

Quebec government threatens thousands of lives with precipitous return to work

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Though Quebec remains the Canadian province most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with over 25,000 confirmed cases and more than 1,675 deaths, Quebec Premier François Legault is intensifying his criminal policy of a hasty, premature return to work.

Lying about the extremely fragile state of a public health care system ravaged by decades of austerity, Legault announced Monday the imminent reopening of daycare centers and primary schools. Those outside of Montreal will reopen on May 11 and those in the Greater Montreal area, the epicenter of the pandemic in Quebec, on May 19.

Yesterday, Quebec's premier announced that most retail stores outside of the Montreal region will be able to open as of next Monday, and all the province's manufacturing facilities and construction sites will be allowed to resume their operations on May 11. Already last week, work on residential construction sites, which along with the rest of the building industry were only closed in late March because of angry worker protests, resumed.

The Legault government is following in the footsteps of the Trump administration in the United States and the governments of the European Union. The repeated warnings of the World Health Organization (WHO) that the hasty lifting of lockdown measures could lead to a second, deadlier wave of COVID-19 cases are being brushed aside.

Like its American and European counterparts, and the premiers of other Canadian provinces, the right-wing CAQ government (Coalition Avenir Quebec) wants to force workers to return to the workplace as quickly as possible. Without any guarantee that appropriate safety measures are in place, the ruling elite is demanding the ratcheting up of the exploitation of the working class in order to feed the insatiable thirst of big business and the financial markets for profits.

Irrespective of the countless human lives that such a policy will cost under conditions of a continuing deadly pandemic, the authorities refuse to implement the measures prescribed by the scientific community to contain and defeat the coronavirus. These include systematic mass testing, treatment and isolation of infected people, contact-tracing, and massive investments in the health care system to build up surge capacity.

Instead, the only concern of the ruling elite is to “reopen and revive the economy”—i.e., to relaunch and ratchet up the exploitation of the working class—in order to pay for the trillions of dollars and euros that have been digitally created and handed over to the financial and corporate aristocracy through a host of emergency subsidies and rescue packages. By contrast, only crumbs have been dispensed in public aid for the millions of workers with lost income.

For its part, Justin Trudeau's “progressive” federal Liberal government has funneled more than C\$650 billion in bailout money to the banks, big business and the financial markets to protect the investments and profits of the rich and super-rich.

At Monday's press conference announcing the reopening of childcare and elementary schools (with the reopening of high schools, colleges and universities postponed until September), Legault sought to limit the political damage caused by the scandalous statements he had made only days before advocating a policy of “herd immunity.”

This policy consists of allowing the coronavirus to infect a large part of the population—and even wishing and facilitating such mass contamination—on the claim that this will allow the development and wide circulation of antibodies that would then block any further significant outbreak in the community. Wherever this criminal policy has been applied, whether in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe, it has led to a rapid

spread of the coronavirus, overwhelmed hospitals and caused thousands of preventable deaths.

Ignoring explicit warnings from the WHO that “There is currently no evidence that people who have recovered from COVID-19 and have antibodies are protected from a second infection,” Legault cavalierly stated at a press conference last Thursday that “we must develop immunity over the next few months” and “those who are less at risk can develop antibodies and become immune.”

Even the Public Health Agency of Canada has been forced to publicly reject the concept of herd immunity because it is so contrary to all available scientific evidence. “The idea of...generating natural immunity is actually not something that should be undertaken,” Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam said Saturday, in remarks clearly aimed at rebutting Legault’s comments.

Legault, in his remarks of last Thursday, attempted to persuade a population largely hostile to his push to reopen the schools that his government’s promotion of “natural”—i.e., herd—“immunity,” “does not mean we are going to use children as guinea pigs.”

His Monday announcement that daycares and schools are to be quickly reopened shows in fact that he intends for them to be “guinea pigs” and more. They are to be used as the vectors of the mass COVID-19 contamination that Legault publicly declared “desirable” last Thursday, although Quebec’s premier no longer finds it politically advisable to blurt this out.

The situation for teachers will be no better. On Legault’s orders, the schools will not be providing teachers with masks or other personal protective equipment. In violation of the WHO’s recommendations, the CAQ government also has no plans to institute mass testing of children, staff, or the general population as the schools and daycares are reopened, thereby ensuring that the virus will spread undetected.

Whatever stock phrase Premier Legault chooses to use in public to justify his reckless back-to-work orders—“natural immunity” last Thursday, “situation under control in hospitals” on Monday—the reactionary content of his government’s policy remains unchanged.

In Quebec, as in the rest of Canada and the world, the ruling class is determined to revive as quickly as possible the process of exploitation of the working class, which alone can produce real wealth and thus pay for the multitrillion-dollar bailouts lavished on big business and the rich.

At Monday’s press conference, Legault focused on the

refrain that “the situation is under control in the hospitals,” an absurd lie given that just days earlier he was forced to call on the support of 1,000 Canadian Armed Forces personnel to manage the catastrophic situation in Quebec’s long-term-care facilities (CHSLDs). The premier added another big lie: the claim that the return to work will be gradual, without pressure, saying with a falsely relaxed tone, “Go along at your own pace.”

Social reality is very different. Whether in classrooms, on construction sites, on factory floors or in other workplaces, real protective measures will be minimal or non-existent. Workers will be faced with the terrible choice of risking infection and infecting their loved ones with a potentially deadly virus or being fired and losing their livelihood.

This is the alternative that several physiotherapists, social workers and professionals employed by the West-Central Montreal regional health authority faced last week.

After a short two-hour course, these staff, who have no medical training, were redeployed to some of the CHSLDs hardest hit by an uncontrolled outbreak of COVID-19 and without being provided N95 masks. In an anonymous interview with the CBC, Canada’s public broadcaster, one of the employees in this position explained: “[The instructor] even said in the training, if you refuse to go, you’ll be fired. She said it very nonchalantly.”

Workers must oppose the efforts of Legault, his CAQ government, and the entire Canadian ruling elite to restart production at the risk of countless lives. In all workplaces, rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, must be built to fight for safe working conditions, a massive injection of funds into the health care system, a halt to all non-essential production, and full income security for all workers off work because of the pandemic. The resources exist to do this and more, but they are monopolized by a financial oligarchy whose assets must be seized and redirected toward the battle against the pandemic and the satisfaction of urgent social needs.



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