

Alberta's Conservative government slashes health care amid COVID-19 pandemic

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The rapid and uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 across Canada finds especially sharp expression in Alberta, where more than 500 new infections are being reported daily in a province with fewer than 4.4 million people. On Wednesday, public health authorities reported that the origin of 67 percent of new infections is unknown.

Amid this health and social disaster, Premier Jason Kenney and his hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) provincial government are enforcing savage attacks on the public health care system, including sweeping spending and job cuts, and privatizations.

In early October, UCP Health Minister Tyler Shandro unveiled a plan to eliminate 11,000 public sector health care jobs, including those of porters, catering staff, cleaners, and administrators. Of these jobs, 9,700 are to be contracted out to private for-profit companies, and another 800 jobs eliminated entirely. Underscoring the widespread working class opposition to this onslaught, several thousand health care workers mounted a **wildcat strike** at dozens of hospital and health care facilities across Alberta on Monday, Oct. 26.

The layoffs and contracting-out are only one element in a concerted assault on public health care, which is aimed at laying the basis for the flourishing of private, for-profit medicine. This prioritization of corporate profit over human lives goes hand-in-hand with the Kenney government's murderous "herd immunity" policy, which has seen all schools and major businesses remain open despite the resurgence of the pandemic. Kenney previously downplayed the risk of the virus, comparing it to the flu. He has received praise from the new federal Conservative Party leader, Erin O'Toole, for his refusal to impose even limited restrictions on social and economic life to curb the spread of the virus.

In February, the UCP government terminated the existing master contract with physicians and imposed changes to billing and compensation fees, resulting in

some rural physicians losing between 20 and 60 percent of their gross income.

There are two particular funding changes that doctors say are forcing them to withdraw their services: the amount doctors who work in hospitals are paid is being reduced by about 20 percent on a fee-for-service basis; and the province is reducing its reimbursement of medical liability insurance premiums. Dr. Christine Molnar, president of the Alberta Medical Association (AMA), warned these changes will force service cuts that will "be horrible for pregnant women—particularly those who live in rural communities."

Alberta doctors have been without a master agreement since last April, and surveys performed by the AMA suggest that 42 percent of its members are considering leaving Alberta. Responding to this dissatisfaction, the UCP wants to change the rules of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta to prevent doctors from quitting their practice all at the same time, and to require that physicians make a "reasonable effort" to find their patients a new doctor before closing their practice. Dr. Ian Walker, speaking for the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons, stated, "I recommend that our organization stand up against the minister's direction and seek legal consultation to determine if this proposed change would stand up to legal challenge."

Other significant cuts to health care and related social services include:

- The cutting of C\$72 million from seniors' drug coverage and the imposition of measures to make it harder for seniors to qualify;
- An effective C\$500 million funding cut to Alberta Health Services;
- A C\$135 million reduction in hospital funding;
- A reduction of C\$53 million in the budget for the maintenance and renewal of senior facilities and housing;
- The elimination of C\$105 million from planned

spending on the maintenance and renewal of health facilities.

These savage austerity measures have been accompanied by across-the-board cutbacks to education and other critical social services. In its first full budget, the government announced a four-year, real-terms per capita public spending cut of 10 percent or more, and it is pushing for wage cuts of up to 5 percent from the province's 180,000 public sector workers.

Citing the coronavirus pandemic as a pretext, the UCP last May slashed all non-teacher salary funding to Alberta school boards, resulting in the layoff of at least 20,000 teaching assistants, cleaners, and other support staff.

The Kenney government's sweeping assault on health care and public services more generally is aimed at generating the funds necessary to offer massive tax breaks and subsidies to the super-rich. The government already carried out a huge corporate tax cut in July, reducing it by a third in one fell swoop, from 12 percent to 8 percent. In addition, billions of dollars in public funds have been handed over to Big Oil to prop up corporate profits amid a crisis in the energy sector.

At the same time, the decimation of public health care produced by the government's ruthless austerity measures will be used as a pretext to demand that it be opened up to for-profit care. At last month's UCP annual general meeting, delegates voted by 53 percent to 47 percent in favour of creating a privately funded and privately managed health care system. Known as Policy 11, the motion in favour of a totally for-profit private "tier" of the Alberta health care system callously declared, "Health care is the greatest budgetary expense. Recent events have shown how vulnerable the system is to demand fluctuations on it."

The UCP's cynical dismissal of the pandemic's impact on the health care system as "demand fluctuations" illustrates the ruling elite's contempt for the lives of working people. The reality is that the health care system in Alberta, as across Canada, has been chronically underfunded for decades by governments led by all the establishment parties, the opposition New Democrats (NDP) included.

If the UCP feels emboldened to press forward with its class war assault on public services, it is above all due to the role of the trade unions and New Democrats. During its four years in office, Rachel Notley's union-backed NDP government imposed austerity in health care spending. In a policy it called "bending the cost curve," the NDP government held budget increases below the

inflation rate and population growth. Now, the unions and social-democrats are working tirelessly to contain and suppress all popular opposition to Kenney's cuts, urging workers to make futile appeals to the UCP to change course.

The Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE) treated last month's wildcat strike by health care workers as nothing more than a public relations stunt. After the government predictably sought and obtained an order from the pro-employer labour relations board outlawing the job action, the AUPE immediately accepted this anti-democratic ruling and used the threat of criminal action to prevail on workers to return to their jobs the very next day.

Eager to head off an explosion of working class opposition, of which the wildcat strike was only an initial expression, the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), United Nurses of Alberta, and several other unions launched a "Stand up to Kenney" campaign two days after the strike. Demagogically invoking the wildcat strikers, AFL President Gil McGowan asserted that they "showed us what's possible. But they can't do it alone."

Far from proposing any concrete program of struggle, the unions urged workers to individually visit a website to sign a "pledge" that they are ready to "stand up to Kenney" and would join province-wide rallies and protests "that may include job action or strikes called in the future"—wording that commits the union bureaucrats to precisely nothing.

If a genuine struggle is to be waged against the ruling elite's assault on health care amid the pandemic, workers must advance their own independent class interests in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions. They should establish rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and neighbourhood to demand an overturning of all cuts to health care, and the provision of billions of dollars to support the health care system and working people throughout the pandemic.



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