Canada: Quebec government advocates hiring children to disinfect daycare centres amid coronavirus pandemic

Laurent Lafrance
19 May 2020

Quebec's right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government is resorting to ever more desperate measures to push through a premature return to work as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage.

And far from mobilizing society's resources to protect essential workers and conduct mass testing and contract tracing, it is increasingly abandoning serious efforts to stop the spread of the virus, especially in Montreal, which is the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada.

Quebec Premier François Legault's government is now urging Montreal-area daycare centres to hire teenagers, including children as young as 14, to fill staff shortages. Legault has already greenlighted the resumption of construction, mining, manufacturing and most other businesses, as well as the reopening of primary schools and daycare centres throughout the province except in the Greater Montreal area.

"During the summer school break, students aged 14 and over will be able to be hired" for disinfection, cleaning tasks, and to assist with child care, the government said in a note sent to daycare centres which are facing a shortage of staff, linked to poor working conditions and exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis. "An employer who wishes to employ a child under the age of 14," the note said, "must obtain written permission from a parent or guardian."

The Legault government's outrageous policy will put children, who would replace staff unable to work due to health conditions, at a high risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19. It takes place under conditions of a deepening health crisis, with Montreal's hospitals beginning to overflow with COVID-19 patients. Horrific conditions prevail in the region's nursing homes, and several working class neighborhoods on the Island of Montreal, including Montreal North and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, are seeing significant community transmission of the virus.

While children and young people in Montreal are the immediate targets, the announcement must be taken as a serious warning by workers across Canada as to just how far the ruling elite is prepared to go to force working people back to work. Legault's government has for weeks been spearheading the reckless return-to-work drive of Canada's ruling elite, implementing reopening plans that were subsequently embraced by provincial governments across the country, including Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives in Ontario. (see: Quebec government, big business push for return to work as COVID-19 deaths soar).

Legault is seeking to replace up to 6,000 daycare workers who are currently unable to work, according to figures provided by the FIPEQ (*Fédération des intervenantes en petite enfance du Québec*), which is affiliated with the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec* (CSQ—Quebec Union Federation).

"We're talking, for example, of vulnerable people, people who have chronic illnesses, who have diabetes," explained FIPEQ President Valérie Grenon. "Some people are afraid of catching and transmitting the virus to a vulnerable relative," she added. She also noted that the government will not remunerate workers in the province's *Centres de la petite enfance* (CPE—government-funded, non-profit daycares) who don't show up to work because they are infected by COVID-19, unless this is approved by Public Health authorities.

The hasty reopening of daycare centres, to be

© World Socialist Web Site

implemented through the mass hiring of teenagers and children to work in highly dangerous conditions, is aimed at accelerating the precipitous return to work demanded by big business. Its goal is to resume and intensify the exploitation of workers in order to make them pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars handed over to the financial and corporate elite by the Trudeau government, Bank of Canada, and other state institutions under various bailout schemes.

This anti-worker policy is being applied in the United States, Europe and around the world. In Canada, with the full support of Justin Trudeau's federal government, all provincial governments have begun to lift their containment/lockdown measures. They are doing so in defiance of repeated warnings from the World Health Organization (WHO) that a premature lifting of the lockdown—especially one without provisions for mass testing, contact tracing, quarantining and treatment of the sick and a vast expansion of hospital surge capacity—risks resulting in a second, even more deadly wave of infections.

Due to a public outcry, the Legault government has stopped publicly advocating a criminal strategy of "herd immunity," which calls for the mass infection of the population. Nonetheless, its entire policy shows that it is prepared to risk the lives of working people, even children, for the sake of corporate profit. This is all the more disturbing as doctors are beginning to observe serious consequences in children infected with COVID-19, including a condition similar to Kawasaki syndrome.

Other measures being considered by the Legault government to speed up the reopening of child care centres include: the hiring of day-camp animators to replace daycare workers; increasing the number of children per trained worker; and hiring staff before the criminal record check process is completed.

At the same time, in blatant violation of its own hypocritical calls to maintain social distancing, the government is recommending that parents in need hire a student or even use grandparents under the age of 70 to babysit their children.

Several outbreaks have already been reported in emergency child care facilities that have been kept open during the lockdown to accommodate the children of health care workers and other essential employees.

At a daycare centre located at La Mennais School in Mascouche, a northern suburb of Montreal, 12 children and 4 employees tested positive. Another emergency daycare centre in Mascouche, Clair-Soleil, reported that one child tested positive for COVID-19 and that three other children and six educators who had been in contact with the infected child were removed as a preventive measure.

The immense danger posed by the complete reopening of the daycares being prepared by the Legault government is indicated in an open letter from the FIPEQ. "Numerous directives concerning ratios, social distancing measures or limiting contacts at pickup times are not being respected," it states. "Management at several places are threatening to fire workers who fear for their health or that of their loved ones."

Protective equipment is clearly insufficient. "Every day, we change diapers, wipe noses and comfort children, and so far, we have not been given any protective equipment," said Paula Romero, an educator at CPE Pierrot La Lune, on the South Shore of Montreal.

No systematic testing has been put in place. "Some people have been quarantined, but staff and children who have been in contact remain at the CPE without having been tested," explained the FIPEQ. The union has also observed that parents of children attending emergency daycare centres are not systematically informed when there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in their daycare centres.

Employees are even kept in the dark about the health status of the parents who use their services. In an interview reported by the daily newspaper *Le Devoir*, a daycare educator explained, "I looked after a child whose mother tested positive for COVID-19, and management never informed us."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site