

“We want the government to stop using us” like “guinea pigs”

Youth who led Montreal high school strike against unsafe school reopening speaks out

Our reporters
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Dozens of students at LaSalle Community Comprehensive High School (LCCHS), in south-west Montreal, protested Thursday against the provincial Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government’s reckless reopening of Quebec’s schools. At 11 a.m., dozens of students walked out of their classes and protested in front of the school to demand greater protection from COVID-19 and the right to receive their education online.

The protest was organized by 16-year-old Lily Rowe, who was supported and encouraged in her courageous action by her mother, Trina Padulo, a school bus driver. As a way to promote the protest and gather support, Lily posted an online petition addressed to Quebec’s right-wing CAQ premier, Francois Legault, that quickly gathered hundreds of signatures and now has more than 2,100.

Whilst relatively small, the protest at Lasalle high school was an important contribution to the growing resistance among working people in Quebec and across Canada to the ruling elite’s unsafe reopening of schools amid a resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Located in Montreal, which is once again becoming the epicenter of the pandemic in Canada, LCCHS is among the more than 800 schools in the province where coronavirus cases have been registered since schools began reopening, on government orders, in late August.

A growing number of students, workers and parents are shocked at Legault’s contempt for students’ health and human lives. Recently the premier nonchalantly termed in-person schooling—the only type of schooling his government is offering except to those with a documented medical condition—“a calculated risk.”

Legault has played a leading role in the cross-Canada back-to-work, back-to-school drive. In late April, he bluntly declared that “herd immunity,” the deliberate infection of the vast majority of the population, was “the best way out of the current pandemic,” and he and his government have repeatedly implied, falsely, that the virus poses little to no

risk to children.

All governments across Canada, from the Conservative governments of Doug Ford and Jason Kenney in Ontario and Alberta to John Horgan’s New Democrats in British Columbia, have pushed for dangerous back-to-school policies so that parents can be forced back into unsafe workplaces to generate profits for the corporate elite. This strategy has been sanctioned and given political cover by the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau.

The Lasalle walkout is part of a growing international movement. In the United States and Europe, teachers and students have staged protests against their own governments’ irresponsible reopening of schools. In Greece, thousands of students have occupied some 700 schools across the country in recent weeks to demand better measures to protect their lives and their community. (See: **School occupations continue in Greece as students resist government blackmail and violence**)

If it fell to young people to organize the first strike against the CAQ government’s reckless school reopening and back-to-work drive, this is because the trade unions, including the teachers’ unions, have worked to systematically smother all opposition among working people to the ruling elite’s homicidal policies. Calling for “national unity” to confront the pandemic, the unions have rallied round the CAQ government and the ex-big business CEO Legault, amid a health and social crisis that is above all the outcome of the indifference and criminal neglect of this very government, its federal Liberal counterpart, and their predecessors—all of whom have slashed funding for health care and other critical public services.

Lily and Trina spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Lily explained that what motivated her to organize the walkout was the conditions in her school. “With 30-plus kids in the classrooms, there is no social distancing at all. Most classes don’t have windows,” she said, adding, “there’s poor ventilation, the only ventilation you really get

is from doors opening. Some classes don't even have windows. In the hallways you have to wear your mask. But in the classrooms you can take it off, which makes no sense!"

Lily also addressed the students' demands, commenting, "We want the government to give us online learning as an option, and we want them to stop using us as test objects. They like to call kids the future, but they aren't protecting us." Trina went on to say that the CAQ is now "putting kids in a similar situation to the seniors at the CHSLDs (nursing homes where thousands of seniors died of COVID-19 last spring)."

Commenting on the government-promoted "class-bubble" concept, Trina said: "The classes are supposed to be considered a bubble. But you're in a bubble with however many kids are in your class. Then the kids get on the school bus, from kindergarten to grade six. And then you're intermingling bubbles. Just the three of us, our family, we're connecting with 60 people a day, minimum, because they're in class and I drive a school bus. And that's not including the people we run into in stores, so we've got that as well."

Lily also exposed the lie that schools are supposedly open for kids' "socialization." "They're treating us like guinea pigs. And doctor's notes are next to impossible to get" she said, adding, "let's say your teacher has symptoms and they go get tested. They still have to go to school until the test result comes out."

The discussion went on to the subject of why the Legault government is so determined to open the schools. Trina said that she "had heard a few times that people really think it's for the profits (of big business). There's that." When the WSWs reporters linked the students' feeling of being used as "guinea pigs" with the government's unstated "herd immunity" policy, Trina said, "We heard about that at the beginning of the virus, and then they shut everything down. But it doesn't seem to be the case that people who have been sick gain immunity, because people are getting COVID-19 a second time. The virus is so new, so unknown that it's hard to predict what will happen."

Lily's younger sister who was also present, 13-year-old Sarah, jumped in with a sharp criticism of Legault, saying, "I think he's a hypocrite. He needs to learn his facts because technically school is a public place, and he should stop saying that we should shut down public places if school isn't going to be shut down too. Most cases come from schools and workplaces. So, he should honestly just shut down schools and everything."

Lily and dozens of fellow students mounted their walkout in defiance of the LCCHS administration and the Lester B. Pearson School Board, which denounced the student strike, citing spurious "health concerns." In a statement, the board

declared, "In the current context (...) we feel it would be reckless and irresponsible to support a student walkout. The safety of the community remains our utmost priority."

Speaking of the reaction of school staff to the protest, Trina told the WSWs, "The teachers are scared, you can see it. They go to work because they don't have much of a choice." Despite teachers not being able to openly support the action for fear of reprisal, Trina noted, "When the kids were leaving the school, some of the staff were actually cheering them." She also said that there's a group of teachers on Facebook "who want parents and teachers to work together to come up with solutions."

Lily and Trina concluded by announcing that another action is planned for today, including another high school walkout, but with the objective of expanding it across the province. They also helped organize a "sit and draw" action for elementary students. Lily explained, "Younger children are scared too, and they should have the right to speak out about what they think the government should do. They're going to draw pictures about how being at school in a (government-designated) 'red zone' in a pandemic makes them feel and they're going to send emails with the scanned pictures (to the government)."

When the reporters raised the WSWs' international campaign to mobilize the working class against the unsafe back-to-school drive and the necessity to form rank-and-file committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods, Trina was eager to learn more about it.

Such rank-and-file committees, completely independent of government institutions and the pro-capitalist unions, have already emerged in the automotive, transportation, and education sectors in the United States, Australia, Germany, and elsewhere. Workers and youth in Quebec and across Canada must join these efforts so that the international working class can advance its own solution to the health and socio-economic crisis in answer to big business and their political hirelings, who put profits before working people's lives.



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