

Canada presses ahead with final phase of back-to-work drive

By Frédéric Charlebois
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The Quebec government unveiled the next stage in its reckless back-to-work drive last week. New measures include allowing indoor gatherings of 50 people; reopening cinemas, pools, arenas and gyms; the resumption of day care services in Montreal; the reopening of shopping malls; and the relaxing of “social distancing” measures to the point of making them effectively useless.

The Coalition Avenir Québec’s (CAQ) back-to-work drive began in April, at the height of the pandemic, with the reopening of mines and residential construction. It was intensified in May with the reopening of most businesses, primary schools and daycare centres (except in the Greater Montreal area, the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada).

Quebec is the Canadian province most affected by COVID-19. It accounts for more than half of all infections and deaths although it is home to less than a quarter of the country’s population. Yet the Quebec government has mounted the most aggressive campaign for a premature reopening of non-essential sectors of the economy.

The announcement of similar measures in neighbouring Ontario by the hard-right government of Doug Ford underscores that the back-to-work drive is a cross-Canada policy aimed at enabling big business to begin reaping profits once again from the working class, irrespective of the consequences for human life.

The push for a premature return to work is being carried out under the oversight of Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government. After demonstrating a complete lack of preparedness for a foreseeable and predicted pandemic, Ottawa responded by bailing out big business to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars, while placing workers who lost their jobs on meagre rations (see: Canada’s parliament approves coronavirus bailout for corporations and austerity for workers).

Like their European and American counterparts, all levels of government in Canada are in the process of lifting their last remaining lockdown measures. Their intended goal is the creation of conditions in which workers are forced, under threat of dismissal, to return to workplaces where the risk of contracting the deadly coronavirus, and passing it on to their loved ones, is high.

This is highlighted by the Trudeau government’s Bill C-17, which threatens severe fines and even prison sentences for workers who use the meagre assistance provided by the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to delay their return to unsafe workplaces (see: Canadian government threatens fines and jail time to force workers back to work).

The priority for the capitalist elite is to recover the costs of the massive bailout provided it by the state through increased exploitation of the working class. Underscoring that the financial aristocracy is determined to put profits before human lives, their hirelings in government are already letting it be known that they intend to ignore the sharp rise in COVID-19 and deaths that will inevitably be the product of their premature “reopening” of the economy.

Quebec’s director of public health, Horacio Arruda, has already declared that there will be no “total lockdown” in the event of a “second wave” of the pandemic. Similar statements have been made by other Canadian officials, including Saskatchewan and British Columbia’s chief medical officers and by US President Donald Trump.

The forced return to work is accompanied by an official campaign to give the false impression of a return to “normality,” when in reality the COVID-19 pandemic continues to progress at an accelerated pace.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported last week that the number of new cases worldwide has surpassed a record 150,000 daily. “We are entering a “new and dangerous phase” of the pandemic, warned WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

In Canada, the ruling class has seized on a moderate decline in the number of infections since the beginning of June to intensify the back-to-work drive.

This is particularly true in Quebec which since it reached the gruesome threshold of 5,000 coronavirus deaths on June 8, has seen a drop in the number of new infections. Currently they average about 100 per day.

The decision by François Legault’s government to take advantage of this decline in the official pandemic figures, which is primarily the result of lockdown measures, to move to the final stage of its back-to-work campaign is nothing short of criminal.

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, explicitly warned last Tuesday, "Although the growth of the epidemic has slowed considerably, and we can now see these signs of hope, we are at the stage where we need to work together and continue our efforts, because it only takes one new case of COVID-19 to trigger an epidemic or to restart an exponential growth that could change our trajectory."

According to Dr. David Kaiser of Montreal's regional Public Health Agency, the reduced number of infections is due in part to better controls in nursing homes and other care facilities.

Looking at infections caused by community transmission, he adds, the decline in the number of new cases has been "more modest." Dr. Kaiser also warned that it is too early to see the real impact of the Legault government's measures to "reopen" the economy. He added, "We're going to find out in the next couple of weeks, not necessarily today."

Another factor in the decline in new cases is the sharp drop in testing. Since June 1, less than 8,000 people on average have been tested daily for the coronavirus in Quebec. This is little more than half of the already insufficient target of 14,000 daily tests set by the province's own health authorities.

According to David Buckeridge, an epidemiologist at McGill University, the province mainly tests people who are sick enough to seek testing, rather than proactively screening large segments of the population. "There are certainly more [infections]. The number confirmed by tests will be much lower than the real number," he explains.

Quebec's refusal to carry out systematic pro-active testing, which is replicated across Canada, underscores that the ruling elite has no interest in containing the spread of the pandemic. It was only under pressure from the working class, including mass walkouts by construction workers in Quebec and auto workers in Ontario, that Legault and premiers across Canada were forced to close many non-essential sectors of industry in March.

But Legault's government rejected from the outset the only known effective methods to combat COVID-19: mass testing, quarantining, systematic contact-tracing and the injection of massive resources to strengthen health care infrastructure.

Instead, the CAQ favoured (first overtly, then covertly) the strategy of herd immunity, i.e., deliberate mass contamination, regardless of the cost in human lives. The result was that Quebec has one of the highest death rates per head of population in the world.

With last week's announcements, Legault abandoned all lockdown measures. A range of confusing social distancing regulations—including keeping 2 metres distance in crowded areas, 1.5 metres in places where people are seated and not talking, and 1 meter for school students under 16—are designed to create complacency and break down the observance of WHO-recommended distancing practices. For younger students, "bubbles" of four to six students where no distance requirements apply are to be created. A distance of 1.5 metres

between each "bubble" is supposed to be observed.

"I fell off my chair when I heard the new measures," says Steeve Tremblay, an occupational health and safety consultant. "It's far too complicated and difficult to understand. The problem is the message it sends," he says. "People may assume that it's not that bad. But we're still in the midst of a pandemic! And it's far from over."

The CAQ government's criminally irresponsible back-to-work drive will make working conditions for frontline workers even more dangerous and life-threatening.

Since the start of the outbreak in Quebec, more than 5,000 workers in Quebec's public health system, devastated by decades of budget cuts, have contracted COVID-19 because they lacked personal protective equipment (PPE). Many have died as a result.

Other workers in services deemed "essential" have also been exposed to the deadly coronavirus. Two weeks ago, about 60 employees at retailer Dollarama's warehouse and distribution centre, which employs close to 1,000 workers, held a demonstration. They were protesting the impossibility of enforcing social distancing, and management's minimal application or outright violation of safety standards and public health measures.

"The company has prioritized money, leaving aside the health and safety of its workers," said one employee in an anonymous interview. Workers, some with many years of seniority, have been fired for filing a complaint. Dollarama, which was declared an "essential service" at the start of the pandemic, has seen its profits exceed expectations, with the company making nearly \$86 million in the first quarter.

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