

The Crisis in our Health Care “System”

November 3, 2022



For the first couple of years of COVID, the pandemic shone a light on the huge gaps in our health care system and, in turn, on the sacrifices health care workers made to try and keep it together. Now, instead of responding to those gaps, we are entering what looks like a new period of austerity which may bring public health care to a breaking point.

At the federal level, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland is paving the way for austerity budgets. She spoke recently to multiple audiences about how her government must cut back on costs. After cutbacks, how will the Canada Health Transfer – already not keeping pace with patient need – provide what is necessary? Freeland also referenced the ongoing interest rate hikes imposed by the Bank of Canada as positive and necessary, even though workers know they can expect worse outcomes for themselves and their families and a greater likelihood of recession as a result.

In Ontario, Ford’s Conservative government continues to cry poor, wielding huge legislative sticks to solve education, health and other problems in unhelpful ways. The erroneously named Bill 7, “More Beds, Better Care Act,” will force seniors into low-standard for-profit long term care beds, hours from where their families live, in order to free up hospital beds. The recent “nuclear” use of the notwithstanding clause to impose a collective agreement on education workers is another example: what will they use to address health staffing problems? A quick glance at the Ontario Federation of Labour’s Ford Tracker shows countless other illustrations of their support for profitable corporations and their contempt for public care.

Toronto’s third term mayor won re-election last month with only 29% of Torontonians casting a ballot. Despite this, John Tory has been given strong mayor powers, including the right to set the City’s budget, and he has declared before even seeing what the needs might be that he will continue not to raise taxes above inflation, even for the wealthiest property owners. There is a nearly one billion dollar hole in Toronto’s budget. How is Toronto Public Health and municipal long term care going to fare under such constraints?

We can easily chronicle the patchwork that has been made of Ontario’s health care system over successive Conservative and Liberal governments at all levels. It feels like the *public* health care system is on its last legs: closure of emergency rooms, overflow of pediatric emergency care to adult hospitals, nurses quitting in despair, other health care workers suffering from low and shrinking wages and the need to work multiple jobs, poor mental health among workers, long term care homes still in huge COVID outbreaks, delayed care and surgeries, expanding for-profit long term care, people on waiting lists for years to get a family doctor even in large urban centres, ill people encouraged to cover medical expenses on their credit cards, and more.

A strong public health care system needs support and participation by all levels of government: federal, provincial and municipal. Today, more than ever, we need leadership that is fearless and ambitious.

In the days ahead, watch for leadership by our major health care unions to address the human health resource crisis we are in and the treacherous privatization path we are currently on. We must all support their campaign which will put pressure on the government to collaborate with these knowledgeable unions and come up with much-needed healthcare system solutions.