

Alberta's overwhelmed hospitals on verge of leaving patients to die as Canada's fourth pandemic wave accelerates

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A fourth pandemic wave that threatens to be the deadliest yet is gathering pace across Canada. It is being driven by the reckless open economy/open schools policy pursued by provincial governments from coast to coast and overseen by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government.

The epicentre of the current wave is Alberta, where hospitals, overwhelmed by the deluge of gravely ill COVID-19 patients, are on the verge of having to deny some of them treatment—effectively choosing those who will be left to die. Cancer patients and those with other life-threatening conditions have already had vital medical procedures postponed for want of ICU beds and medical personnel.

Currently, Alberta's intensive care units are at 87 percent of surge capacity, which includes beds hastily added in recent weeks. Absent these extra beds, the province's ICUs would currently be at 174 percent of their capacity. When the surge capacity level reaches 90 percent, which appears to be only days, if not hours, away, hospitals will be forced to invoke their "triage" protocols, meaning that patients deemed least likely to survive will be denied life-saving care.

As of Wednesday, there were 1,040 COVID-19 patients in Alberta's hospitals, the highest at any time since the pandemic began, and 230 in ICU beds. Over the previous seven days, the number receiving ICU treatment increased by 13 percent.

On Wednesday 20 deaths in Alberta were attributed to COVID-19, including that of an 18-year-old woman. "This is a tragic moment for our society," said Dr. Joe Vipond, a Calgary emergency physician, who has repeatedly criticized the provincial United Conservative Party (UCP) government for its reckless decision at the beginning of the summer to declare the pandemic "over" and scrap virtually all anti-COVID measures. "This person, who otherwise would have had a good life, died because they live in Alberta. And I'm so sorry to the parents and friends and family of this person."

Alberta—with a population of just 4.4 million, or roughly 12 percent of Canada's total population—is currently reporting over 1,600 new infections every day or about one-third of all new cases across Canada. Given that hospitalizations typically lag several weeks behind initial infections, there is little to no

likelihood the pressure on the health care system will abate in the coming weeks.

On July 1, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney declared the province "open for summer," and later that month, his government unveiled plans to scrap quarantine mandates, limits on gatherings, contact tracing and almost all COVID-19 testing. After weeks of daily protests and popular outrage, the government was forced to backpedal and delay the ending of mass testing and the requirement that infected people self-isolate, but otherwise Alberta pressed forward with its "post-pandemic" plan.

Last week, with hospitals already at the point of collapse, Kenney re-imposed a public health emergency and various social distancing measures. These included limiting the capacity for indoor dining, various social and recreational activities, and making it mandatory for students in Grade 4 and higher to wear masks. However, the UCP government insists schools remain fully open for in-person instruction, and greenlighted businesses that want to force all their staff to keep working on site, especially in the resource, food-processing, manufacturing and construction sectors, to do so.

Alberta's devastating fourth wave and Kenney's cynical, but nonetheless politically damaging, "apology" to Albertans for getting the province's reopening plan "wrong" has shaken the UCP government. On Tuesday, Tyler Shandro was shuffled out of the health ministry and replaced by the labour minister, Jason Copping.

At a meeting of UCP legislators Wednesday, Kenney came under attack from all sides. Fearing for their seats in next year's provincial election, several MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) attacked the Premier for failing to respond to the crisis quickly enough. Far stronger fire, however, was directed at Kenney from the UCP's substantial far-right faction, which opposes any effort, no matter how limited, to curb the spread of the virus. In order to fend off an immediate leadership challenge, Kenney agreed to the UCP holding a formal party vote on his leadership next spring.

Seeking to shift blame for the disaster he and his government have done so much to create, Kenney has cynically tried to

focus attention on long-term staffing issues. “One key lesson of the COVID era is that we must expand the capacity of Canada’s health-care system,” he declared this week, adding that his government will join “all of the provinces in calling” on Ottawa “for a significant increase in the Canada Health Transfer to reflect rising health-care costs.”

Kenney’s government has been slashing social spending, including health care, since it came to power in 2019. Earlier this summer, the government demanded that nurses accept pay and benefit cuts equal to a 5 percent salary rollback.

While Alberta is currently bearing the brunt of the pandemic, the reckless reopening policies supported by all parties are threatening to cause a surge in new infections and deaths across the country. Modeling released by the Public Health Agency of Canada on August 30 showed that if new restrictions were not put in place, cases would surpass the highs of the second and third waves, approaching 15,000 daily cases in October.

In neighbouring Saskatchewan, hospitalizations have reached record highs with 262 people being treated for COVID-19, including 54 in intensive care. Cases and hospitalizations have risen sharply since the province dropped most restrictions in mid-July. Mask mandates were only belatedly re-instituted last week. Four children are currently in non-ICU care in the province.

The increase in transmission is clearly being exacerbated by the return to in-person schooling, which the ruling class views as necessary to facilitate parents returning to work so they can generate profits for big business. As children under the age of 12 are not eligible for vaccination, they are especially vulnerable to the more virulent and transmissible Delta variant of the virus. Outbreaks have forced the closure of schools across the country.

In Ontario, there have been 1,313 confirmed cases and 12 hospitalizations among those under the age of 10 in the span of just 2 weeks. The province’s chief medical officer, Kieran Moore, who at the start of the month boasted the province had made “incredible strides” to “confidently get our children back in the classroom,” has claimed that the rise in cases among students is being driven by community transmission outside of schools themselves. Moore, who infamously declared in August that it was necessary to “normalize” COVID-19 in our schools, did not explain how this determination has been made. Case numbers among students and school staff far exceed what was recorded at the same time last year.

During the federal election campaign, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau strained to find differences between his government’s approach to the pandemic and that of the federal Conservatives and the UCP of Jason Kenney, a prominent ally and supporter of Conservative leader Erin O’Toole. Ultimately, Trudeau seized on the surge in infections and deaths in Alberta to contrast his government’s approach to the pandemic with that of the Tories.

Speaking at a Calgary rally, Trudeau declared, “I know you

see what happens when Conservatives make decisions that aren’t based on science.” Of course, the Liberal prime minister conveniently ignored the fact that his government did nothing to stop Kenney scrapping public health measures, merely asking Edmonton to inform federal officials about the “science” on which it was acting. This was not an oversight, but the product of the ruling class’s pandemic policy, which prioritizes the protection of corporate profits over the safeguarding of human life.

It is this same federal government that the corporatist trade unions are now pleading to rescue Alberta’s health care system from the brink. On September 18, the heads of the United Nurses of Alberta, (UNA), the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), the Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Alberta sent a letter to Kenney urging him to seek federal support.

In a separate letter on September 21 the chief of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions Linda Silas wrote to Trudeau directly, congratulating him on the Liberals’ retention of power following Monday’s federal election and requesting a meeting of “healthcare leaders.” Silas pointed to the brutal conditions facing nurses, citing surveys that found 90 percent of nurses reported burnout prior to the pandemic, average weekly overtime increased by 78 percent during the pandemic, and 60 percent of nurses plan to resign from their jobs within a year.

The union leadership is cynically trying to hide the fact that it has mobilized no opposition to Kenney’s “herd immunity” policies and has suppressed independent action on the part of its members. When health care workers in the province launched a wildcat strike last October over low pay and miserable working conditions, the AUPE quickly accepted a government order that banned job action. The UNA has avoided calling job action by nurses for months in opposition to the Kenney government’s cost-cutting drive even though strike action enjoys widespread support.

In contrast to the unions’ bitter hostility to any struggle by workers to resist the ruling class’s homicidal agenda, thousands of Albertans over the past three months have joined protests organized by medical professionals to demand a science-based approach to the pandemic that prioritizes saving lives.



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