives, Quebec nationalist Parti Québécois, and Coalition Avenir Québec—have for decades gutted the public health care system.

Additional consequences are bound up with this. For example, 145,000 residents of Quebec were awaiting surgery as of June 2021. By this October, Dubé has stated that number is expected to have risen to 150,000. Of those currently awaiting surgery, 19,000 have been waiting for over a year, up from approximately 4,000 prior to the onset of the pandemic.

On July 7, the World Health Organization (WHO) urged “extreme caution” against completely lifting public health measures.

“This is not a flat curve, this is an increasing curve. Making assumptions that transmission will not increase because we’re opening up because of vaccines is a false assumption, transmission will increase when you open up. There are consequences,” said Dr. Mike Ryan, executive director of WHO’s Health Emergencies Program.

For Canada’s entire political and financial establishments, committed wholeheartedly to prioritizing corporate profits over human lives, these “consequences” are of little concern. The reckless policies now being enforced by parties of all political stripes have been facilitated by the federal Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau, which declared in its throne speech last fall that all coronavirus-related measures must be “short-term” and implemented at the “local” level, i.e., totally ineffectual.

The Trudeau government’s determination to keep the economy and schools open led to the deaths of over 10,000 people last winter during the second wave and thousands more this spring during Canada’s third wave. Absent the political intervention of the working class to safeguard human lives amid a looming resurgence of the deadly virus, the ruling class will pave the way for yet another deadly wave of infections and deaths.



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