Quebec’s business elite, unions and opposition parties rally behind Legault’s back to work drive

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Despite mounting worker opposition to returning to work amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic, Quebec Premier François Legault is determined that non-essential businesses and all elementary schools and daycare centres will be reopened in Canada’s second most populous province by May 19. This premature lifting of lockdown measures will result in countless new cases of COVID-19, and potentially tens of thousands of preventable deaths.

Like the Trump administration in the US and Europe’s governments, Quebec’s CAQ (Coalition Avenir Quebec) government is enforcing the demands of the financial and corporate elite. Big business is determined the economy be “restarted” forthwith, so they can intensify profit extraction from the working class and make it pay for the trillions of dollars governments have gifted investors throughout bailout packages.

Although several provincial governments have decided to postpone the reopening of schools until next September, all are following Quebec’s lead in reopening non-essential businesses and relaxing social distancing measures.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberal government, meanwhile, are providing much needed political cover for this reckless back-to-work drive. Trudeau has greenlighted the provinces’ actions and praised them for acting prudently and according to the best scientific advice, even as they make a mockery of Ottawa’s own, far from exacting, “reopening” guidelines.

The Legault government is well aware that the return to work will cost human lives. This was tacitly admitted by Dr. Horacio Arruda, Quebec’s Director of Public Health and Legault’s accomplice in the back-to-work drive, when he said that lifting the lockdown is a “risky bet” and that he hopes “not too many people will die.”

Warmly welcomed by employer organizations, the premature reopening of schools and of some of the province’s most lucrative sectors—manufacturing, construction, civil engineering and retail—has exposed the Legault government as a ruthless servant of big business.

At a time when ordinary people are furious to see profit being put before human life, the entire Quebec establishment, from the right-wing *Journal de Montréal* to the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, has rallied behind Legault’s criminal return-to-work policy. They are also providing him with advice and cover to deflect popular anger.

Mathieu Bock-Côté, a far-right columnist with the *Journal de Montréal*—the pro-CAQ daily newspaper owned by telecommunications magnate and former Parti Québécois leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau—had to acknowledge, in a worried tone, the broad popular opposition to lifting the lockdown measures. “The operation is not being carried out in the same way everywhere and requires a great deal of skill,” he wrote. “And as we’ve seen since Monday, it arouses a great deal of skepticism, and a certain amount of protest from both teachers and parents.”

Editorialists and columnists at the province’s other main newspapers—the pro-Quebec Liberal Party *La Presse* and the pro-Quebec independence *Le Devoir* —have been working full time trying to bamboozle the public into going along with the return to work.

Unsurprisingly, the Liberals and the Parti Québécois—the parties that from 1970 to 2018 alternated as Quebec’s government and for decades have imposed austerity, including by bleeding the public health care system dry—have effectively endorsed the CAQ’s plans. They have raised only minor reservations about its application in order to give themselves some political cover.

The most pernicious role in legitimizing the forced return to work, however, is being played by Québec Solidaire (QS). It has offered its full cooperation to the CAQ from the beginning of the health emergency, which it sees as an opportunity to integrate itself further into the political establishment.

On May Day, QS co-spokesperson and former student leader Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois urged Legault to act as the workers’ advocate and protector against big business. He “requested” the premier guarantee a “right of withdrawal for health reasons” to all employees whose health is “at risk.” In so doing, Nadeau-Dubois is calling on workers to leave their fate in the hands of a former multi-millionaire CEO; one moreover, who has built his

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entire political career on championing the dismantling and privatization of public services and massive tax cuts for big business and the rich.

A Facebook comment by Christine Labrie, another one of the ten QS MNAs (members of the National Assembly), illustrates how this petty-bourgeois party fully endorses the anti-worker policies of the Legault government and the entire ruling elite. “I am relieved for the entrepreneurs who will soon be able to resume their activities, and also for the children for whom staying at home was not easy,” Labrie wrote. “I sincerely hope that the measures taken since the beginning and those announced this week will be effective, that the top of the curve is behind us, and that we will soon be able to relax the distancing measures for everyone.”

Labrie is repeating here a whole series of lies put forward by the CAQ and the corporate media to justify their back-to-work campaign. These include the claim that the vast majority of children are suffering mentally from the lockdown and that a return to school, where they will be threatened with infection and illness, is preferable to being confined to their homes.

To begin with, the situation in Quebec is far from “under control,” Legault’s incessant claims notwithstanding. The province accounts for more than half of the approximately 63,400 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Canada, and, with its 2,510 deaths, nearly 60 percent of Canada’s 4,223 fatalities.

In Montreal, the epicentre of the pandemic, outbreaks have occurred in several hospitals that are close to being overwhelmed. The situation is particularly critical at the Maisonneuve-Rosement Hospital in the city’s east end, which no longer has enough beds to receive COVID-19 patients and has had to cancel surgeries. Meanwhile, in the working-class neighbourhoods of Montreal North and Park Extension, widespread community transmission is taking place.

A return to work can only lead to an exponential increase in coronavirus cases. Social distancing and hygiene measures are virtually impossible to apply in factories crowded with workers, on construction sites where workers exchange tools, or in public transit where passengers are crowded up against each other.

The government is promising to ensure health and safety measures in the workplace. But even in the province’s hospitals, long-term care facilities and senior residences, it has woefully failed in ensuring that front-line health care workers have proper personal protective equipment (PPE). School and daycare staff, who will be required to work with young children, are not being supplied with N-95 masks and other necessary protective gear.

Workers who complain to state authorities about the unsafe working conditions will simply be ignored. This is underscored by a report from neighbouring Ontario, where out of 200 workplace safety complaints filed with the province since the onset of the pandemic, not one was upheld.

Québec Solidaire has come out in support of a big business government that is threatening to deny jobless benefits to any worker who fails to return to work out of fear of being infected by the deadly coronavirus. In a statement supported by Legault, Quebec Labour Minister Jean Boulet has said that workers should “seize the opportunity” to return to work because “the CERB [Canada Emergency Response Benefit] is purely temporary” and can and will be denied those who refuse to work without “reasonable cause.”

As for the unions, they continue their treacherous role of suppressing any opposition to Legault, whom they have been promoting since his election in October 2018. Acting like an industrial police force for big business, the unions have assured the government that they will corral their members back to work. The Quebec Federation of Labor, the province’s largest labor federation, has welcomed Legault’s reckless back-to-work campaign, calling it an “economic recovery plan.”

The ruling elite wants to use the return to work to introduce a series of retrograde measures in labour relations, starting with wage and job cuts. But all over the world there is growing anger among the working class against the hasty “reopening of the economy” and the criminal neglect of capitalist governments.

Workers must reject the false choice between a return to work that endangers their lives and those of their loved ones, or the loss of their livelihood and economic ruin. In all workplaces, they must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions, to fight for the following demands: an immediate halt to all non-essential economic activity; full protection for health care workers and others in essential sectors; and the payment of full wages to all workers laid off or unable to work because of the pandemic.

The ruling class and its political representatives will say that these demands are “unrealistic” and “unrealizable.” In fact, there are abundant resources to realize them, but they must be taken out of the hands of the capitalists through the struggle for a workers’ government and the socialist reorganization of socioeconomic life.

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