

Quebec workers denounce government's rush to "reopen" the economy amid raging COVID-19 pandemic

By Laurent Lafrance
1 May 2020

Following in the footsteps of the Trump administration and the European Union, Quebec's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is determined to force working people to return to non-essential jobs even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread.

Premier François Legault announced earlier this week a plan that will see shops outside of the Greater Montreal region reopen this coming Monday, and daycare centers, elementary schools, and construction and manufacturing industries resume normal operations across the province over the next three weeks.

The CAQ government is thus ignoring the repeated warnings of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other scientists that a premature reopening of the economy could—and most likely will—lead to a new, even more deadly, wave of COVID-19 infections.

Opposition to the reopening of schools is growing among education workers. Many teachers have expressed their anger on social media and pointed to the real reasons for this decision—ensuring the banks and big business can maximize their profits at the expense of working people.

As a Montreal teacher wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We are being sent out to babysit so that business can make profits on the backs of working people.... And we know that these big bosses, they won't catch anything in their ivory towers."

Another explained: "As a teacher, it never occurred to me that I should put my life in the hands of government authorities so that they would turn me into a 'guinea pig', confined to silence under threat of reprisals."

A third could barely contain her anger: "I am writing this condemnation because I am insulted and furious.... I'm being sent back to work without [protective] equipment, to babysit, to get the economy going again."

Another teacher remarked, "Am I to sacrifice myself for a government that has no consideration for my life? I'm participating in a charade that puts my students and their families at risk?"

Big business, meanwhile, has trumpeted its support for the

Quebec government's decision to relaunch non-essential economic activity. The president of the *Conseil du patronat* (Quebec Employers' Federation), Yves-Thomas Dorval, called "the reopening...of elementary schools and day care centers" "good news," while pointing to the real reason for this decision with his statement that "many working parents will be able to benefit from this reopening."

In reality, the only "benefit" will be for big business, which will be able to start raking in profits again, while taking advantage of the federal government's "wage subsidy" program, which in many cases will pay 75 percent of workers' wages at least through mid-June.

Workers, on the other hand, will be risking their lives and those of their families.

Because of a massive public outcry, Premier Legault is no longer urging, as he did at his April 16 press conference, that Quebecers embrace the criminal "natural" or "herd immunity" policy in which the disease is allowed to rage unchecked.

Nonetheless, the waves of re-openings slated for the next three weeks make clear that this remains his government's agenda. But for public consumption, Legault now cynically argues that reopening schools and daycares is necessary for children's "mental health."

Another shameless lie is Legault's assertion that the pandemic is "under control" in Quebec. The province is by far the hardest hit by the coronavirus in Canada. As of midday Thursday, Quebec had a total of 27,538 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1,859 deaths, including 177 in the preceding 48 hours. So catastrophic is the situation in Quebec's long-term care facilities, the CAQ government has had to request the deployment of over 1,000 Canadian Armed Forces' personnel to them.

While people over 70 years of age account for the vast majority of COVID-19 deaths, it is false to claim, as Premier Legault does, that the disease's impact on younger adults and children is minimal. In fact, the virus has claimed victims in all age groups. On Monday, an orderly in her thirties died after contracting the virus at the seniors' residence where she was working.

Quebec's Director of Public Health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, has publicly admitted that the government's plan to open workplaces and schools is a "risky bet." He nevertheless defended it Tuesday, claiming that a "balance" has to be found between "the economy, money, mental health." At the same time, he sought to accustom the population to death on a large scale. "It is clear," said Arruda, "that there will be transmission. There will be hospitalized people. I hope not too many people will die."

Even if elementary school classes are limited to 15 students, as laid out in the current plan, the government knows full well that social distancing and other safety measures will be impossible to enforce. The situation will be even worse in day care centers, especially since access to personal protective equipment (PPE) will be minimal or non-existent under conditions of widespread scarcity.

Under the government's guidelines, in schools and daycares only workers on emergency daycare duty will be entitled to PPE. Legault dared to say in an interview that all teachers have to do to avoid infection is put on a scarf! Quebec's Public Health Department has explicitly ordered that if a child tests positive for COVID-19 in a school, the school must remain open, with only the child's classroom "possibly" closed for the ensuing 14 days.

The Quebec government has thus made clear that it will not implement any of the measures needed to seriously combat the coronavirus—mass testing, systematic treatment and isolation of infected people, contact-tracing, and massive new investments in the health care system to build up surge capacity.

The trade unions' attitude to the CAQ government's plan to resume non-essential economic activities and schools reveals more clearly than ever their role as political agents of big business.

The Quebec Federation of Labor (FTQ), the province's largest union federation, said it welcomed the government's "economic recovery plan" and saw it in a "positive" light. The president of the Autonomous Teachers' Federation, Sylvain Mallette, said "we are not opposed to the idea of gradually reopening schools."

After decades of betraying workers' struggles and enabling big business to enrich itself by lowering wages, gutting workplace protections, and dismantling public services such as health care, Quebec's unions warmly welcomed the coming to power of François Legault's right-wing populist CAQ government in October 2018. They even spoke of a "honeymoon" with Legault, a multi-millionaire and former Air Transat boss, who has built his entire political career by advocating more austerity, privatizations and tax cuts for the rich.

From the outset of the pandemic, union leaders offered their "full and complete cooperation" to Legault. First, they agreed to indefinitely postpone talks on new contracts for over 600,000 public sector workers. Then, when the government

saw an opportunity to quickly push through a concessions contract, the unions made an about-face and agreed to Legault's proposal, expediting contract negotiations behind workers' backs. It is this policy of union surrender that has allowed Quebec's most openly right-wing Premier since Maurice Duplessis to posture as the "father of Quebec" (*père de famille*) during the current crisis.

The unions are now sending their members back to work to face the pandemic without adequate protection so that the financial and corporate oligarchy—which has already received more than \$650 billion in federal government bailout funds—can continue to rack up profits. The federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau, it should also be noted, has given the greenlight to efforts by Legault and other hard-right provincial Premiers, such as Doug Ford in Ontario and Jason Kenney in Alberta, to push through a hasty return to work at the expense of human life.

The popular opposition in Quebec to a precipitous reopening of schools and workplaces is part of a growing working class upsurge across Canada and around the world that is challenging the sacrificing of workers' health and lives for capitalist profit. In Ontario, transportation, postal and auto workers have refused to work because of inadequate health measures. In the United States and Europe, workers at Amazon, in delivery services and in transportation, and in health care facilities, have also protested against a lack of protective equipment that imperils their lives.

Workers must vigorously oppose the efforts of Legault and the entire Canadian ruling elite to resume production at the risk of tens, even hundreds, of thousands of lives. In all workplaces, rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-capitalist unions must be built. They must fight to ensure a halt to all non-essential production, safe working conditions for health care and other essential employees, and full income security for all sick, quarantined and laid-off workers.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>