

Alberta's far-right premier leads charge to criminalize pandemic public health measures

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In Canada and around the world, the ruling class and its servants in the political establishment and media outlets want the population to think that the COVID-19 pandemic is a thing of the past. However, the pandemic can by no means be considered over when the third week of January 2023 saw Canada suffer its deadliest week of COVID deaths yet. Dr. Tara Moriarty, one of the few reliable sources of information on the pandemic left in Canada, noted in her latest update that one in 43 Canadians is currently infected.

One of the worst impacted provinces has been Alberta, which passed the cruel milestone of 10,000 excess deaths since the beginning of the pandemic in early February. No one would guess this based on the actions of the province's far-right premier Danielle Smith. Since coming to power last fall, she has criminalized public health measures and solidarized herself with anti-vaxxers, "Freedom" Convoy activists and other far-right elements who openly flouted anti-COVID measures.

Throughout the pandemic, Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP) government ruthlessly pursued a profits-before-life policy that resulted in successive waves of mass infection and death. Former Premier Jason Kenney described COVID-19 as the "flu" and denounced local officials for adopting mitigation measures. In July 2021, following the lead of then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Kenney declared Alberta "open for the summer"—a criminal decision that soon made the province the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada.

Yet the province's UCP government—notorious for its championing of Big Oil—is so peopled with far-right "Alberta First" elements and dependent on their support that Kenney, once a key minister in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government,

was deemed too "moderate" on the pandemic and removed from his job. Smith campaigned to replace him with open appeals to supporters of the fascistic "Freedom" Convoy, which occupied downtown Ottawa, Ontario, for three weeks in January and February 2022 with support from a powerful faction of the ruling elite, including the official opposition Conservatives in Parliament. The Convoy's instigators and leaders advocated the establishment of an authoritarian junta to scrap all pandemic-related measures.

Smith has explicitly supported organizers of the February 2022 blockade of the Coutts border crossing in Alberta, who were heavily armed and threatened violence against the police. She intervened late last year to urge the dropping of charges against them, a move widely seen as a blatant violation of the independence of the judiciary. Smith has also intensified the "let it rip" policies of her predecessor Kenney with faithful devotion to the pseudoscientific theory of herd immunity. Smith's UCP government presented the intersection of the winter flu season with the continuing pandemic as an inevitability, insisting that Alberta remain fully "open for business," with even mask mandates in hospitals scrapped.

Circumstances became so dire that Heather Smith, president of the United Nurses of Alberta, toothlessly wrote in December "imploring" Premier Smith's government to "do the responsible thing" and reintroduce mask mandates, a plea which the premier blithely ignored.

Alberta's schools have not been spared either: mask mandates were eliminated in November and schools have been instructed to provide in-person learning no matter what. The November order banned mask mandates in grades 1 to 12 outright and prohibited a

switch to online learning. In Orwellian language, Premier Smith declared, “Parents and students have told me time and time again that they want a normal school environment for their kids.” The new rules would “enhance educational choice,” she added.

These diktats hamstringing local initiatives and amount to an outlawing of one of the most basic and effective tools for protecting students, education workers, and their communities from infection.

Keeping sick kids and teachers in schools is a backhanded tactic to drive their parents back to the workplace so they can churn out profits for Alberta’s business elite. These are the same elites who are salivating at the prospect of privatizing Alberta’s public health and education infrastructure. Weakened by decades of austerity, starved of resources over the entire course of the pandemic, and run with skeleton crews of workers whose unions won’t lift a finger to defend their rights, the education and health systems that Albertans rely upon have never been more vulnerable.

Under these circumstances, workers should view Premier Smith’s formation of a \$2 million COVID-19 committee to review the government’s response to the pandemic with suspicion and hostility. The chair of this committee, who will be paid \$253,000, is leading hard-right ideologue Preston Manning. The founder of the Reform Party and the son of a long-time Social Credit premier of Alberta, Manning is a profoundly reactionary figure and was instrumental in shifting Canada’s official political discourse sharply into the realm of neo-conservatism and right-wing populism during the 1990s.

Manning has already publicly pronounced his hostility to essential public health measures. Last year he authored the “final report” of a fictional inquiry into the pandemic which raised the idea of holding politicians and administrators criminally and financially responsible for mismanagement. To be clear, Manning does not see decades of deliberately neglected public health systems, more than 20 million deaths worldwide from COVID-19, or hundreds of millions more sickened by Long COVID as “mismanagement.” Rather, he views “mismanagement” as any public health measures, however limited, that impinge on the capitalists’ accumulation of private profit.

Manning and Smith are loyal servants of capitalist

reaction, ceaselessly committed to dismantling public services and any democratic means for the working class to defend them. For their part, the opposition New Democrats and unions have demonstrated only consistent indifference to the lives of working people during the pandemic, proving there is no hope for reform from these bankrupt organizations.

Workers in Alberta must unify their struggle against Smith’s disastrous pandemic policy with those of the working class across Canada and internationally. Smith’s policies are only an especially brutal example of an agenda shared by the entire Canadian ruling class.

From the Trudeau federal government, which relies on the support of the trade unions and NDP to stay in power, on down, the entire establishment has embraced a policy of “forever COVID.” Continuous infection, elevated death rates, and the abandonment of all mitigations is now the norm across Canada and around the world. Taking up the fight for the elimination of COVID-19 is only possible as part of a struggle by working people united internationally against capitalism and its prioritization of corporate profits over human life.



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