

Quebec teachers denounce unions for their complicity in reckless school reopening

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Millions of students across Canada are going back to school this week and next, returning to unsafe and overcrowded classrooms as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage across the country and internationally.

The back-to-school drive has one overriding aim: to force working parents to return to work so they can resume generating massive profits for big business. It is being jointly orchestrated by the provincial governments—Liberal, Conservative, Coalition Avenir Quebec, and NDP—and by the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government.

Among its most ardent promoters is Quebec Premier François Legault and his CAQ (Coalition for Quebec's Future) government. Legault has refused to offer worried parents the alternative of e-learning, insisting it be reserved only for children with a doctor-certified medical condition.

After a spike in COVID-19 cases this week, including at many newly reopened schools, Legault blamed the public for ignoring social-distancing rules and vowed to keep the schools open even as teachers and students fall sick. "Above all, I do not want to close the schools," he declared.

In Quebec, the epicenter of the pandemic in Canada, the Ministry of Health is refusing to provide official updates on school-related COVID-19 cases. But according to data compiled by a Montreal father on the *covidecolesquebec.org* website, more than 30 schools in the province have already had at least one positive case.

Across the province, workers, parents and medical experts have expressed deep concern about the government's school reopening plans:

- A group of parents has sent a formal notice to the Ministry of Education to demand the implementation of online school learning. Politimi Karounis, a member of

this group, said he has received thousands of messages from parents who are concerned about their children going back to school.

- Sarah Gibson, a mother of two teenage girls in a Montreal suburb, launched a petition to demand the plan be revised to provide an online-learning option, reduce class sizes, and incorporate other science-based safety measures. To date more than 30,000 people have signed the online petition. Refuting the government's lies, the text accompanying the petition states that it is "increasingly clear that children are as contagious as adults." The text draws attention to airborne transmission, in the presence of often antiquated ventilation systems, as an important vector for the spread of the virus. And it stresses the need for regular testing of students and school staff.

- A group of 150 doctors, epidemiologists and other scientists have signed an open letter to the Legault government denouncing the reopening of schools. "The current back-to-school plan in Quebec needs to better consider all the available scientific evidence to prevent outbreaks in schools, to avoid jeopardizing the safety of our children, teachers and parents, as well as, to prevent a resurgence of SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) in our community," the letter states.

In Quebec, as in the rest of Canada, the trade unions have been working for decades with the ruling class to impose capitalist austerity. Today they are fully collaborating in the back-to-work campaign, merely making timid criticisms of the premature return to school in order to camouflage their collaboration with the authorities.

But workers, in all fields of activity and on an international scale, are beginning to draw lessons from the treacherous role of the unions.

Comments posted to social media by Quebec teachers underscore that they are searching for an alternative to the union bureaucracy, which has no intention of protecting the health and safety of education workers. Particularly significant are the trenchant criticisms of the Autonomous Federation of Teachers (FAE/Fédération autonome de l'enseignement), a union that claims to be “more militant.”

These include the following comments, each from a different teacher.

- “I thought my union was mobilized, but I was wrong! There is no ventilation system in our schools, no reduction in [pupil-to-teacher] ratios, no visors, no Plexiglas, no windowless classrooms, and on top of that, at the secondary level we have to disinfect ourselves every time we arrive in a new classroom.”

- “Our unions... Forget it! We have to mobilize ourselves and then kick them out!”

- “I’ve always been the first one to defend the FAE, but I don’t understand... High school teachers will be teaching in windowless, poorly ventilated environments... I’m speechless and very disappointed!”

- “It’s not a matter of demanding answers, what we need is action! We have been denouncing this problem for the past six months right here in connection with Covid and we ask you not to let the government expose us to this additional danger. The new school year has already begun and all I still see is a ‘wait for some to die’ attitude.”

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the only way to stop the homicidal reopening of schools, and save lives, is for the working class to take matters into its own hands through the establishment of safety committees made up of rank-and-file workers, independent of and opposed to the pro-capitalist unions.

Such rank-and-file committees must demand the immediate closure of schools until the pandemic is

contained, as well as a massive increase in public education funding to ensure that all students have access to online education and necessary support services, including mental health, special education and food security.

The ruling elite will inevitably claim there is “no money” to implement these demands. Workers must respond by showing that resources are plentiful, but they are being diverted to further enrich the corporate-financial aristocracy. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the federal government, Bank of Canada, and other government agencies have funnelled hundreds of billions of dollars in bailout funds into the financial markets, banks, and big business to ensure the investments and profits of the rich and super-rich.

The fight against the reckless and premature reopening of schools must be combined with the political mobilization of the working class and the preparation of a counteroffensive in defense of human lives. That is why rank-and-file safety committees in schools must make a broad appeal to all workers—educators, school bus drivers, custodians, maintenance and other support staff, as well as construction, health care, logistics, food, retail and restaurant workers.

In the United States, where thousands of infections among teachers and students have been reported across the country since schools reopened in late July, several groups of teachers have taken the decision to establish rank-and-file safety committees. (See: Second call-in meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee attracts large audience across the US)

This example must be followed in Quebec and across Canada. We urge all school staff, parents and students who agree with such a program to contact us.



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