

Quebec's hard-right premier reshuffles cabinet for stepped-up class-war assault

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1 July 2020

Quebec Premier François Legault reshuffled the cabinet of his right-wing populist “Quebec first” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government late last month. His aim is to initiate a new phase in his government’s drive to exploit the coronavirus pandemic to restructure class relations at the expense of the working class.

One of the two major changes in the cabinet shuffle concerned Danielle McCann, a health professional who had served as Minister of Health in the CAQ government since it came to power in October 2018. McCann was demoted to Minister of Higher Education, while her deputy minister, Yvan Gendron, was ejected from his post.

Legault is serving up McCann and Gendron as scapegoats for his government’s disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like all levels of government across Canada, the response of Quebec’s CAQ government to the health emergency has been characterized by:

- * a total lack of preparation for a pandemic that was both foreseeable and foreseen. This includes both the failure to take urgent action when the coronavirus was identified as a major health threat in January, and the decades-long pursuit of capitalist austerity that has left the health care system in a shambles;

- * the refusal to provide health care workers with personal protective equipment (PPE);

- * the adoption of a strategy of “herd immunity,” which promotes mass contamination and blithely accepts mass fatalities;

- * the premature reopening of nonessential economic sectors so as to protect the wealth and profits of the rich.

These criminal policies have led to the terrible toll of over 5,500 deaths in the province of Quebec alone, one of the highest per capita mortality rates in the world.

The new health minister is accountant and businessman Christian Dubé, who hitherto had served as head of the Treasury Board. “Why is it that the Treasury Board president will be managing the health department,” asked political observer Thierry Giasson in the daily newspaper *Le Devoir*. “Is this a harbinger of cuts?”

Indeed, that is precisely the intention of Premier Legault, who called the Health Ministry a “monster” before issuing a thinly veiled warning, “I think it is possible, as a businessman, to improve things in the health care system.”

A few days before his appointment as Health Minister, Dubé was more explicit about the real objective of the CAQ government, i.e. a new round of brutal budget cuts and ever more authoritarian methods to impose them. “In times of crisis,” Dubé argued, “we cannot continue to do things the way they were done before. But some folks don't want to go any further ... Is it because they're afraid of change?”

Almost as soon as Dubé became Health Minister, the CAQ government said that it would stop holding daily press conferences to update the population on the spread of COVID-19 in Quebec. This was followed the next day by an announcement from the Quebec government’s National Institute of Public Health that it too was ending its daily reporting of infections, deaths, and tests. These figures, which are essential for both the public and medical professionals to assess the progress of the pandemic, would instead be released only once a week.

In other words, the CAQ wanted to hide from the public the impact of its premature “reopening” of nonessential businesses, which will inevitably lead in the coming days and weeks to a surge in the number of COVID-19 infections, as has already been seen in the United States and Europe. Only after a public outcry and protests from health care experts did the Legault government back down and pledge to continue the daily release of key COVID-19 data.

The other major change in the cabinet shuffle was the replacement of Dubé by the former Minister of Justice, Sonia LeBel. In her new role at the head of the Treasury Board, LeBel will be tasked with imposing new concessions on the 600,000 public sector workers whose collective agreements expired on March 31. She also inherits the controversial Bill 61, whose adoption had to be postponed until the fall because of widespread popular concern over the extraordinary powers the CAQ government is trying to arrogate under its provisions.

Presented by the government as a means to facilitate the rapid launch of infrastructure projects so as to revive the economy, this omnibus bill has in fact a much broader reach and sinister political implications. It would indefinitely extend the public health emergency and associated extraordinary government powers. It would give the CAQ government the power to arbitrarily change construction industry rules and regulations, directly threatening the rights of construction workers. Moreover, a vaguely worded provision in Bill 61's Clause 36 authorizes the government to "take any measure it considers necessary to make any adjustment to any provision of an Act," suggesting the government could use it to rewrite virtually any law at will.

In the name of fast-tracking 202 construction projects, Bill 61 also allows the government to circumvent environmental standards. Section 4 stipulates that any future proposed public infrastructure project be studied for no more than one hour by the responsible committees of the Quebec National Assembly. Section 51 stipulates that the government or any other public body cannot be sued for any action taken under the legislation once it becomes law.

The public committee charged with following up on the recommendations of the Charbonneau Commission, an inquiry set up by the former Liberal government following a spate of construction industry corruption scandals, has criticized Bill 61, because it "creates conditions extremely favourable to the emergence of corruption, collusion and other malfeasance."

LeBel was the chief prosecutor of the Charbonneau Commission. Her appointment to the Treasury Board is clearly intended to provide the CAQ government with political cover so it can defuse opposition to Bill 61. It will cite LeBel's past as she attempts to steer the legislation through the National Assembly, hoping thereby to counter accusations that it will pave the way for a return to the corrupt practices of the past.

Extending the state of health emergency indefinitely instead of renewing it every 10 days would remove any limit on the government's ability to use decrees to abrogate workers' collective agreements—as it is already doing. This has allowed the government to impose even more disastrous working conditions on health care workers on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19, whether it be by cancelling vacations and holidays, forcing employees to change workplaces and duties (offloading), or forcing them to work overtime.

Salivating at the prospect of obtaining lucrative government contracts, the Quebec Council of Employers and construction industry representatives have all warmly welcomed Bill 61. However, some business representatives, aware of the fact that the huge scandals in the construction

industry have contributed to the discrediting of the political establishment, warned that the government needed to be more "rigorous" and "accountable."

Since coming to power, the CAQ, a government dedicated to deregulation, privatization, and massive tax cuts for big business and the rich, has intensified the anti-worker agenda of its Liberal and Parti Québécois (PQ) predecessors.

Bill 61, which would give the government quasi-dictatorial powers, is the logical continuation of the class-war program that the ruling class has been waging for decades, both in Canada and internationally. After gutting social programs, attacking living standards and fabulously enriching a tiny minority, even a façade of democracy is less tolerable for the ruling elite. It is increasingly turning to authoritarian forms of rule to impose its programme of social counterrevolution at home and neocolonial wars and great-power conflict abroad.

It remains to be seen whether the new version of Bill 61 that LeBel will present this fall will maintain, beyond a few cosmetic changes, the openly authoritarian bent of the previous version. But two things are certain: no section of the ruling class is fundamentally opposed to the turn toward antidemocratic forms of rule; the defense of democratic rights depends entirely on the independent political mobilization of the working class against the crisis-ridden capitalist system (see: Why is Canada's ruling elite deploying the military amid the COVID-19 pandemic?).

The opposition parties—the Quebec Liberals, the PQ, and Québec Solidaire—fully agree with the massive subsidies to construction companies under the pretext of "economic recovery." All they are asking is that the government not trample on the rules for awarding contracts, out of fear that doing so will further discredit the entire political system.

This is also the case with the unions, who have eagerly collaborated with the CAQ since its election in imposing its right-wing agenda. "We have an opportunity today to make a shift in our economic development strategy," wrote the presidents of Quebec's four main labour federations (FTQ, CSN, CSQ, and CSD) after the temporary withdrawal of Bill 61. These loyal defenders of the capitalist system merely want to be part of the process as "partners of Quebec society, in an open and constructive dialogue" with the government and big business.



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