

Mobilize the working class to stop Alberta's COVID-19 catastrophe! For an immediate shutdown of all schools and nonessential businesses!

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The COVID-19 catastrophe now ravaging Alberta is a social crime. Canada's fourth most populous province has been subjected to a cruel and inhuman experiment by Jason Kenney and his United Conservative Party (UCP) government. On July 1, Kenney declared Alberta "open for summer," making the province the first in Canada to scrap all COVID-19 safeguards. The entirely predictable results of this homicidal policy are now plain for all to see: skyrocketing infections, a collapsing health care system, and a looming wave of unnecessary and preventable deaths.

Albertans are already dying from COVID-19 at more than three times the national rate, according to figures gathered for a seven-day period beginning September 20. In neighbouring Saskatchewan, the death rate is almost four times the national average. Both provinces are led by hard-right conservative governments that have spearheaded the dismantling of all pandemic public health measures.

Hospitals in Alberta's northern zone surpassed 100 percent ICU surge capacity on Wednesday, four days after the first reports emerged of doctors invoking triage protocols due to shortages of beds, ventilators or trained personnel. Under triage, patients deemed least likely to survive are denied life-saving treatment.

Hospitals in the northern zone, which includes Grand Prairie and Fort McMurray, transferred 33 patients to Edmonton between September 15 and 22 to receive care. But even this respite cannot continue much longer. The latest figures show that there are 313 intensive care patients across the province, which has just 373 ICU beds, including all those added in recent weeks as surge capacity.

Infections have risen more than seven-fold since Aug. 1 to more than 1,500 per day, even as testing has been scaled back, and are now close to the peaks reached at the height of the province's second and third waves. The government's own modelling shows that daily infections will continue to rise for weeks to come, indicating that the strain on the health care system will not soon abate. On Monday, Alberta had 21,307 active COVID-19 cases, almost half of the Canadian total; yet the province accounts for little more than 10 percent of the country's population.

The dire state of affairs was laid bare in a statement from the Canadian Medical Association Wednesday, which appealed for a "circuit-breaker" lockdown. CMA president Dr. Catherine Smart said, "We are now witnessing an unprecedented health care crisis in Alberta and Saskatchewan, and patients and health care workers are

facing unfathomable choices and consequences. ...What is happening is as heartbreaking as it was preventable."

This is merely the latest in a series of desperate warnings from doctors and medical organizations, all of which Kenney has blithely ignored. The premier, who spent the first six months of the pandemic comparing COVID-19 to the flu, and has modelled his COVID-19 policy on Trump's and Boris Johnson's, cynically described the CMA's proposed lockdown as "unfair" to the vaccinated.

One of the main driving forces of Alberta's and Canada's fourth pandemic wave is in-person schooling. The Kenney government reopened schools at the beginning of September after eliminating all COVID-19 protections. Even contact tracing was scrapped.

Conditions in Edmonton are emblematic of the disaster unfolding across the province's schools. On Tuesday, Edmonton Public Schools published an alarming report noting the presence of 573 self-identified infections across its school system, almost 10 times more than the 68 recorded at the same time last year. The infections have been located at 165 schools across the city. "That's 78 percent of our schools that have cases of COVID," remarked board chairwoman Trisha Estabrooks. "Seventy percent of that total number of COVID cases are in our kindergarten to grade 6 (population), among students who can't be vaccinated. We have 57,000 elementary students that aren't eligible to receive a COVID vaccine."

Estabrooks criticized the government's halt to case reporting and contact tracing, which has left the school board to document self-reported cases independently. She added, "We know that (573) isn't accurate. We know there are more."

Infection rates are also rising sharply among children in rural areas, where vaccination rates among the adult population are lower.

The only way to put an end to this accelerating catastrophe is for working people across the province and Canada to take up the fight for a hard lockdown, including an immediate and complete shutdown of all nonessential production. This must be combined with the closure of all schools to in-person learning and the payment of full wages to all workers affected, funded by the confiscation of the wealth accumulated by the pandemic profiteers over the past 18 months. To wage a struggle for these urgently necessary measures, workers must form rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, school, and neighbourhood across the province to coordinate a mass mobilization in opposition to the political establishment, which bears full

responsibility for the rising toll of infections and deaths.

This struggle must not stop at the provincial borders of Alberta. Workers across Canada and internationally have an urgent interest in mobilizing to eliminate and eradicate the virus, which does not respect borders. Cases among school age children are already spiking dramatically in neighbouring British Columbia, while Ontario has recorded over 1,500 infections among school-aged children since in-person learning returned three weeks ago. Without the decisive intervention of the working class, the nightmarish conditions gripping Alberta will sooner rather than later be the reality for the entire country.

Kenney implemented his homicidal reopening strategy with the support of the entire Canadian ruling elite. Justin Trudeau only got round to criticizing him almost three months later, in the dying days of the federal election campaign, so as to score some political points against Conservative leader Erin O'Toole, a close Kenney ally. Significantly, the Alberta premier, at his latest press conference Tuesday, approvingly cited the reopening policy of John Horgan's New Democratic Party government in British Columbia, which has rejected school closures out of hand.

The UCP government's policy of mass infection and death is the spearhead of the murderous pandemic response supported by the entire ruling elite, which has already claimed the lives of over 27,700 Canadians. Last fall, the Trudeau government urged provincial governments to impose only "short-term" lockdowns, restricted to the "local" level if infections spiked. Trudeau also applauded the reopening of schools across all provinces. These policies resulted in the second wave over the winter, with over 10,000 fatalities. During the recent federal election, which Trudeau irresponsibly triggered as a fourth wave was erupting, none of the parties proposed any strategy to suppress the virus. Their support for the back-to-work/back-to-school campaign and claim that it is possible to vaccinate our way out of the pandemic without taking any other public health measures has led directly to a swelling fourth wave that could prove to be the most devastating yet.

The lack of popular support for this "profits before lives" strategy, which has facilitated a vast explosion of the wealth controlled by Canada's big banks and super-rich, is underscored by the deepening crisis of the Kenney government. He is under attack from all sides, with ongoing efforts to oust him as UCP leader. A faction of the party, fearing that the UCP will be wiped out at the next election, is demanding Kenney impose stricter public health measures. A far more vocal far-right faction is denouncing Kenney for re-imposing the most limited social distancing measures.

Kenney's crisis-ridden government confronts an even greater threat from the working class, which is moving into struggle against its homicidal pandemic policy and savage austerity measures. In a move ostensibly aimed at combatting protests by right-wing extremists and anti-vaccine groups outside health care facilities over recent weeks, Kenney announced Tuesday that hospitals would be added to the list of protected sites under the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act. This law now criminalizes all protests at the relevant sites, including those by health care workers against the government. The CIDA was first introduced in 2020 following railway blockades by anti-pipeline protesters.

There is no doubt that the real target of this measure is the working class. Nurses have been demanding strike action for months after the government sought to impose a pay and benefit cut of 5 percent. Public sector workers have protested on various occasions over the

past year due to low pay, wage cuts and social spending rollbacks. Just this week, over 10,000 supermarket workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action, citing the risks posed by COVID-19 as a major concern.

The only reason this simmering class anger has yet to develop into an open political clash with the Kenney government is that the trade unions have done everything in their power to smother and sabotage social opposition. Even now, with hospitals on the verge of collapse and patients being denied care, all the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) could muster Wednesday was a polite appeal to "the provincial and federal governments," i.e. the very people responsible for the current catastrophe, to implement a "firebreaker lockdown." The union federation, which claims to represent 175,000 workers, also called for financial support to workers and businesses "similar to what we saw in the first wave of the pandemic nationally," i.e. poverty-level, makeshift benefits to workers and unlimited funds for the major corporations.

These pathetic appeals come from an organization that has done absolutely nothing to mobilize workers against the entirely predictable fourth wave. It was only thanks to the courageous actions of doctors and other medical professionals, acting independently of the trade unions, that any protests against the Kenney government's murderous reopening agenda took place. Those protests, which won support from tens of thousands of Albertans over the course of several weeks in late July and August, provided a glimpse of the depth of popular hostility to the ruling class' disastrous handling of the pandemic. Precisely for that reason, out of fear that a social explosion could be triggered that would disrupt the unions' cozy corporatist ties with big business and governments at all levels, the AFL's Wednesday statement did not propose a single protest or action that workers should take to enforce a change in course.

Only the independent political mobilization of the working class in Alberta and across Canada can impose a lockdown and other public health measures that are so urgently needed. Contact tracing, vaccinations, case isolation and mass testing must be deployed as part of a comprehensive strategy to eliminate and eradicate COVID-19.

To prevent a repetition of the horrendous scenes of mass casualties witnessed in New York and Italy in the pandemic's initial stages, and in India earlier this year, workers must organize rank-and-file committees and immediately begin organizing strikes and other forms of protest, such as today's international school strike initiated by British parents. Their aim will be to enforce a shutdown of all nonessential production with full compensation for all workers impacted. This must be coupled with a political struggle directed against capitalist austerity and for the placing of the health and social needs of society as a whole ahead of the profits of the wealthy few.



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