

The tragedy at Quebec City's Jeffery Hale Hospital: How Québec Solidaire tried to hide capitalism's responsibility

Our reporters
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The calamity now playing out at Quebec City's Jeffery Hale Hospital is a product of decades of federal and provincial government social spending cuts and their chronic underfunding of the public health care system.

Located in Quebec City's Saint-Sacrement neighbourhood not far from the downtown, Jeffery Hale Hospital was the site of the first COVID-19 outbreak in Quebec's capital city. Today nearly half of the 130 long-term care patients have contracted the coronavirus, leading to 17 deaths. As the following record shows, the authorities sought to cover-up the seriousness of the situation from the general population and the workers and families directly affected.

On March 30, hospital management confirmed a few COVID-19 cases and then spoke of an outbreak "under control" that affected only "a few members of a well-controlled ward."

The next day, the regional health authority admitted that 4 staff and 4 patients on the palliative care unit at Jeffery Hale Hospital had contracted COVID-19. It said the symptoms presented by the eight infected persons were "mild" and "all necessary protective and disinfection measures" had been put in place to "avoid transmission," including placing 23 hospital employees who may have been in contact with the infected persons in preventive isolation.

However, information revealed anonymously by hospital employees to Canada's French-language public broadcaster, Radio-Canada, painted a completely different picture. According to these employees, the outbreak was the result of negligence on the part of the authorities. For example, while staff had expressed fears of contagion as early as March 18, no preventive measures were put in place. Even when a staff member showed symptoms on March 23 and some staff were informed that an infected person may have been circulating on the palliative care floor, no protective measures were implemented, other than the quarantining of some workers.

According to the employee, workers had reported the presence of two patients with coronavirus symptoms as early as March 25, and asked for visors so that they could work safely with these patients. They were refused this essential piece of protective equipment, a decision endorsed by their local union which is an affiliate of the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec.

The president of the union, Patricia Lajoie, made rhetorical statements about the need to protect workers in order to disguise her collaboration with hospital management. But, questioned as to whether employees should have been equipped with visors from the moment the presence of two patients with COVID-19 was revealed, she instead raised the spectre of a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), put forward by the right-wing CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government at the end of March to justify rationing PPE. On that basis, the local union leader refused to criticize the hospital's decision and said: "We really must follow public health guidelines in such cases. Depending on the severity of the symptoms, that's what's going to tell you what equipment you need."

Another employee also revealed to Radio-Canada on March 31 that at least four patients with symptoms had died in the previous days, but that hospital management had refused to test them for COVID-19 because "it wasn't worth it" for people at the end of their lives.

For its part, the regional health authority defended the failure to test these patients and cavalierly blamed the doctors, who were responsible, according to the authorities, for "determining whether the symptoms of fever and breathing difficulties are due to infection or imminent death."

The negligence demonstrated by Jeffery Hale Hospital and the regional health authority has had tragic consequences. A steady worsening of the situation led to the announcement on April 16 of a 12th hospital death, a catastrophic toll representing more than half of the deaths recorded in the Quebec City area at that time. Despite the supposedly reinforced measures put in place, all floors of the institution were affected, and 46 patients and 31 staff members had received positive results from their COVID-19 screening tests. Thirty-five other persons were in preventive isolation.

Workers continued to decry the inadequate response from public health authorities. On April 16, Radio-Canada reported that coronavirus patients continued to eat from the hospital's reusable dishes and that laundry staff lacked the necessary protective equipment, as visors were provided late and in insufficient numbers. Some employees reportedly refused to handle the contaminated dishes.

The negligence of the authorities is all the more inexcusable

given that the Jeffery Hale Hospital was particularly at risk among health care institutions in the Quebec City region. It counts geriatrics among its specialties and houses patients suffering from cognitive disorders such as Alzheimer's. The latter have extreme difficulty in following social distancing and other precautionary measures, and are thus at greater risk of coming into contact with infected people. In addition, the hospital houses a day centre for the elderly.

Drastic funding cuts have been felt throughout the Canadian health care system, as a result of the austerity measures implemented by all the establishment parties when in office, from the Liberals, Conservatives, and Parti Québécois to the NDP. However, Jeffery Hale Hospital has been particularly affected in recent years. The hospital has had to reduce the services it offers to the population, especially in the emergency room, which has been closed at night since 2007.

The case of the Jeffery Hale Hospital in Quebec City is just one example among many demonstrating that while the coronavirus pandemic is the result of a biological process, its catastrophic impact is the result of a twofold social process: the criminal complacency and negligence of the ruling elite in recent months, which has allowed the virus to spread rapidly; and the decades of budget cuts and other capitalist austerity measures that have bled the entire public health system dry.

The coronavirus pandemic has thus exposed to the world the putrefaction of a capitalist system that subordinates all of society's resources—and countless human lives—to the insatiable demands of the financial markets and the super-rich.

Broad masses of people are coming to realize this. However, the political forces representing affluent layers of the middle class are coming forward to hide, under fake "left" posturing, the responsibility of capitalism for the current tragedy.

This is the task that Québec Solidaire (QS) has set itself in an open letter, co-signed by its two elected members of the National Assembly (MNAs) from the Quebec City region, Sol Zanetti and Catherine Dorion, and party leader Manon Massé. Motivated perhaps by the situation at Jeffery Hale Hospital, the QS MNAs' letter was published on April 18 in Quebec City's main daily newspaper, *Le Soleil*, under the headline, "You are right to be angry."

In the letter, the three QS legislators deplore the social spending cuts implemented by previous Parti Québécois and Quebec Liberal Party governments that have ravaged the public health care system. But they present these brutal austerity measures, not as flowing from the implacable logic of the crisis-ridden capitalist system, but as a bad, subjective policy choice of some politicians.

"Why?" they ask, after listing a series of examples of "organizational abuse" in nursing homes. "Because austerity was in the air of the times, and our government ministers lacked the backbone to resist the air of the times."

Who do the QS MNAs think they are kidding? "Our government ministers" are not just balloons floating in the "air of the times." They are seasoned political representatives of big business, working consciously and ruthlessly to impose the full burden of the capitalist crisis onto the backs of working people.

In its open letter, QS goes on to call for a "major refinancing of

our public services," to create "good jobs," which "could seriously boost the economy in all our regions." Such calls are not aimed at mobilizing workers and young people in a political struggle against the bankrupt capitalist system.

Their real purpose was revealed a few words later, when QS raises the question: "Will the CAQ have the courage to recognize this?" In other words, under the guise of defending public services, QS is sowing illusions in the right-wing CAQ government, led by Premier François Legault, a multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO who has spent his entire political career promoting privatization, tax cuts for big business and the dismantling of public services.

The letter from Québec Solidaire ends with these words: "There is only one moral and cultural duty, there are only shared values, love and compassion for others, without which Quebec would be nothing."

Class conscious workers should reject with contempt this promotion of Quebec nationalism—echoing, as it does, the "Quebec First" demagoguery of Legault and the reactionary appeals of the entire Quebec political establishment—and the unabashed call for class collaboration that accompanies it. Workers' only real "duty," and the only progressive answer to the human tragedy caused by the pandemic and capitalism's prioritizing of profit over human lives, is a political struggle based on class "values" that cannot be "shared" with the parasitic ruling elite that exploits them. Workers in Quebec must mount a common struggle with their class brothers and sisters across North America and internationally to replace rotting capitalism with a planned socialist economy and social equality.

The authors also recommend:

Quebec workers denounce government's rush to "reopen" the economy amid raging COVID-19 pandemic
[1 May 2020]

Quebec nurses expose shortages that enabled COVID-19 to ravage long-term care facilities
[21 April 2020]

Canada's coronavirus wage-subsidy tailored to propping up business, not protecting workers' incomes
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