

In closed-door meeting, top CEOs give Quebec Premier his marching orders

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Quebec Premier François Legault met behind closed doors with the CEOs of the province's largest companies on October 23rd.

The meeting was organized by Quebec Global 100, an organization founded and led by the billionaire Charles Sirois, the co-founder with Legault of his right-wing populist CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec/Coalition for the Future of Quebec), which came to power in Quebec City in October 2018. QG100 brings together one hundred of the province's largest companies, including the National Bank, Caisse Desjardins, CGI, CAE, Aldo, Canam, Cascades, Saputo and SNC-Lavalin.

Although no information from the meeting has been provided or leaked, it can be certain that Legault was instructed to keep the economy “open”—in the midst of a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic—in order to maintain the flow of profits, even if this means a massive loss of human life.

With the full support of the federal Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Legault is pursuing the homicidal policy of “herd immunity,” without admitting it. This policy accepts and even encourages the widespread circulation of the deadly coronavirus throughout the population, so that economic activity can continue unimpeded and the financial oligarchy can go on lining its pockets.

“There must be an immunity that develops in the coming months,” Legault declared last April when arguing for the reopening of schools, something his government implemented the very next month, except in the Greater Montreal region. Flying in the face of the recommendations of the World Health Organization and epidemiologists the world over, Legault went on to declare that “herd immunity” is “the best way out of the current pandemic.”

After a public outcry, the premier walked backed these remarks. But only so he could more effectively push for

the reopening of the economy and in particular schools and daycares, so as to compel parents to return to work, generating profits for big business and investors.

A multimillionaire and the former CEO of Air Transat, Legault is also determined to use the coronavirus crisis to implement his long-standing anti-worker program based on austerity, tax cuts for the rich, and the privatization of public services.

In addition to increasing social inequality, the policies dictated to the Legault government by the members of QG100 and big business as a whole will deepen the health crisis across the country. Since the reopening of schools from the summer break in late August, Quebec has recorded 50,000 new cases of COVID-19, with 7,100 new cases and 161 deaths recorded just in the past seven days. Since reopening, nearly half of the province's schools have registered at least one case of the deadly disease and close to 8,000 teachers, students and school support staff have tested positive for COVID-19.

One striking example of the criminal policies of the ruling class is the Olymel slaughterhouse in Beauce, where management refused to close the plant, even after some sixty COVID-19 infections had been confirmed. Consequently, the number of infected workers at the plants soon swelled to 114 and tragically one worker died. Despite this, the Chaudière-Appalaches public health department had given the green light for Olymel to keep the plant open. Instead of closing, a “pilot project” of weekly screening of employees is being put in place to “keep the plant running.”

According to Quebec's Institute for Public Health, nearly 30 percent of the new cases of COVID-19 in the second week of October were due to workplace outbreaks.

The spread of the pandemic across Canada is alarming, particularly in Quebec, which has been recording a seven-day rolling average of 900 or more cases per day for the past month. But the worst is yet to come. One need only

look at the disaster currently taking place in the United States and Europe, where the premature reopening of workplaces and schools has already caused hundreds of thousands of new cases as well as thousands of preventable deaths.

According to global epidemic specialist Dr. Joanne Liu, the pandemic has brought Quebec's health care system, already ravaged by decades of budget cuts, to the brink of collapse. "We are witnessing the exhaustion of health care personnel," she recently warned.

Health care workers, whose ranks are decimated by coronavirus contamination and decades of job cuts, are overworked, and forced to do endless hours of compulsory overtime work. Due to the inhumane working conditions, an estimated 1,700 nurses have left the public system, or the profession altogether, since the beginning of the pandemic. The wave of contamination that has hit Quebec due to the Legault government's inaction has also created a backlog of nearly 100,000 surgeries and medical procedures.

This dramatic situation is the direct result of the policy of the CAQ and of the entire Canadian ruling elite, which refuses, like the Trump administration in the United States or Europe's governments, to adopt the health measures necessary to curb the spread of the virus—mass testing, systematic tracing, school closures, cessation of nonessential economic activities, and a build-up of medical infrastructure.

However, responsibility also rests with the previous governments, both Liberal and Parti Québécois, which for four decades imposed brutal austerity measures. To cite just one example, a recent analysis shows that public health spending in Quebec, which has been the target of ongoing cuts, was \$150 per capita in 2019, three times less than in the neighboring province of Ontario.

Legault could not move forward with his anti-worker program without the collaboration of the trade unions, which have done everything since the beginning of the pandemic to suppress the class struggle and subordinate workers to his right-wing government in the name of "national unity" in the face of the health emergency.

The unions have been collaborating for months with the CAQ government and the employers through various tripartite committees tasked with overseeing "recovery plans" for the economy and the reopening of the schools. They have also been negotiating behind the scenes for months with the government to jointly impose new cuts in services to the population and new cutbacks in wages and working conditions for the more than half a million

provincial public sector employees, whose collective agreements expired in March.

After organizing a blockade of a Montreal bridge late last month to give itself an air of "militancy," the nurses' union FIQ canceled a planned job action late—a collective refusal of mandatory overtime for one weekend—on the pretext that Labour Minister Sonia Lebel had "heard" the workers and "recognized they were overburdened."

With this action, which exemplifies the role of all the trade unions, FIQ wanted to reassure the government and the entire ruling elite that they can count on the unions to stifle any opposition to capitalist austerity and the reckless campaign to keep the economy operating as normal amid a resurgent pandemic.

Legault's meeting with the CEOs represents a serious warning to the working class as a whole. The CAQ is poised to transfer vast wealth from the bottom to the top of society—either with the complicity of the unions or through authoritarian methods if the unions prove unable to impose the required attacks on workers. The government has already used ministerial decrees to override health workers' contracts and arbitrarily increase their workload.

For the working class, opposition to the austerity program of the ruling elite must go hand in hand with the struggle to protect public health and lives. Workers throughout the public sector and private industry must build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and opposed to the pro-capitalist union apparatuses.

The primary task of these committees will be to develop the necessary measures to ensure the health and safety of all, and to secure full financial support for all workers unable to work or laid off as a result of the pandemic. The broad campaign required to enforce these demands can be led only through the independent political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for a workers' government.



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