

Mounting worker opposition to Quebec's reckless back-to-work drive

By Louis Girard
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Quebec continues to be the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic in Canada. It accounts for 39,391 of Canada's 72,262 confirmed COVID-19 cases, and for 3,220 of the 5,303 deaths from the coronavirus. Home to less than 25 percent of Canada's population, Quebec has recorded over 60 percent of the country's COVID-19 deaths and close to 60 percent of all cases.

This has not stopped the hard-right Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government—led by the right-wing populist, “Quebec First” premier Francois Legault—from spearheading the Canadian ruling elite's reckless back-to-work campaign. Legault's success in reopening schools and daycare centres and allowing key industries to restart production has emboldened other governments across Canada, including Ontario's Tory regime, in lifting lockdown measures and putting profits before human lives

These criminal policies, which fly in the face of World Health Organization (WHO) warnings about easing restrictions too soon and without developing mass-testing and contact-tracing capacity, have been greenlighted by the federal Liberal government. While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has issued personal statements calling for caution and warning about the risk of a “premature” reopening, his government has declared that all decisions on lifting lockdown measures are the purview of the provinces, thus giving Legault and his CAQ a free hand.

Legault's push to reopen the province's daycares and primary schools is aimed at creating conditions where their parents can be forced back to work, even though infection and fatality rates remain high.

The premier's oft-repeated assertion that “the situation is under control” has proven to be a shameless lie.

On Sunday, public health authorities announced 142 new deaths in Quebec due to COVID-19, more than twice the 61 reported the previous day. The number of additional deaths stood at 85 on Monday, 118 on Tuesday, and 89 yesterday—for a five-day total of 495.

The province's nursing homes and senior residences have been ravaged by the virus. Yet, as Montreal's *La presse* reported yesterday, even at the Résidence Berthiaume-Du Tremblay long-term care facility, where there have been 42 deaths, and where at least 83 residents and 74 workers have become infected, staff are not being systematically tested.

Some working-class neighbourhoods in Montreal, such as Montreal North and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, are experiencing large-scale community transmission.

According to projections released Friday by the province's public health institute (*l'Institut national de santé publique du Québec*), the lifting of lockdown measures could result in as many as 150 deaths per day in July in the Greater Montreal area, not counting deaths in nursing homes. “A small increase in social contacts could lead to a rapid increase in cases, hospitalizations and deaths,” says the report from Quebec's leading government health research agency.

As the contagion continues apace in Montreal and many parts of Quebec, criticism of the CAQ's policies are mounting among experts and workers.

Dr. Yves Longtin, a professor of medicine at McGill University and a specialist in infection control at the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal, expressed concern for hospitals in the Montreal area. “The lifting of the lockdown will increase the risk that a patient affected by COVID-19 but showing no symptoms will introduce the virus into our hospitals,” he warned.

In an interview published Sunday in *La Presse*, Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious disease specialist at the Toronto General Hospital Research Institute, noted that “Quebec is the epicenter of Canada, and Montreal is the epicenter of Quebec.” While acknowledging that many cases of COVID-19 infection were registered at long-term care facilities, he pointed out that a lot of transmission is occurring outside the nursing homes. He concluded by saying: “I take no pleasure in saying this, but in my opinion, Quebec is the province least ready to reopen its economy at this time.”

The strongest opposition is coming from workers, who are being ordered to return to work without adequate protection against a potentially deadly virus, and threatened with the loss of their livelihood if they refuse to risk their lives and those of their loved ones.

This terrible choice was illustrated by an internal memo leaked to Quebec City's largest daily newspaper, *Le Soleil*. The document was issued by the *Société des traversiers du Québec*, the provincial-owned ferry service. According to this memo, “employees who choose not to send their children to school or day care” and miss work will have to empty their vacation and sick days if they want to receive any payment. The message was blunt: “Wage payment will not be continued.”

Hundreds of teachers have taken to social media to rebut Legault's cynical claim that the hasty reopening of primary schools and daycare centres has been ordered out of concern for

children's "mental health." As one teacher wrote, the reopening of schools is above all a matter of "allowing employers to make a profit on the backs of the population."

Monday saw the reopening of daycares, elementary schools and businesses across the province outside the Greater Montreal area. The industrial construction and manufacturing sectors also resumed their activities, following in the footsteps of the residential construction and mining industries whose reopening the government had previously greenlighted.

But the Legault government continues to face strong popular opposition, as part of a growing working class rebellion against the subordination of workers' health to business profit across North America and internationally.

That is why the CAQ government has been forced to manoeuvre, changing its rhetoric on an almost daily basis, and employing one cynical argument after another to try to justify its back-to-work policy.

Legault has twice had to postpone the reopening of Montreal-area schools, businesses and daycare services.

After announcing that people aged 60 and over would not be required to return to work because they are at much greater risk, he quickly reversed course, citing the lack of staff in schools, daycare centres and hospitals—arbitrarily redefining who is highly vulnerable if they contract COVID-19.

The government no longer openly talks of its "herd immunity" strategy because of the public outcry it caused. Instead, it is posing as an advocate for the "mental health" of confined young children. But in essence, as demonstrated by its aggressive campaign to reopen schools and workplaces, it is pursuing the same criminal policy of "herd immunity," i.e. promoting the spread of the virus and the acceptance of mass death so as to ensure business profit-making is not disrupted.

Like the Trump administration in the United States or the governments of the European Union, the objective of the Legault government, a ferocious promoter of privatization and deregulation, remains unchanged. It is to resume as soon as possible the extraction of profit from the labor of the working class in order to make workers pay for the more than \$650 billion in bailout money handed out to the financial elite by the federal Liberal government. For Canada's ruling class, these staggering amounts must be repaid through increased worker exploitation in the form of wage cuts, speed-up, and the further dismantling of public services, including health care.

In its attempt to suppress popular opposition to a premature and unsafe return to work, Legault is relying on the pro-capitalist unions that have pledged their "full collaboration" with his government. By rallying round the government in the name of a "united" response to the pandemic, the unions played a key role, together with the nationalist pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, in enabling Legault to gain some popular credibility at the start of the lockdown in mid-March.

Top union leaders have closely collaborated the CAQ government since its election in October 2018. Continuing their long-standing role as an industrial police force for big business, the unions are now reassuring the government that they will corral their members back to work, while cynically insisting that this

must be done in a "safe" manner.

The Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL), the province's largest labor federation, has welcomed the back-to-work drive as "a positive step." Its president, Daniel Boyer, went so far as to relay the government's propaganda by saying that workers "are reassured by the [protective] measures that are put in place in every workplace."

Boyer is lying shamelessly. Such measures are insufficient or non-existent, whether in hospitals, on construction sites, in factories or at other workplaces. He should go tell the 64 workers at the Cargill meat processing plant in Chambly who have been infected; or the thousands of health care workers who have been denied any or adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and have contracted the coronavirus.

The real motivation for the unions' support for the back-to-work campaign was revealed in a joint statement issued by Quebec's two largest union federations, the QFL and CSN (Confederation of National Trade Unions), along with the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Bankers Association, other employer groups, and federal Liberal government on April 15. The corporatist document asserted that it was necessary to return workers to their jobs as quickly as possible so as to make sure that Canadian businesses can "come roaring back" from the crisis.

Workers must reject the false choice between a hasty and unsafe return to work or the loss of their livelihood. They must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for the following demands: shut down all non-essential economic sectors; full protection for health care and other essential-service workers; full financial compensation to all workers laid off or unable to work due to the pandemic; a massive injection of resources into a health care system ravaged by decades of capitalist austerity.

The resources needed to achieve this program can only be obtained through the independent political struggle of the working class for a workers' government that will reorganize socio-economic life to meet the social needs of the majority.

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