

Quebec educator urges teachers to build rank-and-file safety committees to oppose reckless school reopening

Our reporter
7 October 2020

Despite the uncontrolled surge in coronavirus cases, governments across Canada are demanding that the reckless reopening of schools and the economy continue. Governments of every political stripe are adamant children return to in-class learning, so that their parents can be forced to return to work and to boosting corporate profits, regardless of the cost in human lives.

This reality is especially stark in Quebec, where Premier Francois Legault and his right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government pressed ahead with the reopening of the economy in April and May even as deaths skyrocketed. With a population of just 8.5 million, Quebec has recorded 5,900 COVID-19 deaths since the onset of the pandemic—well over half of Canada’s current tally of 9,540 deaths, although Quebec is home to less than a quarter of the country’s 37 million residents.

Legault’s criminal policies have produced a surge in new infections. On Tuesday, Quebec recorded 1,364 new cases, its highest daily total since the start of the pandemic. A large number of the new infections recorded in recent days are related to the reopening of the schools. Across the province, 916 schools have recorded at least one infection, according to the government’s latest figures (which date from October 5), with 729 institutions dealing with active infections. Overall, 2,832 infections among students and staff have been registered since schools began to reopen in late August.

Greater Montreal, Quebec City, and other regions have now been designated by the Legault government as “red zones.” Families are threatened with fines and police raids if they receive visitors. Yet the government is determined to keep the schools open. Toward this end, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge announced Tuesday that as of today high school students in Quebec’s “red zones” will be required to wear masks in the

classroom, and the government will introduce a “hybrid system,” relaxing somewhat its prohibitions on online learning for students in the last two years of high school.

Opposition among the working class to the ruling elite’s homicidal back-to-school policy is growing. The World Socialist Web Site received the following appeal from a special education assistant at an elementary school in the Greater Montreal region. It calls on teachers, education workers, students, and their relatives to organize independent rank-and-file safety committees to take up the struggle to contain the pandemic and save lives. We strongly urge teachers and other education staff in Quebec and across Canada who agree with this appeal to contact us today for assistance in organizing a rank-and-file safety committee at their school.

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As a special education assistant who faces the real and growing threat of contracting the coronavirus every day, I am issuing this appeal to all my fellow teachers, educators, and school workers.

There is no longer any doubt that the reopening of schools is linked to the resurgence of COVID-19 in the community. While cases are skyrocketing across the province and the country, more than 900 of Quebec’s 3,000 schools, or almost one-third, have had at least one confirmed case in just four weeks.

Workers, students and their parents wake up every morning wondering if they will be the next victims of the lethal virus. How many more workers and young people must have their health and lives sacrificed? And to what end?

Quebec Director of Public Health Dr. Horacio Arruda has openly admitted that there will be more and more cases in schools and in the community, and that we have entered a second wave of the pandemic that threatens to

be more deadly than the first. Yet Premier Legault maintains that schools will remain open no matter what.

All the reasons that have been given to justify the reopening of schools have proven to be shameless lies. Quebec Education Minister Jean-François Roberge knowingly lied to us when he claimed schools would be safe, that children seldom contract and transmit the deadly coronavirus, and that the government's back-to-school policy is driven by concern about children's "mental health" and the academic success of vulnerable youth.

The government and ruling elite's true aim in reopening the schools is to force working parents back to the workplace in unsafe conditions, so that the banks and big business can continue to rake in profits. To be blunt, we are being sacrificed for the rich.

All education workers know that it is impossible to adequately apply the rules of social distancing and other necessary health measures in overcrowded schools. Teacher assistants and substitute teachers are being treated with particular contempt. Working in multiple classrooms, they are at high risk of contracting the virus and can act as important agents of COVID-19 transmission. Simply put, we are being treated as expendable.

At my school, one class had to close after a student contracted COVID-19. No one in authority required or even recommended that the class's teacher and its other educators be tested, under the pretext that they wore masks and visors (or glasses). The educators thus continued to work, not knowing if they were carriers, at risk of spreading the virus. Only a week later, before the school administration was even informed, the parents of the child concerned received a letter from Public Health indicating that their kid could return to class. This is just one of thousands of such recklessly handled cases across the province and the country.

Meanwhile, what are the unions doing to protect us? The answer, obviously, is nothing! While government policies and public health directives endanger our health and even our lives, the only thing that the unions are doing is echoing these same directives, with at best a few tiny criticisms—no matter that the health and lives of education workers, their families and the general population are at stake.

Moreover, behind the scenes, the union leaders are talking with government and big business about how to "get the economy going again" without provoking working class resistance. In the case of Quebec's public sector, the unions are preparing to accept major setbacks

in our next collective agreements under the pretext that the pandemic has made the "economic situation" "unfavourable" for a struggle.

While we are being treated like cannon fodder and the government continues to starve health care, the ultra-rich, well-protected from the virus in their ivory towers, have taken advantage of the health crisis to get even richer. Benefiting from the Trudeau government's C\$650 billion bailout of the financial markets, banks and big business, Canada's 20 richest billionaires, including Quebecer Alain Bouchard, have seen their wealth increase by C\$37 billion since March.

To protect our own lives and those of our loved ones, teachers, all school personnel, parents and students must form rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of all government institutions, employers, and the pro-capitalist unions.

Such rank-and-file committees have already emerged in the automotive, transportation, and education sectors in the United States, Australia, Britain, Germany, and elsewhere. Quebec and Canadian workers must join these efforts so that the international working class can advance its own solution to the current health and socio-economic crisis.

A network of school safety committees will be able to mobilize all workers to impose real safety measures. It will also have to prepare, in the face of the growing threat posed by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the necessary actions—including a general strike—to impose the closure of the schools, which have become vectors of coronavirus transmission, and to guarantee that all students receive on-line education, in complete safety and with all the necessary logistical support.

For my part, I am not prepared to leave my health and my life, and those of my loved ones, in the hands of those who put the profits of the financial and business elite before human lives. Colleagues, what do you think?



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