

Seventh COVID-19 wave sweeps across Canada

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Little more than three months after provincial governments across Canada followed the demand of the far-right “Freedom Convoy” and dismantled all remaining public health protections, another wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths is raging. Despite drastically scaled back screening measures, data from British Columbia to the Atlantic provinces makes clear that Canada confronts a rapidly escalating summer wave, fueled by the more immune-resistant and transmissible BA.5 variant.

In BC, where testing is limited to only a tiny fraction of the population, cases are steadily rising. Hospitalizations and critical care patients have shot up by over a third in the past fortnight. The independent BC COVID-19 Modelling Group estimates that the BA.5 variant now makes up roughly 80 percent of all cases in the province.

In Quebec, hospitalizations, ICU patients and deaths are rising sharply. On July 8, the province reported 17 deaths, the highest single daily death toll in almost two months. Ontario is witnessing similar trends, with the province reporting sharp rises in hospitalization rates at the beginning of July. The PCR test positivity rate rose to 14 percent, a two month high, with the BA.5 variant making up two-thirds of all genomic sequencing. Most ominously, case rates are rising fastest among people in their 80s, which suggests that the virus has found its way into long-term care facilities once again.

On the Atlantic coast, similar trends are being observed. In New Brunswick, hospitalizations doubled in the second week of July, with the BA.5 variant making up almost half of all sequenced cases.

The reaction of governments has been to double down on their profits before life, vaccine-only strategy. Every level of government from Trudeau’s federal Liberals on down has made clear from their total

indifference to the rampant spread of new variants that they will do nothing to stop mass infection and death, and the widespread devastation to the health of the population that will ensue from cases of Long COVID, which can occur in anywhere from 10 percent to 30 percent of all infections.

Attempts to roll out the second COVID-19 booster vaccine, which offers additional protection against severe acute illness, have fallen flat. In BC, Provincial Health Minister Adrian Dix and Penny Ballem, executive lead of BC’s immunization program, held a press conference on July 8 in which they refused to authorize a fourth vaccine dose to the general public. They then bizarrely granted that anybody who wanted a fourth dose was, indeed, eligible to get one.

In Ontario, while fourth doses were initially limited to the elderly and the immuno-compromised, Chief Public Health Officer Kieran Moore did an about face on July 13 and authorized second boosters for the general population aged 18 to 59. Medical professionals such as Colin Furness and Tara Moriarty were quick to note on Twitter that the province’s failure to offer another dose to anyone under the age of 18 showed a reckless disregard for the danger the virus poses to children.

All three prairie provinces are refusing to expand fourth-dose access to the general population. Alberta’s hard-right government led by Jason Kenney is the most restrictive, limiting fourth doses to people aged over 70.

The homicidal policies pursued by governments from coast to coast have produced a situation in which the number of deaths recorded in 2022, with life-saving vaccines widely available, will far surpass the number recorded in 2021. In early July, Montreal daily *La Presse* noted that Quebec recorded more deaths from

COVID in the first six months of 2022 than the entirety of 2021.

Canada surpassed 30,000 COVID-19 deaths in mid-December 2021, as the omicron wave surged across the country. Since then, more than 13,000 official deaths have been recorded, approaching the approximately 15,000 fatalities registered during 2021. With more than five months of the year to go, including the colder fall and winter months when the virus spreads even faster due to people spending more time indoors, 2022 is on course to be the deadliest year of the pandemic in Canada by far.

This scenario is all the more likely given the obstinate refusal of all public health officials to countenance the revival of any serious public health protections. BC Health Minister Dix, as he has done throughout the pandemic, insisted that avoiding infection was a personal responsibility that had nothing to do with public health. Moore also emphasized that Ontario would not institute any new public health measures to combat the current wave, blatantly lying that most Toronto residents are wearing masks in public settings voluntarily. Quebec's Public Health Officer, Luc Boileau, similarly claimed that "basic rules" still apply, without specifying what those actually were, and refused to implement new measures.

The current wave is unfolding under conditions in which the national health care system is by all accounts on the brink of collapse. Massive staff shortages, and overcrowded and closed emergency rooms are being reported across the country. Quebec announced that over 7,000 health care workers are currently absent from work due to COVID-19-related reasons. Authorities in Quebec City urged residents to avoid five emergency rooms at hospitals due to staff shortages.

Data released by Ontario Public Health showed that even before the current summer wave, wait times for hospital beds in the province reached an all-time record high in April. Cathryn Hoy, president of the Ontario Nurses Association, told CBC News on June 16, "I don't think the people of Ontario really know what is going on in the emergency rooms." In British Columbia, rural communities appear to be bearing the brunt of the health care crisis, as small towns across the province, including Port Alberni, Clearwater, Port McNeil, and Merritt, all reported unexpected ward

closures in the past few months due to staff shortages.

As the health care system becomes overwhelmed, demands on nurses and doctors are increasing. The burnout has become increasingly unbearable for many in the profession. One out of every two nurses is seriously considering quitting their jobs because of fatigue and overwork, according to the Canadian Federation of Nurses.

Against the backdrop of a seventh wave of the pandemic, the meeting of Canada's premiers held July 11 and 12 in Victoria, BC, descended into political theatre. The heads of Canada's provincial governments issued a call on the federal government to increase funding for the health care system they acknowledged was on the point of collapse. Trudeau's Liberals, following the example of the hard-right, pro-austerity Harper Conservatives, have ruthlessly enforced real-terms cuts to health care transfers to the provinces since coming to power in 2015. Despite a growing aging population, not to mention inflation, the Trudeau government has restricted annual "increases" to the health care transfers to a meager 3 percent, while making available unlimited funds for Canada's military, and bailouts to the banks and big business.

However, the criticism made by the premiers of the federal Liberals rings hollow. These are the very same premiers who, for the past two and a half years, have prioritized the health of the economy, the big banks and investors over the health of the general public. It is their ruinous pandemic policies that have helped push the health care system into an unprecedented crisis by sickening wide swathes of the public and overworking health care workers to the point of collapse.

For the working class, the choice is increasingly clear. Either they must organize themselves, independently of the mainstream political parties and trade unions, into rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighbourhood to fight for a strategy of global COVID elimination, or they will face a future of endless waves of the deadly virus driven by the homicidal policies of the ruling elite.



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