

Canadian workers denounce lack of safety measures and forced labor

Our reporters
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On March 24, the Quebec government ordered the closure of services and businesses deemed “non-essential,” so as to prevent the spread of the highly contagious and potentially lethal new coronavirus. However, under the pretext of providing essential services, many businesses, including manufacturing plants, have been allowed to continue to operate.

In fact, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government and the political establishment as a whole have shown little regard for human life. Their principal concern is responding to the demands of the financial markets and big business, which are eager to get workers back to work as soon as possible, with little to no regard to public health, in order to continue boosting their huge profits (see: “Quebec government, big business push for return to work as COVID-19 deaths soar”).

Premier François Legault signaled late last week that his government was considering the hasty reopening of schools and daycare facilities before May 4 to allow some workplaces to reopen. Yesterday, he announced that the residential construction industry and the province’s mines will be able to resume operations in the coming days.

Such moves are reckless, indeed even criminal. Not only are the reopenings hasty and unnecessary amid a surge in coronavirus cases and deaths, they are taking place without any significant improvement in mass testing and contact tracing, the availability of health care equipment or the enforcement of proper sanitary measures at workplaces. As a result, they carry a grave risk of triggering a second, more deadly wave of mass contagion.

The government’s reckless plan has aroused strong opposition among working people and on social media networks. A petition demanding the closure of schools and day-care centres until September was signed by more than 175,000 people in less than 72 hours.

A team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers from various fields who have either worked, or

are being forced to work, during the pandemic. Their remarks expose the malevolence and mercenary motives of the companies and the ineffectiveness of the safety measures supposedly put in place.

Max is an operator in a metal refining plant in Montreal that employs approximately 300 workers. “The company says we’re an essential service because apparently the copper we produce is used to weld cans. I’ve never heard that before,” he commented.

“The union told us that we would have reduced hours so no one would lose their job, but now we’re actually doing overtime,” added Max. “I worked 48 hours last week.”

Expressing concern about the pandemic, Max said, “I don’t want the virus to spread any further, I don’t want to infect anyone, but I have bills so I have no choice but to go back to work. Personally, I would have stayed at home, but they won’t give me unemployment benefits. My boss tells me I can stay at home, but without pay. I already took two weeks without pay after I found out there were potential cases at my job. When I found out my job was on the essential services list, I had no choice but to go back to work.”

“There are rumors that some people may have been infected, but we have no evidence,” he continued. “I think it’s suspicious. A guy was pulled over two weeks ago, waiting for results. They’re supposedly negative, but the guy hasn’t come back to work yet. He had all the symptoms, but we were told it wasn’t COVID-19.”

Max explained that the health measures put in place were insignificant. “At the plant, schedules were slightly modified to avoid overlapping shifts,” he said. “When we go in and out of the plant, there’s a thermal camera to take our temperature and see if there’s any change. We have cleaning products as well. But it’s clear that the social distance of two meters is very difficult to apply in our working conditions.”

He continued, “I work in an operating room that’s about 10 feet long by less than 6 feet wide. In my case, there are three of us sharing that space. So when you go from one side to the other of the refining board, you are sure to run into someone.”

Referring to companies such as mining companies, which have the right to continue production on the pretext that they are essential, Max said, “Some people have more power than the average worker who works 40 hours a week. It’s easy for managers, factories and industry to pass themselves off as essential services by using the loopholes in the system: the wheel turns, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer.”

Max concluded by saying, “What is needed is a real quarantine: everyone at home for 14 days!”

François works for the aerospace manufacturer Pratt & Whitney as a component inspector. Since the beginning of the crisis, the company has maintained much of its production under the pretext that its contracts for the military are essential. Last week, in a decision that surprised and outraged workers, the company recalled its entire workforce even though aeronautics is not an essential service. Management and the union justified their decision evasively on the basis that the parts manufactured at the plant are used to propel aircraft carrying essential goods.

François explained to the WSWs that even in the departments that were kept in operation throughout the lockdown, the military accounts for only 5 to 10 percent of production. More than 90 percent of the production since the beginning of the pandemic has been related to commercial or other non-essential services such as engines for private jets.

François sharply criticized the sanitary measures, “Some sanitary measures are being taken, but it is not enough! Contacts are inevitable in a factory where hundreds of workers are working, where we constantly exchange tools. When you go to the bathroom, you find about 20 employees at the same time. In spite of the schedule changes, there are still large crowds at the entrance and the exit when all the workers leave their shifts at the same time.”

He explained what really motivates the company, commenting, “It’s good for the shareholders to maintain production because if there was only production related to the military, the company would not make a good turnover.” He added ironically, “For the bosses, it’s all in their pocket. Long live capitalism!”

The WSWs also spoke with **Paul**, a construction

worker, and **Jean**, his 19-year-old son.

Jean explained that he worked as a clerk in a supermarket but left because of fears for his health. “There were no real safety measures in place for the workers,” remarked Jean. “I was working at the entrance. We had little rubber gloves. We didn’t have access to a mask. I had to disinfect the customers’ hands, and they had to come within two meters of me.”

Jean was critical of the government’s response. “I think the government should have acted faster and sooner,” he said. “Now we’re reacting instead of preventing.”

When asked what prompted the government to push for a quick return to work, despite the fact that infections and deaths continue to rise rapidly in Quebec and across Canada, Paul paused for a moment before answering, “I think the government is under financial pressure. If they ask me what is needed before the lockdown measures are lifted, I would definitely say health.”

Then we discussed the catastrophic situation for health care workers and the so-called “lack of money,” the refrain of all levels of government in recent decades. Paul raised the issue of the staggering amounts Canada, the US and its others key allies are spending on the military. “I find it very difficult to explain the lack of equipment, especially medical equipment,” he added. “How long has the US been at war—125 years? How much money has been put into this? I don’t know, it’s way beyond me.”

The authors also recommend:

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[11 April 2020]

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