

Quebec Premier accelerates return to work in Montreal—Canada's COVID-19 epicenter

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Quebec's government ordered the reopening this Monday of all businesses with exterior storefronts in the Greater Montreal area. Daycare centres will follow on June 1. These measures are the latest in a massive push to force a premature resumption of all economic activities in the Canadian metropolitan area that remains, by far, the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As early as April, Premier François Legault had sanctioned the reopening of mining, residential construction, garages, and landscaping companies throughout the province. On May 11, it was the turn of manufacturing and industrial construction. That same week, Legault's right-wing "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government ordered the reopening of the province's elementary schools—except in the Greater Montreal area. Although Legault repeatedly announced the impending opening of Montreal's elementary schools, due to an outcry from parents and teachers he was ultimately forced to concede last week that they would only reopen for the new school year in August.

What guides the decisions of Quebec's premier, like all representatives of the ruling class across Canada and around the world, is the demand of the banks and big business that they be able to resume extracting massive profits from workers' labor. They are determined to make workers pay—through increased exploitation and at the possible cost of their lives amid the pandemic—for the more than C\$650 billion Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government and the Bank of Canada have funnelled in bailout funds to the country's financial and corporate elite.

The premature return to work comes in defiance of repeated warnings from the WHO (World Health Organization) and the scientific community about the immense dangers of lifting lockdown measures without a massive campaign to detect, trace and treat those infected,

and without a major expansion of the health care system to build up surge capacity.

Legault was forced to admit last Wednesday that Quebec has still not reached its own target for the number of COVID-19 tests performed per day. While his government set a modest target of 14,000 tests per day, the province has only managed to increase the number of tests from 6,000 to about 9,000 per day.

"Instead of transparent test-and-trace plans, and proud reports on their execution," wrote the *Globe and Mail* in an editorial that was forced to acknowledge the dearth of COVID-19 tests, especially in Ontario and Quebec, "we keep hearing about plans to have a plan, or plans to consider plans." This scathing and ironic assessment is all the more significant coming from the mouthpiece of Canada's financial elite, which is pushing for a rapid resumption of economic activity.

Another noteworthy intervention was that of Canadian Medical Association (CMA) President Dr. Sandy Buchman, who argued before a Senate committee last week that the country was "gambling by reopening." Pointing to the shortage of medical personnel and insufficient testing, Dr. Buchman warned: "We're scrambling. In my opinion, we're not fully prepared for a second wave." The CMA president criticized the lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical personnel three months into the pandemic. "We'd never permit a firefighter to go into a burning building without adequate protection," he said. "We can't expect our frontline health care workers to put themselves in harm's way."

Under such conditions, the Quebec government's decision to speed up the return to work in the Canadian province most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic is nothing short of criminal.

Horrifying conditions continue to prevail in seniors' residences and nursing homes (known by their French

acronym CHSLD), which have recorded more than 80 per cent of the deaths. At least one positive coronavirus case has been detected in 332 of these facilities; two of them were shaken by the deaths of more than 80 of their residents; and all the residents of the Vigi Mont-Royal CHSLD became ill after the ventilation system broke down: of the 226 seniors who tested positive, 70 died on site and 32 were sent to hospital, while 148 employees were infected.

Turning his back on reality, Premier Legault justified his back-to-work push at a press conference last week by saying, “The trend is good, and we can actually take a gamble.” The first part of the sentence is a brazen lie. As for his “gamble,” Legault did not bother to explain that it consists of putting the health and lives of hundreds of thousands of workers, their loved ones, and the general public in danger.

The risk is particularly pressing in the Greater Montreal area, the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.

With only 5 percent of the Canadian population, the city accounts for 30 percent of all COVID-19 infections. Its infection rate stands at 822 per 100,000 population, five times the Canadian average of 164 per 100,000. According to figures released by health authorities yesterday, COVID-19 cases on the Island of Montreal have reached 24,388, while deaths officially attributed to the virus now stand at 2,584.

The number of cases has jumped in the poor neighbourhoods of the city, where those hardest hit by COVID-19 are low-wage workers who do not have the luxury of self-isolation. In Montreal North, for example, all indicators are in the red: the number of cases, the number of deaths, and the number of health care workers infected. The latter figure stands at 440, equivalent to 24 percent of the borough’s total coronavirus cases.

The vast majority of these workers are orderlies, some of them working in nursing homes. Many are refugees who fled Trump’s anti-immigrant witch-hunt and arrived between 2017 and 2019 through Roxham Road, an unofficial border crossing point between Quebec and New York State near the official Lacolle immigration center. They were denounced by Legault, who made it a central element of his anti-immigrant campaign during the October 2018 Quebec election. Now that he is premier, Legault is continuing his chauvinistic policy. Despite the courageous work accomplished by many of these refugees in Montreal nursing homes struck by the coronavirus, Legault refuses to grant them permanent resident status. “We can’t open the door and say, ‘If you come here

illegally, if you find a job, it’s OK, we’ll accept you as an immigrant,’ ” he said last Thursday.

With more than 3,740 registered cases, health care workers account for nearly 20 percent of all confirmed coronavirus cases on the Island of Montreal. This large-scale contamination is the result of the Quebec government’s failure to provide them with the necessary PPE. Its response to the subsequent shortage of medical personnel was to increase the number of patients per caregiver, force part-time employees to work full-time, and cancel nurses’ vacations.

The Legault government’s frontal attack on health care workers has provoked growing anger and outrage among them, which the unions, having offered their full cooperation to the government, are finding increasingly hard to contain.

Dozens of nurses took part last week in a demonstration organized by their union FIQ (Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec) in front of the premier’s office in Quebec City to denounce the government’s suspension of several clauses of their collective agreement, including vacation rights.

“Everyone knew that our working conditions were already dismal. Now they are unsustainable,” said FIQ President Nancy Bédard. But these demagogic remarks were only intended to let off steam among rank-and-file workers. As the CBC noted in its report on the demonstration: “The FIQ adds that it is well aware of the more critical situation in the Greater Montreal area and is prepared to enter into special agreements to ensure that workers will be present in sufficient numbers.”

Workers must reject the efforts of the ruling elite, aided by the pro-capitalist unions, to subordinate their health and even their lives to the profit interests of big business and the financial markets. Rank-and-file committees must be built to ensure the full protection and safety of health workers, the shutdown of all non-essential production, and full compensation for workers laid off or unable to work. These committees must also link the struggles of workers in Quebec with their colleagues across Canada and internationally, who confront the same threats to their health and lives



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