

Quebec government, big business push for return to work as COVID-19 deaths soar

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Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, with the full-throated support of the province's principal employer federation, is pushing for a precipitous, premature end to the now two-and-a-half week-old shutdown of all but essential services and businesses.

Under conditions where the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths is continuing to surge in Quebec, as across Canada, the lifting of the provincial government-ordered shutdown would be nothing short of criminal. It would put the lives of workers and their families in grave danger, and risk sparking a "second wave" of coronavirus infections much larger and more devastating than the first.

And for what? So that big business can resume generating profits off workers' labour and paying out flush dividends to the rich and super-rich.

On Thursday, Quebec Premier and CAQ leader François Legault claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic in Quebec is on the verge of "peaking" and that it is now necessary to begin preparing for the relaunching of non-essential businesses and industries. The premier specifically mentioned the construction industry—most of which he was reluctantly forced to close down after widespread worker protests and walkouts—as a sector in which it would be possible to practice "social-distancing" while working.

Legault cynically pointed to the heavy COVID-19 death toll among those aged 60 and over to argue that younger workers are not at serious risk, nor will the public be if the younger workers keep their distance from their parents and grandparents. "If people who are younger go to work in the construction sector," Legault asserted, "and if they don't go near people 60 and over, the risks are limited."

Legault's comments were seconded by Quebec Director-General of Public Health Horacio Aruda. Underscoring that in the interests of "reopening the economy," the government wants working people to accept the inevitability of infections and deaths, Aruda said, "We will finish by accepting a certain level of transmission in society so that (the virus) burns itself out in time."

Legault's claims that the pandemic is reaching its peak in Quebec are based on a wilful misrepresentation of the facts so as to support a predetermined conclusion dictated by the selfish

class interests of the ruling elite. Moreover, his touting of a fall in the percentage increase in infections and hospitalizations flies in the face of repeated World Health Organization (WHO) warnings that a rapid resumption of economic activity will quickly expend any gains in slowing the pandemic attributable to social distancing. All the more so, when as in Quebec there are no provisions for systematic mass testing and contact-tracking, and the public health care system is in shambles due to decades of austerity.

According to the official tally released at 1 p.m. yesterday, Quebec has 11,677 COVID-19 cases, or more than two-and-a-half times its total on April 1. During the same 10-day period, deaths rose from 33 to 241.

Quebec currently accounts for more than half of the 22,052 confirmed COVID-19 cases across Canada, and more than 40 percent of the 557 deaths. Due to Ontario's strict rationing of coronavirus tests, it is virtually certain that the number of Ontarians infected with COVID-19 is grossly understated in the official figures.

Be that as it may, Legault's assertion Friday that "good days are coming," just 72 hours after he released projections that showed that by the end of the month COVID-19 is likely to have killed between 1,200 and 8,960 Quebeckers, is not just irresponsible. It is mercenary.

Evidence suggests that the Quebec government may even be deliberately undercounting the number of COVID-19 fatalities so as to boost its "feel good" message. Yesterday, the head of the residents' committee at one of the six Quebec government long-term-care facilities hardest hit by the pandemic revealed that the coronavirus has killed 17 people at Montreal's Pavillon Alfred-Desrochers, not the four claimed by the government.

Anne Kettenbeil, whose own husband died of COVID-19 two weeks ago, told the *Montreal Gazette*. "I know the government's numbers aren't accurate and everyone knows they're not accurate ... It didn't have to be this way. This is happening because the centres are understaffed and underfunded."

Legault now claims that safety precautions, social-distancing, and staggered shifts will soon allow businesses to resume most or all of their operations at minimum risk to their workers and the public.

Quebec's premier is lying and he knows it. At present, the government can't even supply front-line health care workers with the N95 masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) they need to protect themselves and their patients from the contagion.

Yesterday, the principal union that represents orderlies at government-owned long-term care facilities and senior's residences (FAS-CSN), issued a statement condemning the "lack of personal protective equipment" and the poor quality of the equipment that is available.

FAS spokesperson Hubert Forcier said that even at the two hardest-hit CHSLDs there are no N95 masks. "In Ste-Dorothée, we're talking about a facility that has 150 residents and yet 50 workers have been infected? That's unacceptable. Two of our workers," added Forcier, "displayed COVID-19 symptoms but were told to come in to work anyway because staff is overloaded."

At his daily COVID-19 press conference Friday, Legault again downplayed the COVID-19 threat, declaring that Quebec's schools and daycares could be reopened even earlier than the current projected date of May 4.

In promoting a rapid return to work, Legault, himself a former Air Transat CEO, is acting at the behest of big business and the banks. The Conseil du Patronat (Quebec Employers' Federation) has welcomed the CAQ's government stance, only it is urging Legault to "reopen the economy" even more rapidly.

"If we are envisaging a resumption on May 4," Conseil du Patronat President Yves-Thomas Dorval told Radio-Canada, "then one must let those in production chains work before." Dorval also argued that the "reopening" should not be limited to businesses and industries where it is possible to practice social-distancing. Even though employers routinely violate health and safety regulations, he insisted they can be trusted to provide workers with non-available PPE and other protective gear.

According to Radio-Canada, the CAQ government is closely studying developments in Europe, where even while the pandemic continues to surge killing thousands daily, governments from Germany to Italy and Spain are now focusing on press-ganging workers back-to-work, prioritizing profit over workers' health and lives.

In its public statements about the peaking of the pandemic and the need to reopen the economy, the Quebec government is among all Canada's governments the one most explicitly echoing Donald Trump's fascist pronouncements that the effort to stop the pandemic—i.e. to save lives—must not be allowed to "kill" the economy. But this is only because the shutdowns imposed by Ontario and other provinces were significantly less comprehensive. In the case of Ontario, virtually all manufacturing has been deemed "essential" and it was only a few days ago, due to widespread protests, that the Conservative government ordered most industrial construction

shut down. Work on residential construction projects continues.

Other provinces are undoubtedly now looking at Quebec as an example as to how they can rapidly end their own shutdowns. On Thursday, the Ontario government announced the creation of an Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee.

As for the trade union and NDP-backed ostensibly "progressive" Trudeau government, it did

nothing to counter the pandemic, until it was spreading like wildfire across North America, so as not to impinge on the interests of big business. And its principal preoccupation remains guaranteeing the wealth and investments of the rich and super-rich. While the five million workers who have lost their jobs amid the pandemic are being offered a ration-stipend of \$2,000 per month for at most four months, the government has handed over more than \$600 billion to the banks and big business.

As was the case following the 2008-9 global financial meltdown, the ruling elite is looting the state and will demand workers pay for the crisis through massive austerity and the destruction of workers' social rights.

There is a rising tide of social opposition in Canada and around the world to demand adequate protection from the pandemic and its devastating economic and social consequences. The essential principle that must guide the response both to the health emergency and to the economic crisis is that the needs of the working class must take absolute priority over the wealth and profits of the rich.

To combat the pandemic and its devastating economic fallout, workers must insist on the shutting down of all non-essential workplaces; systematic universal testing; and the pouring of tens of billions of dollars into the overstretched health care system. They must also ensure that medical staff and other essential workers receive the necessary protective equipment to perform their work safely. Every worker who has been thrown out of work must receive full compensation for their wages from the state and big business until the pandemic is contained and overcome.

These necessary demands demonstrate the irreconcilable clash of interests between the working class, the vast majority of the population, and the capitalists. The fight for them must, therefore, be linked to the fight for workers' political power and the socialist reorganization of society.



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