

Quebec authorities left long-term care residents to die in pandemic's first wave

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As Quebec faces a sharp rise in COVID-19 infections, with over 2,000 cases reported last Friday—the highest daily count since the peak of the pandemic's second wave in January 2021—newly published information has exposed the indifference to human life shown by the right-wing government of multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO François Legault.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has pursued a profits-before-lives policy that has led to the infection of nearly 450,000 people and over 11,500 deaths. In public CHSLDs (long-term care homes) and private institutions for the elderly, approximately 4,000 residents died during the first months of the pandemic between March and June 2020, when Quebec recorded one of the highest per capita mortality rates in the world.

A special report by Quebec's Ombudsman published on November 23 under the title "COVID-19 in CHSLDs during the first wave of the pandemic" highlighted the structural fragility of the health care network and a level of complacency on the part of government authorities that borders on criminality.

The report identifies "significant pre-existing and long-known systemic deficiencies" as one of the main causes of the tragedy that occurred in Quebec's CHSLDs. Although not explicitly stated in the report, these "well-known deficiencies" are the result of the drastic cuts imposed by successive Parti Québécois (PQ), Quebec Liberal (PLQ) and CAQ governments to health and social services.

The report paints a devastating picture of a system undermined by decades of capitalist austerity: an outdated computer and communication system incapable of providing real-time epidemiological data; a glaring lack of expertise and resources in the area of infection prevention and control; a total absence of reserve supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE); and a chronic shortage of personnel.

It notes that "at the dawn of the pandemic, CHSLDs had no room for maneuver in terms of human resources" and that the shortage of personnel in the health and social

services system was an "acute problem" that "was the subject of numerous warnings."

In addition to detailing the deplorable state of the health care system, Quebec's Ombudsman confirms that government authorities wasted the first few weeks of the pandemic. They failed to take any concrete measures in January and February 2020 to seriously prepare for the inevitable arrival of the new coronavirus. On the contrary, the report suggests that the Legault government's public statements downplaying the danger the virus represented, in order to protect big business profits and avoid a crash of financial markets, caused health care officials to not take the threat seriously.

The report also confirms the *World Socialist Web Site's* analysis of testimony heard at Coroner Gehane Kamel's public inquiry into the "national pandemic management component in CHSLDs." The testimony revealed that the Quebec government left seniors' residences unprotected at the start of the pandemic.

The report concludes, among other things, that "CHSLDs were not taken into account in any planning scenario," that no concrete action was taken until mid-March 2020, and that it was only in the second week of April that the province's Health Ministry presented strengthened measures for CHSLDs and set up an advisory committee of experts. This response was deemed "late and insufficient" by Quebec's Ombudsman.

The report also examines the government's decision in early March to transfer patients from Quebec hospitals to CHSLDs in order to free up beds for an anticipated influx of COVID-19 patients. This policy forced the transfer of 865 vulnerable people to environments that were already overcapacity and lacked staff, PPE and space to create containment areas. It was not until April 11, when the situation was completely out of control in the CHSLDs, that these transfers stopped. At the same time, the government also prohibited COVID-stricken residents from being transferred to hospitals for treatment, leaving them facing death without adequate care.

Testimony taken by investigators for the Office of the Quebec Ombudsman summed up the drama that took place in the CHSLDs in poignant terms: “[We practiced] war medicine...we no longer knew where to put the bodies. Patients were dying alone, in distress and suffering.”

An exchange of emails between managers of seniors’ residences and the Health Ministry during the critical period of early March 2020 was recently made public. The timeline reveals not only the ministry’s crass indifference to the most vulnerable seniors, but also how the government systematically lied to the public.

On March 16, 2020, the director of the *Association des établissements privés conventionnés* (Association of private regulated nursing homes), Annick Lavoie, complained that the government had not yet provided seniors’ residences with promised personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, gloves, and gowns. In another e-mail sent on March 19, with a copy to the Ministry for Seniors, Lavoie deplored the fact that “some health care centers that we contacted refuse to provide us with supplies” even though “we are part of the health network.”

The assistant deputy minister in charge of logistics, Luc Desbiens, replied on March 20 to Lavoie that it was a “crisis,” “the Health Ministry has no inventory” and “the majority of institutions are short of PPEs.” The same day, Quebec Premier Legault declared on live television that “we have enough equipment in the short term” and “there is no declared need.” This provoked Lavoie’s caustic reply to the assistant deputy minister: “I am extremely surprised by your comments, which seem to contradict the information that Premier Legault and [Health] Minister McCann are providing during their daily press briefings.”

The seriousness of these revelations has forced the opposition parties—the PLQ, PQ and the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire (QS)—to criticize the Legault government. Coming from political parties that have collaborated behind the backs of the population to implement the CAQ’s murderous policies, such criticism is entirely hypocritical.

In a “special report” published in the Montreal daily *La Presse* in March 2021, the opposition leaders at the time, Manon Massé (QS), Pierre Arcand (PLQ) and Pascal Bérubé (PQ), boasted that the only request they had made of the government at the beginning of the pandemic was to have “a direct link, on a regular basis” with Legault in order to know in advance the content of his press briefings. To justify their total lack of criticism of the government’s policies, the opposition leaders referred to an “unprecedented episode of collaboration” between the four parties, which were all members of the “same team.” Massé even boasted about working with Legault “behind closed doors.”

The common front of all political parties in the National

Assembly, the complacent coverage of the mainstream media and the full collaboration of the trade unions have allowed Legault to implement the policies demanded by the financial elite and big business without real opposition, despite the thousands of deaths for which he is responsible.

Unwilling to openly condemn the policies they helped implement, the opposition parties have limited their criticism to the “contradictions” and “lies” of some of the witnesses heard by Coroner Kamel and to the possible destruction or alteration of CHSLD inspection reports during the pandemic.

Their only demand is for a futile “independent public inquiry.” Like that conducted by the Quebec Ombudsman (whose report is “forward-looking” and “does not seek to assign blame”) and that of Coroner Kamel (who is prohibited by law from pronouncing on a person’s civil or criminal liability), the public inquiry requested by the opposition parties would be limited to “preventive” recommendations that the government would have no legal obligation to implement.

Workers in Quebec and the rest of Canada should not expect anything from inquiries commissioned and directed by the capitalist class to absolve itself of any responsibility.

If workers want to know the truth about the disastrous response of pro-business governments, corporate Canada, and the capitalist mass media to the COVID-19 pandemic, and light to be shed on the political and economic interests responsible for the uncontrolled transmission of a virus that has killed millions of people around the world, they should support and participate in the *World Socialist Web Site*’s global workers’ inquest launched November 21.



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