Alberta nurses protest forced overtime, government's mishandling of pandemic

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Protests and mounting threats of strike action are developing among nurses in Alberta, Canada as the deadly fourth pandemic wave gathers pace. Health care workers are outraged over the hard-right United Conservative Party's (UCP) disastrous mishandling of COVID-19, and its imposition of forced overtime on chronically underpaid and understaffed nurses.

Alberta has reported the highest number of confirmed cases per capita in the country with 6 in every 100 residents testing COVID-19 positive since March 2020. The province, with a population of 4 million, currently has over 13,400 active cases. Since last year at least 2,390 Albertans have by killed by the disease, with a seven-day average of 4 people dying every day as of September 2.

As of Friday, there were 515 people in hospital with COVID-19, including 118 in intensive care. The UCP government was forced last Monday to reverse course on its planned abandonment of coronavirus testing for symptomatic patients as of September 27. This was only the latest in a series of minor retreats from the UCP's proposal, initially unveiled in late July, to dismantle all public health measures in the face of widespread popular anger.

This has changed nothing fundamental about the UCP's criminal "herd immunity" strategy, which government officials acknowledge is modelled on that pursued by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Nathan Neudorf, chairman of the UCP's parliamentary caucus, summed this up bluntly when he told *Bridge City News* in Lethbridge on August 27 that he was "very hopeful" Alberta would see a rise in COVID-19 cases among the unvaccinated. "Once these case numbers have gone through the unvaccinated, where do they go?" the Lethbridge-East MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) stated.

The deadly character of these calculations was underscored by a report in Monday's edition of the *Globe and Mail*, which revealed that hospitals in Alberta, and neighbouring British Columbia and Saskatchewan, may soon have to triage COVID-19 patients. Triage refers to the procedure of deciding which patients should receive treatment and who should be left to die.

Nurses are playing a leading role in the mounting opposition among the population to the government and its homicidal "herd immunity" agenda. Having worked on the front lines throughout the pandemic, they have been repaid by the UCP government with demands for wage and premium cuts of 5 percent and the imposition of compulsory overtime.

According to Dr. Shazma Mithani at the emergency department of the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton, nurses are completely stressed and burned out.

The UCP has plans to eliminate as many as 16,700 full- and part-time medical employees through job cuts and privatization. This comes after nurses have seen no wage increase in five years, a period during which both the UCP and nominally "left" New Democratic Party (NDP) were in power. Hundreds of nurses have left the province to seek work elsewhere.

The sustained attacks on health care workers overseen by successive governments, combined with the UCP's homicidal policy of abandoning almost all public health measures designed to combat the pandemic, have produced an entirely predictable health care crisis. As the number of patients in need of care rises sharply, the UCP and management at Alberta Health Services (AHS) have responded by cynically invoking a health care emergency to impose emergency work rules on nurses. These rules allow the government to impose long working hours, cancel vacations, and transfer nurses to other hospitals.

The government has seized on the crisis created by its anti-scientific policies to expand the involvement of private staffing agencies in the health care sector. At the orders of the UCP government, AHS has concluded agreements with three staffing agencies to hire nurses to fill staffing gaps in the province's overwhelmed hospitals. AHS will contract nurses from Toronto-based Greenstaff Medical Canada, Vancouver-based Brylu Staffing, and Airdrie-based Northern Nursing Solutions. Ads for Greenstaff found online show nurses from Ontario and other provinces are being

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offered up to $75 an hour to work in ICU and Emergency units. Alberta nurses represented by the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) are paid between $36.86 and $48.37 an hour, which is at least 3 percent too much according to Finance Minister Travis Toews.

"It's outrageous that AHS, acting on the instructions of the Alberta government, is proposing to reduce the compensation of nurses that it already employs, and threatening to lay off hundreds more, while paying more to nurses hired by the Canadian arm of a multinational recruitment agency based in Texas," said UNA Labour Relations Director David Harrigan in the union's news release.

This is undoubtedly true. But the government's ability to proceed so ruthlessly with gutting the public health care system and allowing the pandemic to run rampant is due in large measure to the policies pursued by the UNA and the union bureaucracy as a whole.

Although support for strike action among nurses against the government's attacks is even acknowledged by UNA president Heather Smith to be widespread, the UNA has done everything to prevent an open struggle by health care workers against the government. It reluctantly sanctioned a series of days of action throughout August, which included information pickets outside hospitals. In late August, it agreed to formal mediation with AHS, which obligates the union to engage in 14 days of bargaining with AHS overseen by a mediator. Only if this process proves fruitless and after another 14-day cooling-off period do nurses even have the opportunity to vote for a strike mandate. Harrigan admitted that even if a strike were to take place, only about 30 percent of UNA members would walk off the job. This is because UNA negotiators agreed to an emergency staffing proposal tabled by AHS management without even consulting nurses.

Last fall, when hundreds of health care support workers took matters into their own hands and launched a wildcat strike against miserable working conditions, the government moved immediately to ban the strike with a court injunction. The Alberta Union of Public Employees rolled over and accepted the injunction, resulting in hundreds of workers being docked pay and subjected to other disciplinary measures.

The unions' sabotaging of workers' struggles has emboldened the UCP to move ahead with the dismantling of public health pandemic measures. On July 29, the Alberta government loosened its rules so that quarantine for close contacts of COVID-infected people was no longer mandatory. Contact tracers no longer notify close contacts, and asymptomatic testing is no longer recommended. The announcement also included plans to abolish mandatory quarantine for infected people and stop all testing. However, daily protests involving thousands of people across the province organized by doctors forced the government to reverse course.

Medicine Hat-based Dr. Paul Parks told CTV News: "We're raising the alarm because we see it's getting worse, and we're really worried we could get to full crisis mode."

Premier Jason Kenney and chief medical officer of health Deena Hinshaw disappeared from public view for three weeks in August as the crisis deepened. A group of doctors responded by calling their own press conferences to provide updates on the worsening COVID-19 situation. Calling themselves Protect Our Province Alberta, the doctors held their first press conference August 30. The doctors, led by Dr. Joe Vipond, a Calgary physician who played a major role in organizing the province-wide protests against the government's abandonment of public health measures, described developments as "incredibly concerning" and "frustrating."

Anger among health care workers is on the rise across the country. In Manitoba, community health care support workers voted by margins of well over 90 percent over the past two weeks for strike action. They are protesting against low pay, poor working conditions, and job security. Nurses in Quebec have engaged in a bitter struggle against the FIQ union's effort to enforce a concessions-filled contract demanded by the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec government. In Ontario, nurses are protesting over horrendous working conditions exacerbated by the pandemic.

The critical task facing health care workers in Alberta and across the country is to translate their anger over the disastrous mishandling of the pandemic and terrible working conditions into organized political opposition. This requires the establishment of health care workers rank-and-file committees to fight for a policy of eradicating COVID-19 and winning good-paying, secure jobs for all.

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