

Quebec bans far-right anti-vaccine protests at hospitals to cover up its own criminal mishandling of the pandemic

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Schools and hospitals in Quebec and across Canada have been targeted by anti-vaccine protests in recent weeks aimed at intimidating health care workers, teachers and students of all ages. These protests are political provocations organized and led by far-right elements seeking to make political capital by exploiting the climate of confusion generated by the authorities' disastrous, anti-scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a few hours last Thursday, Quebec's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government rushed Bill 105 through the National Assembly with the ostensible aim of suppressing the far-right protests. The new law, which bans protests at health care facilities and schools, won the unanimous support of the opposition parties, including the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire.

The CAQ's absurd effort to posture as the defender of health care workers against the threat posed by the far-right is a political cover-up, aimed at concealing the responsibility of Quebec Premier François Legault—and all levels of government in Canada—for a COVID-19 policy that has prioritized profits over human lives and caused a social catastrophe.

As early as April 2020, after a brief lockdown put in place under pressure from workers, the Legault government called for the full reopening of schools, daycares and non-essential industries. This policy was aimed at the "reopening of the economy," i.e., the continuous and uninterrupted flow of profits to big business.

Legault publicly promoted "herd immunity" to justify his government's actions. According to this criminal policy, any health measure (social distancing, preventive isolation, lockdown) to curb the spread of the coronavirus was to be proscribed as it encroached upon the profit-making activities of big business. Instead, the virus was to be allowed to run wild and infect the vast majority of the population on the spurious claim that fatalities would be "limited," and most people would gain "natural immunity" over time.

Internationally, this homicidal policy was spearheaded by the Swedish government and then US President Donald Trump, with catastrophic results in both countries. In Quebec, it led to horrendous conditions in nursing homes, which recorded

thousands of deaths, and contributed to the province having one of the highest per capita death rates in the world during the pandemic's first wave.

A public outcry led Legault to stop talking about "herd immunity." But it has remained central to his ruinous pandemic policy—a policy he has pursued with the full complicity of the trade unions. Legault has also enjoyed the unwavering support of the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government and his provincial hard-right Conservative counterparts like Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Alberta's Jason Kenney.

Grudgingly, Canada's ruling elite accepted some anti-COVID public health measures to prevent the health care system from being overwhelmed by a tsunami of infections. But it has systematically sought to scale back these mitigation measures and they have always been subordinate to its fundamental objective of keeping the economy open to maintain the flow of profits. This combination of laissez-faire ("herd immunity") and minimal mitigation measures led to second and third waves of the pandemic, each more devastating than the previous one, and has now resulted in a fourth wave that may yet prove to be the most ruinous of all. Officially, Canada has recorded over 27,700 deaths from COVID-19. But when excess deaths are taken into account, the actual death toll is closer to 50,000.

COVID vaccines are a major scientific breakthrough and a pivotal tool for combating the virus. But Canada's governments, and their counterparts the world over, have not sought to deploy them alongside proven public health measures such as mass testing, preventive isolation, contact tracing and lockdown to eliminate and eradicate the coronavirus. Instead, they have seized on the vaccines as a pretext to greatly accelerate their back-to-work and back-to-school drive and to eliminate all remaining public health measures.

The most glaring example of this is the cross-Canada return to full in-person schooling, for which Legault has been the most vocal proponent. The presence of millions of students—including children under twelve for whom a vaccine against COVID is not yet available—in crowded, poorly ventilated classrooms has served as a powerful accelerant to the

fourth wave of the pandemic now sweeping across Canada.

This brief overview of the right-wing CAQ government's pandemic policy exposes the utter hypocrisy of its Bill 105, through which it is posing as the representative of science against a horde of anti-vaxxers and far-right proponents of conspiracy theories. In truth, central responsibility for the catastrophic situation in which the population finds itself today, with COVID infections and hospitalizations once again skyrocketing, lies entirely with the ruling elite's criminal policy of "living with the virus"—as Premier Legault cynically proclaimed in his most recent attempt to normalize mass death.

The hypocrisy borders on the obscene when Legault defended Bill 105 on his Facebook page by posing as a protector of "our nurses." "These women and men," he wrote, "have committed body and soul for months to care for COVID patients despite very difficult working conditions." They must now be protected from "a handful of radicals" who seek to "make their lives even more difficult."

Educators, nurses and other health care workers don't need Legault to understand that the anti-vaccine demonstrations are a provocation of the far right that must be firmly opposed. But this must be done through their own methods of class struggle—the independent political mobilization of the working class against capitalist austerity and the ruling elite's drive to keep the "economy open" amid a deadly pandemic.

The deplorable conditions in Quebec's hospitals and schools are the result of decades of budget cuts implemented by successive big business governments—Liberal and Conservative, at the federal level, and Liberal, Parti Québécois and now CAQ at the provincial level. Added to this is a pandemic that has infected thousands of teachers and health care workers left unprotected by a government dedicated to "reopening the economy," that is, prioritizing profits over human lives.

To top it all off, during last spring and summer the CAQ government threatened to use anti-strike legislation while relying on the treacherous role of the unions to impose public sector contracts that penalize workers with wage increases well below inflation and maintain the mandatory overtime regime so decried by nurses. Thus, it is Legault himself who has systematically worsened the "very difficult working conditions" of the nurses whom he cynically claims to want to protect. As a result, nurses' workload is increasing, their psychological distress is intensifying, and thousands, seeing no other way out, have quit the profession.

Bill 105, moreover, threatens democratic rights. It prohibits, within a 50-meter radius of health and educational institutions, any demonstration "related to health measures (...) or any other recommendation related to the COVID-19 pandemic." Incitement to organize such events is also prohibited under penalty of severe fines.

The broad language restricting demonstrations "related to health measures" could be used not only against far-right anti-

vaccine protesters, but also against teachers or parents who oppose the dangerous reopening of schools and demand distance learning, or against any publication that publicizes or welcomes such an initiative.

That far-right activists are roaming the streets and seeking to intimidate workers, parents and students must be viewed by working people as a serious warning. In Canada, as internationally, these elements are increasingly emboldened and aggressive, as evidenced by the emergence of far-right parties in Europe, including the AfD (Alternative for Germany), the Vox party in Spain and the Fratelli d'Italia Party. The far-right danger is above all exemplified by Donald Trump's attempt to overturn the outcome of the US presidential election through a coup plot involving much of the Republican Party leadership and sections of the state apparatus, and that was spearheaded by the storming of the US Capitol on January 6 by fascists and other far-right extremists.

The rise of the far right is an international phenomenon actively promoted by sections of the ruling class as they prepare to violently suppress growing working class resistance to capitalism, which has been exposed as totally bankrupt and in irreconcilable conflict with the basic needs of working people by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To fight the far right, the working class cannot rely on a capitalist state that attacks democratic rights, and on parties, like Legault's CAQ that whip up anti-immigrant chauvinism and Islamophobia and use authoritarian methods of rule, including anti-worker ministerial decrees and the criminalization of strikes, to enforce the ruling class's program of austerity and militarism. There is a long history of state measures supposedly aimed at the far right that were subsequently used to repress the working class.

Just as the struggle to eradicate the pandemic requires the independent political mobilization of the working class, so the fight against the fascist threat must be met by a mass movement of working people organized in irreconcilable opposition to the capitalist elite, its state, and all its political representatives. The indispensable political guidance for the building of such a movement and for its victory can be provided only by a socialist and internationalist program.



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