

As COVID-19 spreads across North America

Canada: Quebec establishment hails inadequate response of Legault government

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With the COVID-19 pandemic surging across the United States and Canada, Quebec Premier François Legault ordered all the province's educational institutions closed for two weeks on March 13 and declared a public health emergency the next day.

In the week since, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Quebec, as across Canada, has increased by a multiple of 7 or more. Early yesterday evening, there were 1,045 confirmed cases in Canada, 12 of whom had succumbed to the virus, and 139 cases and one death in Quebec.

Many experts have pointed out that “community transmission” cases are now just beginning to emerge and that the infection curve increasingly mirrors that in China at the height of its coronavirus epidemic. In addition, south of the border, the United States appears set to become a new epicenter of the coronavirus.

This crisis has forced Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government and the provincial governments to adopt a series of panicked and patchwork measures, focused on “social distancing” and the closing of Canada's borders to almost all would-be entrants.

In taking some of these steps, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government acted slightly in advance of other provinces, including Ontario, which has had, and continues to have, significantly more COVID-19 cases.

But Legault is stubbornly resisting demands from workers, particularly in the construction industry, for the closure of building sites, factories and nonessential workplaces.

Moreover, not a single measure to fight the coronavirus outbreak was included in the CAQ's budget tabled on March 10, just eleven days ago!

The entire Quebec ruling elite has rallied behind Legault. This includes the ostensibly “left-wing” Québec Solidaire. The third-largest party in the Quebec National Assembly, Québec Solidaire has offered “its full and complete cooperation to the government.” The big-business media, for

its part, is portraying Legault as a “strong,” “fatherly,” pragmatic leader who has shown fortitude in an “unforeseeable” crisis of “unknown” magnitude.

In reality, the coronavirus pandemic was entirely predictable. Trudeau, Legault and the other provincial leaders were all criminally negligent in the face of the threat posed by the deadly virus. Large scale preventive and testing measures should have been put in place in January and early February when the deadly outbreak in China was identified as a pandemic threat and the World Health Organization was summoning the alarm. Yet these governments—and their counterparts in the US and Europe—refused to act because the necessary measures were seen as an impediment to big business's pursuit of profit. Instead, they downplayed the extent of the danger, some going so far as to say that the virus resembled seasonal flu.

The current crisis is exacerbated by the decades of social spending cuts imposed by all levels of government, including in health care. This program of social reaction has been implemented at the provincial level by successive Liberal and Parti Québécois governments, and deepened since the coming to power in October 2018 of the CAQ—a hard-right big-business party notorious for its vociferous demands for more social cuts, more privatization and more tax cuts for the rich.

Governments around the world have come to the rescue of financial markets and businesses with trillions of dollars since the beginning of the crisis, while aid for working people and the general population has been confined to a pittance. In Quebec, as elsewhere in Canada, government phone lines established to deal with coronavirus inquiries are saturated, many to the point of breaking down.

Tests continue to be rationed, although the WHO has insisted that systematic testing of the population and the quarantining and, where needed, treating of those who have come into contact with the virus is essential to halting the pandemic. Moreover, there are shortages of essential

equipment from ventilators to N95 medical masks.

By touting Quebec Premier Legault as a quasi “national hero” who is uniting and reassuring people in dire times, the ruling elite is seeking to promote right-wing Quebec nationalism so as to use it to deflect popular anger over the social catastrophe produced by the subordination of public health to capitalist profit.

This vast operation of political deception relies on the complicity of the pro-capitalist trade unions. They are calling on their members to rally behind the very same political representatives of big business who have facilitated the rapid spread of the coronavirus through their criminal negligence.

Last week, the leaders of Quebec’s main labor federations issued a joint press release. It announced that they had agreed to indefinitely suspend negotiations for new contracts for 600,000 public sector workers and were offering their “full and complete cooperation” with Legault’s right-wing government in the current crisis.

The unions are calling on their members to join hands with a big-business government that has continued and expanded austerity, denounced the “excessive” wages of workers in Quebec’s manufacturing sector, and adopted chauvinist laws attacking immigrants and minorities.

In recent weeks, Legault used the coronavirus crisis to amplify his anti-immigrant agenda. On Friday, his increasingly strident demands that refugees entering Canada along Roxham Road, an unofficial border crossing point between Quebec and upstate New York, be denied entry was answered. Trudeau announced that henceforth Ottawa would prevent those entering Canada “irregularly” from exercising their legal right under international law to claim refugee status in Canada and will instead hand them over to the Trump administration and the infamous US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.

Earlier this week it was reported that two unions representing 131,000 nurses and health care professionals (FIQ and APTS) have accepted a government proposal, justified in the name of “meeting the health emergency,” for a negotiating blitz to quickly finalize separate three-year contracts.

The government and unions are hammering out the details of separate contracts for nurses and health care professionals in secret, behind the backs of rank-and-file workers. But it has been reported that they will include no more than minimal wage increases tied to inflation and no improvement in working conditions, although workers, especially nurses, routinely suffer burnout and other forms of psychological distress due to short staffing.

For decades the pro-capitalist unions have worked to suppress all working-class opposition to the relentless drive

of big business to dismantle public services and all social protections for workers. Today, under conditions of an unprecedented social crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, they are rallying behind big business and its political representatives and seeking to prevent workers from asserting their own class interests in fighting the contagion and its devastating socioeconomic fallout.

Faced with the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracy and the indifference of the ruling elite to the well-being and indeed lives of ordinary people, workers must take their fate into their own hands.

The essential principle that must guide their response to the crisis is that the needs of the working class must have absolute and unconditional priority over corporate profit. It is not a question of what the ruling class claims it can afford, but what the masses of people need.

It is essential to mobilize society’s resources, on a global scale, to stop the spread of the virus and preserve the lives of all. In Canada and around the world, testing centres, clinics and hospitals must be built immediately to meet the needs of everyone. Workplaces that do not produce goods or services essential for the sustenance of life in contemporary society must be closed immediately and workers fully compensated for the duration of the shutdown. For health care workers and others who must continue to work, conditions must be made completely safe.

As outlined by the Socialist Equality Party (US) in an important statement, “To take this fight forward, workers require their own organizations. The trade unions, beholden to the corporations and the state, will do nothing. Therefore, workers should form rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees to ensure safe working conditions, demand the shutdown of nonessential production, and ensure the safety and well-being of those who are ill or forced to quarantine.”



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