

Quebec Solidaire backs Canadian elites' disastrous handling of COVID-19 pandemic

Louis Girard, Richard Dufour
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Quebec Solidaire (QS) has lent its full support to the Canadian ruling elite in its disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic that has resulted in more than 100,000 infections and 8,400 deaths nationwide.

Although the World Health Organization sounded the alarm as early as January, it was only on March 10 that the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau even asked the provinces to take stock of their medical supplies and inform it of any shortages. As for Quebec Premier François Legault, he ordered the closure of schools and some sectors of the economy only 24 to 48 hours before other provinces, well after the virus had taken hold—allowing Quebec to become the epicentre of the country's COVID-19 pandemic. Although Quebec represents less than a quarter of the country's population, it has recorded more than half of Canada's total cases and deaths.

Behind its vague “left” posturing, Quebec Solidaire has not raised any criticism of the Canadian authorities' belated and criminal response to the pandemic. It fully accepts the official line that the thousands of human lives lost to COVID-19 were inevitable, because such a pandemic was unforeseeable.

In fact, not only was a pandemic foreseen by epidemiologists around the world, but Canadian health authorities issued repeated, highly-detailed warnings about the need to prepare for a global pandemic in the years following the 2002-3 outbreak of SARS—a related virus that hit Canada hard, making it the most affected country outside East Asia. But the modest preventive measures that were then taken were soon set aside due to continued and intensified capitalist austerity. Equipment became outdated and useless. Despite warnings about the need to build “surge capacity,” Canada's hospitals were operating at near- or even full-capacity before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even today, four months on, there is a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline medical staff.

Ignoring these well-known facts, QS co-leader Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois told a May 26 press briefing that his party

“could accept, for the first wave, the explanations of the [Legault] government that it was taken by surprise.”

Quebec Solidaire has also endorsed the campaign—that has been led by Legault and other hard-right provincial premiers such as Doug Ford in Ontario; greenlighted by the federal Trudeau government; and supported by Canada and Quebec's major labour federation—for a premature and reckless reopening of non-essential businesses under the pretext of “reviving the economy.”

From the viewpoint of the ruling class, the limited lockdown measures had to be lifted as soon as possible in order to revive and intensify the exploitation of the working class. This is seen as urgently necessary to make workers pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars funnelled by the Trudeau government into the financial markets and the coffers of big business to guarantee the wealth and investments of the rich and super-rich. By contrast, the millions of workers who lost their jobs due to the pandemic have been placed on meager temporary rations, in the form of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

Under persistent questioning by a journalist who wanted to know whether the end of lockdown measures was “disorganized” or “too fast,” Quebec Solidaire's other leading spokesperson, Manon Massé, gave an evasive answer: “There are still a lot of ... fears, we have not managed ... to reassure Quebecers.”

The aim of capitalist governments—whether Legault's right-wing CAQ regime, the Trudeau government in Ottawa, the ultra-reactionary Trump in the United States, the fascistic Bolsonaro in Brazil or those of the European Union—is not to “reassure” the population, much less to protect it. Rather, it is to force millions of workers, under threat of being fired, to go back to their workplaces without any real protective measures. They are to face the risk of being infected or infecting their loved ones with the potentially deadly coronavirus in order to extract profit as quickly as possible for the financial markets and wealthy investors.

Quebec Solidaire fully supports this criminal objective, which puts capitalist profit before human lives. In reply to a

suggestion that lockdown measures should remain in place, Massé said, “I am not a public health official, I can't tell.” This sums up the political cynicism and cowardice of her party.

Massé, who also heads Quebec Solidaire’s delegation in the Quebec parliament as the second opposition party, went so far as to praise Legault. “So I invite the Premier,” she said, “to return to the fine habit of transparency he displayed at the beginning of the pandemic.”

This is a signal to the ruling class that the upper middle class-based Quebec Solidaire is eager to integrate itself still further into the political establishment and provide a “left” cover for their anti-worker policies.

It is also a lie. Far from being “transparent,” Premier Legault has sought from the very beginning of the crisis to manipulate public opinion in order to achieve his goal of a premature “reopening of the economy,” so that his big business friends and partners can continue to enrich themselves. After Legault’s open promotion of the criminal policy of “herd immunity”—the deliberate contamination of a majority of the population under the pretext of immunizing it against COVID-19 at the cost of thousands of lives—provoked a backlash, he stopped talking about it. But he and his government have continued to pursue the same policy in practice. During the month of May, Quebec’s premier repeatedly announced the reopening of primary schools in the coronavirus-ravaged Greater Montreal area, before having to backtrack in the face of immense public opposition.

Quebec Solidaire seeks to conceal its collaboration with the Legault government and to preserve its tarnished “left-wing” image by focusing all of its attention on a few token policy proposals.

“Those most threatened by COVID-19 must be able to stay at home without fear of being fired,” thundered Nadeau-Dubois. When asked to elaborate, he pointed out that this only applied to “workers over 60” or those with a “weak immune system.” On its website, QS explained that “since a similar measure is already being applied by the government for teachers, Quebec Solidaire is asking that it be extended to all employers.” However, QS promptly dropped even this modest proposal after Legault, in another flip-flop, declared that teachers over 60 years of age were actually not at risk—only those over 70 were.

QS then put forward a “pandemic tax” that would raise the basic tax rate for large corporations from 11.6 percent to 17.4 percent. At a press briefing, QS legislator and economic critic Vincent Marissal did everything to reassure his audience of mainstream media journalists that QS is not anti-business, insisting, “This (taxation) rate resembles that of 2007, before it was reduced by the various governments.”

Another harmless measure advocated by QS concerns tax havens. “Every year,” Marissal lamented, “Quebec is deprived of \$800 million, which goes directly to tax havens.”

However, on the fundamental issue of bailing out big business by plundering the public treasury, QS agrees with the Trudeau and Legault governments. “In these times of economic and health crisis,” said Nadeau-Dubois, “the government has a responsibility to send a lifeline to all citizens and businesses that need it.”

QS is troubled by the \$800 million sheltered in tax havens. But it has no problem with the \$650 billion that, under the cover of the coronavirus crisis, was transferred virtually overnight to the largest corporations and banks by the Trudeau government—and much more by the Trump administration and the European Union.

Quebec Solidaire has not warned workers that they will have to pay for these massive bailouts with an intensified assault on their jobs, working conditions and public services. Instead, alongside the trade unions and the social democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP), it has aided and abetted the looting of public funds for the benefit of big business.

Quebec Solidaire's response to the immense health and socioeconomic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic was to cover up the responsibility of the ruling capitalist class, to help it impose a premature and dangerous return to work, and to conceal the massive transfer of public funds to big business and the financial aristocracy.

It even boasted about this record. In a “balance sheet of the parliamentary session” published on June 12, QS recalled its mid-March “promise ... to work with the Legault government” in fighting the coronavirus pandemic; then declared with satisfaction, “We helped Mr. Legault cover his blind spots.”



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