“For the elite, lives are expendable”

Canadian nurse denounces budget cuts, government neglect and reckless back-to-work drive

Our reporter
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Julien is a clinical nurse in the Quebec City area. He is one of the thousands of health care workers who were "off-loaded," i.e., displaced from their original workplace to respond to the critical needs in the health care system in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Julien explained that adequate protection measures were not taken from the outset by management, who blithely lie to workers. “Some of my colleagues have been quarantined after being put in contact with positive patients without appropriate equipment,” Julien told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “While training usually lasts a week, mine lasted barely two days. I wasn't even trained on how to properly wear the protective gowns.”

Turning to personal protective equipment (PPE), Julien explained, “We don't have the right PPE to be in contact with positive patients, such as N-95 masks. According to management, to be considered 'at risk', you have to be exposed for 10 minutes to a positive patient with an ordinary surgical mask in an enclosed space. I don't think that's the reality.” Julien recounted that several of his colleagues had been in contact with COVID-19 patients, but managers pressured them not to put their names on the list provided for this purpose, in violation of what is required by public health.

“There's a very high level of negligence,” the clinical nurse said. “Many orderlies and nurses voluntarily agreed to go to Montreal (the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada) to help out.” Referring to his colleagues, he continued, “All of them were infected with the coronavirus. Management never wanted to admit that these workers had been infected, but we learned that they had been quarantined.”

Aware that government authorities should have learned from the experience of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), which hit the city of Toronto hard in 2002-03, Julien said, “In my opinion, there is deliberate, and therefore criminal, neglect. The [Quebec] Health Minister Danielle McCann and Premier François Legault said several times in the early days that they were not aware of what was going on in nursing homes, which is not true. Several years ago, at Laval University, I was part of a study project that criticized the conditions in these nursing homes. We held annual meetings with high-level employers to raise the issues. Yet, in front of the cameras, the Premier continues to say that he was not aware of this. We should have learned from the past, but instead, they turned a deaf ear and closed their eyes.”

Asked about the government’s duplicity, Julien referred to the Socialist Equality Party statement, “Build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus and save lives!”

“I read the article you sent me. There's the upper class, and government representatives like Legault are from the upper class,” he said. “They don't think in terms of the life and health of the population but think about the money in their pockets and in the pockets of the upper class. People like us, workers and the general population, our monetary value is very low. Investing money in public health does not bring any money back. Upper class people can afford high quality care in the private sector. They are not affected by that, so they do not want to put money into public services. The government cuts back and then donates large sums of money with no strings attached to big companies like Bombardier or the Cirque du Soleil.”

Julien vigorously opposed the government's drive to

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restart an economy for the benefit of “millionaires.” He pointed out that “there are truly essential services for general health such as dental care. But the way and the reason why the government revived the economy was not good. Things were done too quickly, contrary to what the majority of the population was asking for.”

According to him, “It is only to benefit the elite, who profit economically from all this. The average workers, whether they work or receive the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit, it doesn't make much difference for them, but the upper class had significant losses because there were no workers to bring in the money. Millionaires and multimillionaires were looking at their wallets and seeing that the millions were shrinking a bit. They pushed the government, saying that the money had to keep coming in.”

The nurse continued, “We have to focus on the folks who really drive the economy, the ordinary workers who work and provide services to society. We have to think about the people and not just the economy. We have to deal with the pandemic before we can revive the economy.”

Julien also noted that the concept of “herd immunity,” which is guiding the government’s policies, even if Legault no longer dares to admit it publicly, has no scientific basis. “What I have heard from many doctors where I work is that they do not generally believe in long-term immunity,” he added. “There may be a short-term one, we're talking about 3 to 4 months. But there would be no protection against a second and third wave, because the case 0 (first infected) would no longer be immune when case X (last infected) becomes infected. Person X could therefore re-contaminate case 0.”

Julien also condemned the government's demagogic campaign that ultimately seeks to divide workers and impose major givebacks. “By offering a slight wage increase only to nursing home orderlies, the government is trying to make people believe that it is responding to society's needs, which is false. This is just a 'band-aid' that hides the problem without solving it," he said, adding, "The collective bargaining offer contains wage increases below inflation for all the rest of the workers. We've already accumulated wage givebacks over the years."

For Julien, this is a strategy to pave the way for more privatization and allow companies to make profits at the expense of public health. “The government is trying to turn the population against us, by presenting us as spoiled kids who complain on a full stomach,” he stated. “Then it goes ahead and privatizes, saying everything has been tried but the health care workers are really too demanding, that it's their fault.”

Julien expressed his opposition to the government’s offers to renew the expired collective agreements. However, he experienced intimidation from his union leadership when he spoke out on social media. “My union representative called me up and asked me to calm down because I am too critical on Facebook about the fact that we are not aware of what the unions are negotiating with the government. They tell us what we want to hear, but behind the scenes, they are talking with the government. I would be curious to know what is being discussed behind closed doors. I get the impression that they are very passive. In the end, they are probably the ones who bring the glasses of water to the government negotiators,” he remarked.

With regard to the government decrees overriding its contractual obligations, Julien explained that the government has decided to take away workers' rights, including summer holidays to manage a situation for which it is responsible. “There have been cuts over the years that have resulted in a lack of equipment, facilities, personnel, completely inadequate ratios,” he said. “Now, workers are getting sick and exhausted.

“The government and its agencies are seeking to impose even more work on the workers who are going to stay, and the second wave hasn't arrived yet,” observed Julien. “People are completely exhausted and are thinking about quitting en masse, not because they want to pressure management, but really because they want to change jobs.” Meanwhile, “managers, like unit chiefs, are entitled to their summer holidays,” he added.

Julien concluded, “For the elite, lives are expendable. The money that will be saved is worth the dead bodies that will have accumulated. The government will then privatize, saying that it is the workers’ fault, while it is the fault of this elite, with its social cuts, its mismanagement and its indifference to the well-being of the caregivers.”

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