

Quebec's anti-curfew protests: A political blind alley and entry point for the far right

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Along with the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government and its provincial counterparts, Quebec's *Coalition Avenir Québec* (CAQ) government is putting tens of thousands of lives at risk by keeping the economy "open" amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responding to the demands of a financial aristocracy that has massively increased its wealth during the pandemic, Premier François Legault is systematically prioritizing corporate profits over human lives. Legault and his CAQ government insist schools and nonessential businesses remain open, even though countless scientific studies have identified them as major vectors for the transmission of COVID-19.

Warehouse, meatpacking, health care and other workers and their families are bearing the brunt of the surge in infection and death caused by a devastating third wave of the pandemic that is being fueled by new, more contagious and lethal coronavirus variants. Workers have repeatedly voiced their anger at being forced to work in unsafe conditions, including in short-lived strikes. But their opposition has been systematically muzzled by the pro-capitalist unions, which in Quebec, as across Canada, have supported and enforced the capitalist elite's back-to-work/back-to-school drive.

It is in this explosive social context, dominated by the ruling class' disastrous mismanagement of the pandemic and the suppression of working-class opposition, that some young people in Quebec have given vent to their frustrations and anger with the actions of the Legault government. This opposition, however, has taken a confused political form, which opens the door wide to far-right anti-mask and anti-lockdown elements.

These ultra-reactionary forces have been involved, in varying degrees, in a series of protests that erupted after the Legault government, in early April, advanced the beginning of its COVID-19 curfew to 8:00 p.m. from 9:30 p.m. in the Greater Montreal region and other parts of the province.

On Sunday, April 11, more than a hundred young people gathered in Montreal's Old Port in defiance of the curfew in a protest that ended with the ransacking of some businesses and seven arrests. Earlier in the day, David Menzies, a Rebel News correspondent, was arrested after a provocation orchestrated by this fascist pro-Trump group, which lent its support to and participated in the anti-curfew demonstration.

Two days later, on Tuesday, April 13, about 40 people marched in Quebec City to denounce the curfew and so-called "abusive" health rules.

Then on Sunday, April 18, several hundred young people gathered in Montreal's Jeanne Mance Park before taking to the streets to "denounce the imposition of a curfew ... which seriously undermines our freedoms." Despite the organizers' warning against "the senseless manipulations of conspiracy theorists that are exploited by the extreme right," the absence of a perspective based on the independent political mobilization of the working class has played right into the hands of the extreme right.

Even when they have the best of intentions, those who denounce the arbitrary nature of the curfew and raise the slogan of "freedom" miss the central point. The curfew is being used by Legault and his CAQ government to justify their refusal to implement the health measures needed to stop the pandemic—above all the complete closure of in-person schooling and all nonessential workplaces until the spread of the virus is halted and the population fully vaccinated.

Even though the effectiveness of these measures is proven by science and historical experience, governments in Quebec and across Canada have dismissed them out of hand. The ruling elite is adamant the economy remain "open" so they can continue to enrich themselves on workers' backs; and they view the financial cost of ensuring social support to working people during an anti-COVID lockdown as an intolerable deduction from their profit margins and wealth.

The curfew is part of the ineffective, contradictory, venal and hypocritical measures that have characterized the Legault government's response to the pandemic since it began. Some young people are wondering what purpose a curfew serves if the schools they attend or the businesses where they work remain open despite their being sites of regular COVID-19 outbreaks.

It must be clearly stated, however: The anti-curfew calls that are being made today are characterized by political disorientation and confusion. The political forces leading the protests isolate the curfew from its social and economic context, myopically focus on this attack on "personal freedom" and detach their denunciations of the government from a program to mobilize the working class to fight the pandemic on a scientific basis. As a result, they play directly into the hands of the far right, which internationally has emerged as the veritable shock troops of the ruling class in its drive to "reopen" the economy and consign all systematic efforts to contain the virus to the dustbin.

Even the anarchist Jaggi Singh, a protest leader who has boosted the movement as "progressive," was forced to admit in a comment

to the local CultMtl website, “Unfortunately, many people are hesitant to oppose or defy the curfew due to the potential presence of anti-science, far-right, conspiracy theorists.” He added, “The political terrain is messy,” before noting that one of the recent protests was “organized by a pro-Trump, evangelical Christian ... who is opportunistically using curfew opposition to gain support.”

In the United States, former President Donald Trump mobilized fascist militia members with denunciations of lockdowns and other COVID-19 public health restrictions. These militias spearheaded Trump’s attempted coup on January 6, when right-wing extremists at his direction and with the complicity of the Republican Party leadership stormed the Capitol with the aim of overturning the presidential election results. There have also been violent demonstrations by far-right groups in Europe, including the “Lateral Thinkers” movement in Germany, and in the Netherlands, against any measures to contain the virus.

In Quebec, a demonstration last July by health care workers against their intolerable working conditions was overrun by ultra-nationalists waving anti-lockdown signs.

The perspective that must animate progressive opposition to the Legault government’s criminal pandemic policy is not a fight to lift the curfew, but the independent political mobilization of the working class around a coherent set of strong, science-based measures to eradicate the coronavirus, based on prioritizing saving lives and livelihoods, not capitalist profit. These include: mass asymptomatic testing; contact tracing; a massive and accelerated vaccination campaign; major investments in the public health system to treat all COVID-19 victims and fully maintain other health care; and the complete closure of nonessential businesses and schools, while ensuring quality online education for children and full financial compensation for working parents forced to stay home to look after their children.

The implementation of these vital measures requires a political struggle to mobilize the working class in Quebec, throughout Canada and internationally, against the capitalist system, which the pandemic has starkly exposed as politically, economically and morally bankrupt.

The pro-capitalist trade unions constitute the principal obstacle to such a working-class political struggle. They have been transformed in recent decades into corporatist appendages of the bosses and state that smother workers’ resistance to job and wage cuts, the destruction of worker rights and the dismantling of public services.

It is to these pro-capitalist unions, increasingly discredited in the eyes of rank-and-file workers, that the pseudo-left organizations of the upper middle class seek to politically tie the working class.

A glaring example of this is provided by an article published on April 14 by Fightback, a purportedly Marxist group that functions as part of Québec Solidaire (QS) in Quebec and the New Democrats in the rest of Canada. Warmly welcoming the anti-curfew demonstration that had just taken place in Montreal, the article concludes: “The unions and QS have a duty to organize a mass movement against the curfew and for real measures to curb the pandemic.”

In this one sentence, Fightback succeeds in portraying in progressive colors a politically confused movement that opens the

door to the far right, while insisting that this highly distorted expression of social anger—let alone all genuine working-class opposition—must remain under the political and organizational control of the trade unions. That is, must remain under the tutelage of the very forces that systematically suppress the class struggle and impose the ruling elite’s reactionary agenda on workers.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, the trade unions have fully supported the capitalist elite’s criminal campaign for a return to work and a complete reopening of schools under the pretext of preserving the “economy,” i.e., the profits of big business.

At the start of the pandemic in April 2020, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and Unifor, Canada’s largest private sector union, issued a joint statement with the federal Department of Labour, the Canadian Bankers Association and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business in which they said that workers and bosses “share common goals,” including ensuring that “Canadian businesses are prepared to come roaring back.”

As for Québec Solidaire, a party of the affluent middle class that advocates reactionary Quebec nationalism and seeks further integration into the ruling establishment, its position on the pandemic is indistinguishable from that of Premier Legault. As recently as April 13, QS once again endorsed the hypocritical and criminal policies of the right-wing CAQ government, giving its unanimous support to a National Assembly motion that reiterated “confidence in all existing health measures recommended by Public Health, including the imposition of a curfew.”

The Fightback article also provides political cover for a certain anarchist orientation underlying the anti-curfew protests, namely the calls for “direct action” and confrontations with the police. They reflect the demoralized views of middle-class layers, which are hostile to the working class and animated by a deep individualism that makes them vulnerable to agent provocateurs and hypocritical calls from the far right for “freedom.”

Young people rightly outraged by the Legault government’s catastrophic mismanagement of the pandemic will only be able to give progressive expression to their anger by rejecting the pro-capitalist politics of the unions, the reactionary Quebec nationalism of QS, and the individualistic anarchism that elements of the pseudo-left such as Fightback seek to legitimize.

Instead, they must fight for the independent mobilization of the working class—the only force with the social power to break the capitalist elite’s stranglehold over socioeconomic life and implement a global, science-based response to the pandemic aimed at protecting working people’s lives and livelihoods.



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