Canada’s military sends nurses to Alberta hospitals as COVID-19 crisis worsens

Dylan Lubao
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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage out of control in Alberta, with an increasing number of reports that overwhelmed hospitals are being forced to deny care to patients. On Monday, the Canadian Armed Forces deployed a contingent of eight critical care nurses to Edmonton, the provincial capital, to assist with overwhelmed ICUs.

The Delta-driven fourth wave has seen the most hospitalizations in Alberta since the pandemic began, with 1,079 people now actively under care. Alberta Health Services (AHS) reports that out of 347 ICU beds, including recently added “surge” beds, 307 are in use. Dr. Verna Yiu, head of AHS, was forced to admit that hospitals “are only able to keep pace with some of these sort of numbers because, in part, some of our ICU patients have passed away.”

Emergency and ICU departments have essentially been forced to implement aspects of their triage protocols, under which those deemed least likely to survive are denied needed care. Dr. Paul Parks, head of emergency medicine for the Alberta Medical Association, told CTV News that some critically ill COVID-19 patients who would normally be on ventilators in the ICU have been denied them because of a lack of resources and staff.

Dr. Parks warned that full implementation of triage is not far off. This would include making decisions about which patients, including children, would receive life-saving care, and potentially removing some COVID-stricken patients from ventilators. AHS has been forced to cancel approximately 8,500 surgeries since August, including 805 pediatric surgeries, as the health care system simply cannot cope. Some twenty pregnant women were treated for COVID-19 symptoms in Alberta’s hospitals during August and September. At least one tragically lost her life.

Further pressure is building on the health care system from the as yet poorly understood impact of Long COVID. According to an article in yesterday’s *Globe and Mail*, 80 percent of patients treated in an Alberta hospital for COVID-19 returned to the emergency room within one month of being discharged. Out of those who returned, 17 percent were readmitted to hospital.

Under these conditions, the arrival of the military nurses, along with 20 medical professionals from the Canadian Red Cross and five or six intensive care staff from Newfoundland and Labrador, is woefully inadequate. The CAF nurses would add, at most, resources for five ICU beds.

Since Premier Jason Kenney announced in July that Alberta was “Open for summer” and subsequently dropped all public health measures to stop the spread of the virus, the number of new COVID-19 cases has rapidly risen to over 1,500 per day. On average, 15 people are dying every day, reaching levels unseen since the second wave of the pandemic last winter, before vaccines were made widely available to the public.

One of the main vectors for transmission of the virus is schools, which were opened with literally no mitigation measures by the United Conservative Party (UCP) government a month ago. Kenney and his ministers claimed that school was the safest place for children to be, suspended all contact tracing, and ordered health authorities not to release infection numbers in schools or identify schools with outbreaks.

Government data shows that children aged 5 to 9 have the highest infection rate of any age group, registering a staggering 726.7 infections per 100,000 people as of October 4. Children aged 10 to 19 were the second-most infected, at 548.4 per 100,000. Underscoring the role of schools as a primary vector of infection, adults aged 30 to 50 experienced similar infection rates, indicating that parents are catching the virus from their school-aged children.

In response to widespread public anger at the raging

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spread of the virus in schools, the Edmonton Public School Board appealed Tuesday to the UCP government to close all schools in the province for at least two weeks. This desperate plea came just days after the board reported that at least one COVID-19 case had been detected in over three-quarters of its schools.

To contain mounting popular outrage, the UCP government has reintroduced a few token measures, including contact tracing and rapid testing in schools. These measures, entirely necessary as part of a comprehensive eradication strategy, are totally inadequate to deal with the current crisis.

The Canadian Medical Association and the Alberta Medical Association have both appealed to ordinary Albertans to lobby the government for a firebreak lockdown of schools and economic activity until the situation in hospitals can be stabilized. The AMA's open letter declares, "The time to act is now. Dire times call for drastic measures."

A petition circulating on Change.org demanding the resignation of Chief Medical Officer Deena Hinshaw and the implementation of a firebreak lockdown collected over 1,700 signatures in the first two days. This action comes on the heels of well-attended and widely-supported protests over the summer against the UCP's reopening drive, which were led by doctors and other medical professionals, independently of the trade unions. Numerous grassroots groups of parents, teachers, and health care workers devoted to opposing the herd immunity policy have also been established.

A ThinkHQ poll released on Monday shows that Kenney's popularity has nose-dived. Of 1,100 respondents, 77 percent disapproved of Kenney's leadership during the pandemic, including 61 percent who strongly disapproved. Even among those who voted UCP in the last election, Kenney's approval does not exceed 40 percent.

Yet this healthy class anger towards Kenney, an unalloyed representative of the banks and big business, finds no political expression in official channels. The Trudeau Liberal government kept quiet during the summer as Kenney dismantled COVID-19 protections, and only shifted to criticizing him when it suited the Liberals' electoral needs during the federal election campaign. While the New Democratic Party opposition has attacked Kenney and the UCP for their disastrous handling of the pandemic, the NDP when in power carried out steep cuts to health care and other public services, earning them the ire of millions of working class Albertans and leading to their ouster after one term in office. Moreover, the NDP government in neighbouring British Columbia is pursuing essentially the same pandemic policy as Kenney.

The union bureaucracy, for its part, has done everything in its power to smother and sabotage all social opposition. With hospitals on the verge of implementing triage protocols and schools infested with the virus, the Alberta Federation of Labour, with 175,000 members, has not organized a single protest or proposed that workers take any action. In its latest statement, the union body merely issued a polite appeal to the "provincial and federal governments," the same governments responsible for the unfolding health care catastrophe.

In a recent interview with CTV, Heather Smith, the president of the United Nurses Alberta union, explicitly discouraged any talk of strikes or protests, insisting, "It's time to take action, not political, but health action." The Alberta Teachers Association, besides tepidly calling for a vaccine mandate for its members, has been virtually silent as thousands of educators and their students are exposed to and catch a deadly virus.

On September 30, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a statement titled, ' Mobilize the working class to stop Alberta's COVID-19 catastrophe! For an immediate shutdown of all schools and nonessential businesses!"

In that statement, we made clear that what is taking place in Alberta is a massive social crime, for which all the major parties as well as the unions are responsible. We insisted that what is required is a political break with these purveyors of mass illness and death. Teachers, nurses and all sections of the working class must create rank-and-file safety committees in each workplace to begin organizing strikes and other forms of protest, with the aim of forcing the adoption of a COVID-19 eradication strategy, not just in Alberta, but across Canada and the world.

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