

# Unions' big lie to Quebec health care workers battling the pandemic: "The government will protect you"

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Nurses at the Cité-de-la-Santé Hospital in Laval, Montreal's largest suburb, staged a sit-in Friday, July 31. They were protesting dire working conditions—including chronic understaffing and forced overtime—that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sit-in was part of a growing series of demonstrations and work stoppages that have taken place at health care institutions in Quebec and throughout Canada in recent months.

Many of these protest actions have been organized on Facebook by rank-and-file workers, acting independently of the unions. Like their counterparts in the United States and internationally, these workers have been impelled to act by unsafe working conditions, in particular the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE).

The palpable anger of health care workers is bound up with growing opposition among all sections of the working class to the ruling elite's disastrous response to the health emergency and the economic fallout from the pandemic. But far from channelling this combative sentiment into a working class counteroffensive after decades of capitalist austerity, the unions are doing all they can to stifle and politically neuter it.

This was purpose of an op-ed column written by Jeff Begley, president of the FSSS-CSN, Quebec's largest health care workers' union. Published last Tuesday in *Le Devoir*, a Montreal daily, the article was co-signed by many local FSSS-CSN union presidents.

It made extremely limited criticisms of the actions of the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ)-led provincial government with the aim of pacifying the scorching anger of rank-and-file hospital and CHSLD (nursing home) workers over the government's criminally negligent response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But a careful examination of the letter's contents can only fuel the growing rank-and-file rebellion against the unions' impotence and misleadership.

Under the title "Repeating the mistakes of the first wave is

not an option," the article echoes the lie that the pandemic took Canadian authorities by surprise and that their catastrophic handling of the crisis is simply due to "mistakes." In reality, it is the result of a deliberate policy of putting profit before human lives.

For years, the various levels of government in Canada and Quebec ignored the repeated warnings of public health experts, epidemiologists and other scientists about the dangers from, and growing risk of, a global pandemic, and continued and intensified the budget cuts that have ravaged the health care system for decades. This was all the more criminal given that outside of East Asia, Canada was the country to experience the worst outbreak of the 2002-3 SARS epidemic, thereby exposing the devastating consequences of austerity and health care privatizations.

For two critical months after the novel coronavirus had been identified at the beginning of 2020 as a major health threat, the federal Liberal and provincial governments did nothing to protect the population and front-line health care workers. Although the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a global health emergency on January 31 for the coronavirus, the federal Liberal government waited until March 10 to even request the provinces to identify potential shortages of key medical supplies, such as ventilators and PPE.

In their *Le Devoir* column, Begley and the other FSSS-CSN officials attempt to sow illusions in the CNESST (Quebec's Health and Safety Commission), calling on it to "force employers to increase protective measures at work." The CNESST is an integral part of the capitalist state. Its role is to protect employers from heavy lawsuits in the event of workplace accidents, and provide injured and even permanently maimed workers with meagre compensation. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the CNESST has rejected the vast majority of complaints from workers who have invoked their right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions. Half of its board of directors is made up of senior

union officials, such as CSN (Confederation of National Trades Unions) Vice President Caroline Senneville and QFL (Quebec Federation of Labour) President Daniel Boyer.

Begley's letter also promotes the lie that the CAQ government, which combines anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism with an agenda of privatization and austerity, can be relied on, or at least pressured into, prioritizing working people's lives and livelihoods over the profits of Quebec's capitalist elite. "The government, public health authorities and CNESST must take responsibility," declares Begley.

Begley makes no specific demands to address workers' concerns—not even for the provision of N95 masks and other vital PPE to all hospital and CHSLD workers, or for the lifting of the "emergency decrees" under which the government, in the name of fighting COVID-19, has given itself the power to override all collective agreements in the health care sector and effectively conscript workers.

This only underscores that the unions will not lift a finger to protect the workers they purport to represent in the face of a pandemic that has already killed almost 9,000 people in Canada, including 5,695 in Quebec; infected more than 13,500 Quebec health care workers; and caused a global health, economic and social disaster.

Instead, Quebec's unions—and this is as true for the QFL and CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec) as it is for the CSN — intend to continue and deepen the policy of close collaboration with the CAQ government that they have followed since the beginning of the pandemic.

The unions' immediate response to the eruption of COVID-19 in Quebec was to proclaim their readiness to work closely with the government, and agree to an indefinite suspension of negotiations to renew collective agreements for 550,000 Quebec public sector workers. Later, when the government reversed course, on the calculation it could exploit the crisis to impose further contractual rollbacks, the unions agreed to work toward three-year "interim agreements" in which all questions pertaining to staffing, workloads and work rules are set aside, thereby locking in the existing ruinous working conditions for a further three years. For the past four months, the unions have kept their members in the dark, while they negotiate behind closed doors with the CAQ government on this basis.

In his article, Begley did not so much as mention the ministerial "emergency" orders (decrees) the government has used to reorganize workplace tasks, eliminate summer vacations, and otherwise abrogate health workers' rights. That is because the unions have no intention of opposing, let alone organizing defiance of these orders, just as they have done nothing against the steady deterioration in working conditions over the past decades and the repeated use, under

Liberal and Parti Quebecois governments, of "emergency" anti-strike laws to impose concession contracts.

Canada's union leaders have backed Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government in its bailing out of big business and the financial aristocracy with hundreds of billions of dollars, while providing working people who have lost their jobs and income because of the pandemic with a mere \$2,000 per month. The unions are also supporting the reckless back-to-work campaign being mounted by all levels of government even as the pandemic continues to spread.

The treacherous role that the unions have played during the pandemic is the continuation of their decades-long suppression of the class struggle. Since the 1980s, they have systematically isolated and sabotaged workers struggles, while politically tying them to pro-austerity and pro-war parties, from the Parti Quebecois, Bloc Quebecois and Trudeau's Liberals, to the NDP.

With the pro-capitalist unions unable and unwilling to defend their interests, health care workers must take matters into their own hands to protect their own health and lives and those of the public. The fight against a resurgence of the deadly COVID-19 virus depends on workers' own initiative—the formation of workplace safety committees, entirely independent of the unions.

These rank-and-file committees must establish and enforce measures to protect workers, patients and their families in health care facilities (including ensuring adequate PPE and staffing levels and humane scheduling) on the basis of what is necessary from the standpoint of health and safety—not what the government and management claim is financially affordable. They must demand a massive reinvestment of resources in health care and the protection of all workers from the economic consequences of the pandemic as part of a broader political struggle for a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

Through these committees, health care workers will be able to forge close ties with working people throughout the public sector and industry—not only in Quebec, but in the rest of Canada, the US and internationally—who are facing the same big business assault on jobs, working conditions and their lives.

We urge workers who want to establish such rank-and-file health and safety committees to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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