

Quebec government documents expose its disastrous mishandling of initial pandemic response

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage in Canada, with the number of infections now well past the half-million mark. In the most populous province, Ontario, the situation is so out of control that a partial lockdown (under which many nonessential workplaces remain open) is now in effect for most residents until Jan. 23.

In Quebec, the second most populous province, the rolling 7-day average of new infections has exceeded 2,000 per day for the past eleven days. Since March, more than 194,000 people have contracted COVID-19 in Quebec, and 8,124 have died. So high is the volume of coronavirus patients, several major hospitals have been forced to turn patients away. (See: Canada's health care system buckling as governments reject measures to contain COVID-19)

Nearly 7,500 Quebec health care workers are currently unable to work because they have become infected with COVID-19 or have had to self-isolate. The remaining staff are facing an arduous and unsustainable workload, with anxiety and symptoms of post-traumatic stress reportedly at record levels.

These catastrophic conditions are not the inevitable product of the virus, but rather the result of the policies pursued by Quebec's and Canada's ruling elites. Despite having received multiple warnings about the threat a pandemic would pose prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, and having witnessed the disastrous mishandling of the SARS epidemic in Ontario in 2003, Canada's governments and public health authorities were completely unprepared. Ontario, for example, failed to restock tons of supplies of emergency equipment bought in the aftermath of the SARS crisis after they expired.

From the outset of the current pandemic, the authorities downplayed its severity so as to defend corporate profits: first by doing nothing that would disrupt economic life, and then, having been forced to impose hastily organized lockdowns, by seeking to "reopen" the economy long before the first wave of infections had even crested.

Radio-Canada (the country's French-language national broadcaster) reviewed the Quebec government's shambolic initial response to the pandemic in a recent exposé. Through an access to information request, the broadcaster obtained more than 2,000 pages of internal communications, directives and emails from Quebec's health authorities during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first four months of 2020.

These documents reveal a staggering, even criminal, level of indifference, and lack of preparation in implementing basic public health measures.

Provincial authorities were aware of the potential threat, but delayed taking action until the virus has spread far and wide among the

population. As early as January 12, Quebec's Director of Public Health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, was saying behind the scenes that "if the virus ever leaves China, it will be problematic for Quebec." Despite these concerns, public health officials spent the next two months "observing and monitoring" the virus while publicly minimizing its dangers.

While the WHO (World Health Organization) declared an international state of health emergency on January 30, Quebec's Public Security and Health Ministries did not go into pandemic preparedness until February 26, and failed to update the province's pandemic plan until March 9.

In the meantime, Arruda and the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government squandered the precious weeks before cases began to rise exponentially, issuing appeals for calm and arguing that "there is no increase in emerging cases" (February 3) and that "there is no active contamination in Quebec" (March 9). This despite the rapid spread of the disease internationally throughout February and early March, and Quebec officially recording its own first case on February 27.

The day after this first case was reported, Arruda continued to downplay the danger. In internal communications, he complained that the coronavirus "takes up a lot of space in the media" and that "there are many public health issues ... that are not being addressed instead."

This indifference in the face of a deadly danger to the population extended to federal authorities. It was not until March 10 that Justin Trudeau's Liberal government bothered to write to the provinces to inquire about possible shortages of medical equipment, particularly ventilators and PPE (personal protective equipment).

Going back to the timeline of events in Quebec, it was only on March 4 that Public Security wrote to health care institutions to ask them to provide a list of all their medical equipment within two days. On March 14, two days after the WHO declared a global pandemic, Quebec declared a state of health emergency. Five days later Quebec recorded its first COVID-19 death.

The Quebec government's lack of preparedness is highlighted by its failure to stockpile or secure additional supplies of protective equipment.

As early as January 28, Quebec drugstores were reporting a shortage of protective masks. On February 6, the provincial health network canceled a major call for tenders for unexplained reasons, "out of our control," and the next day the WHO warned that there was a worldwide shortage of masks.

On February 15, doctors warned that "equipment is at a very low level in hospitals." But it was only three days later that the province

issued an emergency appeal for PPE on the Quebec Electronic Tendering System. It read: “Emergency situation where the safety of people or property is at stake; Reasons: Global shortage of masks. Quebec’s health care institutions and first responders no longer have any stock.” Only on Feb. 21, well over a month-and-a-half after reports of a new deadly virus had begun to emerge in China and more than three weeks after the WHO had declared a health emergency, did Quebec sign its first contract for additional PPE.

That same day the Health Ministry instructed health care institutions to preserve and ration protective equipment.

From February 21 to April 8, PPE was in short supply, and health centres had to operate with equipment reserves equivalent to between 3 and 6 days. On March 31, Quebec Premier François Legault was forced to admit publicly that “there will be a shortage of certain equipment during the next 3 to 7 days.” The next day, Trudeau in turn admitted that there was “not enough protective equipment in emergency reserves” to respond to the crisis.

The rationing or outright absence of personal protective equipment—especially in long-term care facilities—resulted in tens of thousands of health care workers, and the entire population, being unnecessarily exposed to the deadly danger posed by the virus.

This disastrous handling of the pandemic stems from the class policy of capitalist governments throughout North America, Europe and internationally. Their preoccupation has been “keeping the economy open,” that is, maintaining the flow of profits regardless of the cost in human lives. Even in its budget, presented March 10, Quebec’s CAQ government did not include any measures or additional funding to fight the coronavirus.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on March 21: “Trudeau, Legault and the other provincial premiers were all criminally negligent in the face of the threat posed by the deadly virus. Large scale preventive and testing measures should have been put in place in January and early February when the deadly outbreak in China was identified as a pandemic threat and the World Health Organization was summoning the alarm. Yet these governments—and their counterparts in the US and Europe—refused to act because the necessary measures were seen as an impediment to big business’s pursuit of profit. Instead, they downplayed the extent of the danger, some going so far as to say that the virus resembled seasonal flu.”

This orientation was evident when Legault began lifting lockdown measures in April, even as the pandemic continued to rage. He publicly advocated the scientifically baseless theory of “herd immunity,” that is, allowing the virus to spread freely in the population, in his failed attempt to reopen schools in the Montreal area, which was then the epicentre of the pandemic in Canada.

As the *WSWS* noted at the outset of the crisis, such a pandemic was both foreseeable and foreseen. For years, scientists and even public institutions had been pressing for pandemic-preparedness measures.

Numerous reports were written, including one co-authored in 2006 by Canada’s current Chief Public Health Officer, Theresa Tam. Canada’s unpreparedness for the novel coronavirus pandemic is all the more glaring and inexcusable, since it was the country, outside of East Asia, most affected by the 2002-3 outbreak of SARS, a highly contagious respiratory disease similar to COVID-19. (See: *The 2003 SARS epidemic: How Canada’s elite squandered the chance to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic*)

Despite this, the authorities failed to take elementary preventive measures before and at the onset of the crisis. They preferred to lie to the population so as not to harm the profits and investments of the

financial oligarchy, with disastrous consequences for the working class and the population as a whole.

The Legault government’s initial inaction and subsequent reckless reopening of the economy, and the decades of cuts to health and elder care implemented by federal Liberal and Conservative and Quebec Liberal and Parti Québécois governments, led to mass death in Quebec, especially in nursing homes. During the pandemic’s first wave, Quebec had one of the highest per capita mortality rates in the world.

The relentless back-to-work drive pursued by all levels of government in Canada, including the reopening of schools in the fall, has created the conditions for a second wave that is now raging across the entire country and threatens to be even deadlier than the first.

The emergence of multiple vaccines underscores that the spread of the virus can be halted through the application of science. But the mass vaccination campaigns announced for 2021 will not reduce the spiralling number of infections and deaths for at least several months.

This makes it all the more urgent that the working class act now to preserve human lives.

In all workplaces, rank-and-file safety committees must be formed, completely independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which have uniformly supported the ruling elite’s homicidal “back-to-work” policy. These committees must demand the strictest measures to combat the pandemic—mass testing, massive investments in health care, and the closure of all in-class schooling and all nonessential production, with full compensation for affected workers and small businesses.

The hundreds of billions in bailout money handed out in March to the financial and corporate elite by the Trudeau government demonstrate that there are ample resources to fund the emergency measures needed to curb the pandemic and save thousands of lives. But they are monopolized by the ruling elite.

The building of a network of rank-and-file safety committees fighting for these demands must therefore be coupled with the independent political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for a workers’ government and the socialist reorganization of society so as to ensure that social needs, not the profit interests of a tiny minority, prevail.



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