

Canada enters fourth COVID-19 wave, as governments gut remaining public health measures

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Canada is entering a deadly fourth wave of COVID-19, with new infections on the rise across the country. This trend, which has seen the number of active cases more than double to over 13,000 in the past two weeks, will only accelerate in coming weeks due to the drive of Canada's ruling elite to reopen all businesses and schools so corporate profit-making can be maximized.

"The latest national surveillance data indicate that a fourth wave is underway in Canada and that cases are plotting along a strong resurgence trajectory," warned Canada's chief public health officer, Theresa Tam, at a Thursday press conference. Tam explained that an average of 1,500 new infections are now being reported daily, with the 20 to 39 age group most severely impacted.

Tam added that the increase in case numbers is already leading to a rise in serious illness and hospitalizations. "On average, 511 people with COVID-19 are being treated in the hospitals each day, an increase of 12 percent compared to last week," she said.

Around 40 percent of the Canadian population, including all children 11 and younger, are yet to be fully vaccinated. This leaves millions exposed to the threat of infection from the Delta variant, which is many times more transmissible than the original virus. Evidence is also emerging that those who are fully vaccinated still face a significant risk of so-called breakthrough infections. The Delta variant has also been observed to cause more serious symptoms among those it infects, with figures suggesting that 1 percent of all children infected by the variant end up in hospital and 10 to 33 percent suffer from long-term effects.

Warning of the threat the Delta variant poses to the still large unvaccinated population, Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious diseases physician and member of Ontario's vaccine task force, commented, "If a large proportion of those individuals get sick in a short period of time, our health care system is going to get stretched and we'll be in trouble."

This worst-case scenario is made all the more likely because governments at all levels, from Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government to the hard-right provincial governments in Alberta

and Ontario, and the union-backed New Democratic Party government in British Columbia, are pursuing a homicidal policy of prioritizing big business profits over saving human lives. As the fourth wave gathers strength, they are recklessly abandoning even the limited public health measures that proved inadequate to stop the pandemic's previous three waves, which claimed over 26,600 lives.

In Ontario and Quebec, the country's most populous provinces, the Progressive Conservative and Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) governments are moving to fully reopen schools to in-person learning, while scrapping most of the limited social distancing measures that failed to prevent schools from becoming major sources of transmission last fall and in the spring. While mask-mandates remain, the Ontario and Quebec governments have greenlighted the resumption of all non-essential economic activity, including retail, entertainment and sporting events.

British Columbia, governed by the nominally left-wing NDP, along with Manitoba and Saskatchewan—which suffered devastating second and third waves of the pandemic—have hastened to remove all mask mandates and scrapped most capacity limits on indoor and outdoor gatherings. In the Atlantic provinces and the northern territories, parallel processes are underway.

Alberta's right-wing populist United Conservative Party (UCP) government has led the way in gutting COVID-19 restrictions. As of this coming Monday, August 16, it intended to end virtually all contact tracing and even abolish the self-isolation requirement for people who tested positive for COVID-19. Two weeks later, on August 31, the UCP government planned to scrap virtually all COVID-19 testing, with testing limited to those exhibiting severe symptoms. Instead, a wastewater surveillance system was to alert public health authorities to generalized COVID-19 hotspots, a method of tracking the virus' spread that the World Health Organization cautions should be used only as "complement" to a full test and trace system. Finally, the government intended to eliminate all mask mandates by the end of August.

The unveiling of this criminal policy in late July triggered

public outrage and protest rallies across Alberta. Significantly, the latter were organized by doctors and other medical professionals independently of the trade unions, which in the province's major industries, from energy, mining and construction to meatpacking, have enforced the government's policy of working full tilt through the pandemic. The public outcry led the Edmonton Public and Edmonton Catholic school boards to write the government this week demanding authorization to require anyone infected by COVID-19 to self-isolate and everyone to wear masks in schools.

Faced with this public backlash and a sharp rise in infections produced by last month's abandonment of limits on the size of gatherings, the UCP government convened an emergency cabinet meeting Thursday evening and yesterday announced a temporary delay to its plans to dismantle all remaining public health measures. The requirement that people who test positive for COVID-19 or display symptoms must self-isolate will now remain in place until September 27. Contact tracing will also continue for the next six weeks. However, schools will open with no mask mandate in September. Making clear that the government plans to stick to its course, the province's chief medical officer of health, Deena Hinshaw, declared, "We are not going backwards. We are pausing to monitor and assess before taking a next step forward."

Prior to Friday's "pause" announcement, Hinshaw published an op-ed in several major newspapers in an attempt to blunt the fierce criticism of the government's course. She said she "apologized." Only this apology was not for recommending a health policy that would overwhelm hospital ICUs and put children on ventilators, but for the "confusion, fear or anger" the government's critics felt. Hinshaw tried to justify the government's profit before lives policy by claiming that the fight against COVID-19 was draining scant public resources from other health crises, like the opioid epidemic. "COVID-19 is a wicked problem," she intoned, "But it is not the only wicked problem."

Hinshaw's lament about the damage caused by taking life-saving measures to fight COVID-19 is a self-serving lie of monstrous proportions—made all the more egregious in that the UCP government she serves is currently in the process of slashing thousands of health care jobs. The truth is the public health system in Alberta, as across the country, has been starved and gutted for decades by governments of all political stripes, even as the profits of the corporations and the wealth of the super-rich have soared. There is one spigot of cash for the big banks and corporations, which gushes continuously, and one for health care and other social services, which has been wrenched ever more tightly shut.

The UCP's temporary retreat in no way represents a turn away from its reckless pandemic policy of placing corporate profits ahead of human lives. In reality, this is a policy endorsed by the entire political establishment. In Ontario, the Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government plans to

throw schools open in September although it is fully cognizant this will promote the rapid spread of the Delta variant among unvaccinated children. Ontario Chief Medical Officer of Health Kieran Moore callously asserted last week that he expects between 10 and 15 percent of students at any one time to have COVID-19. "We have to normalize COVID-19 for our schools," he declared.

Prior to Friday's announcement, federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu made a show of criticizing the Alberta government's proposed measures, while studiously avoiding using any of the powers at Ottawa's disposal to actually overturn them. Hajdu sent a letter to her provincial counterpart, Tyler Shandro, in which she termed them an "unnecessary and risky gamble." She noted that recent modeling of the pandemic in Alberta forecasts the runaway spread of the Delta variant and asked that the UCP government furnish the scientific rationale behind its course of action.

This is cynical posturing. The federal Liberal government in which Hajdu serves has been no less ruthless in prioritizing the profits of big business over safeguarding human lives than their UCP counterparts in Alberta. The Justin Trudeau Liberal government's pandemic response was defined by the more than \$600 billion in emergency bailout funds it funnelled into the financial markets and coffers of Canada's big banks and corporations in March–April 2020, so as to protect their profits and investor wealth. It then unleashed, with the full support of the trade unions and the New Democrats, a murderous back-to-work/back-to-school campaign that played the pivotal role in fuelling the pandemic's second and third waves.

Masking their full agreement with the herd immunity policies pursued across by Canada behind a charade of upholding the provinces' constitutional responsibility for administering health care, the federal Liberal government continues to insist that all lockdown measures to fight the spread of COVID-19 be "short-term" and implemented at the "local" level. In this, they have been provided critical support by the federal NDP, which has guaranteed the minority Liberal government its parliamentary majority throughout the pandemic.



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