

Quebec government's decision to let Omicron run rampant pushes hospitals beyond the brink

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Quebec, Canada's second most populous province, is being hit hard by another wave of COVID-19 fueled by the new, highly contagious Omicron variant. Day after day, the province is experiencing levels of infection and hospitalizations not seen since the beginning of the pandemic. The overwhelmed and understaffed health system is on the verge of collapse.

Hospitalizations in the province surpassed 2,500 yesterday. Another 26 deaths were reported Monday, taking the total to 11,966. Within the next 24 to 48 hours, Quebec, which accounts for less than a quarter of Canada's population, will pass 12,000 officially registered COVID-19 deaths—40 percent of the country's official death toll.

Despite the critical situation, the right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, led by multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO François Legault, refuses to take the public health measures necessary to stem the deadly omicron wave.

Government inaction in the face of Omicron

On November 15, as Quebec recorded 509 new cases of the coronavirus, the government lifted the last remaining measures to mitigate the pandemic's impact. It allowed restaurants to operate at full capacity and reopened nightclubs and karaoke bars.

Unsurprisingly, this decision caused a slow but steady rise in infections. Just under two weeks later, on November 27, Quebec reported 1,171 new cases of COVID-19.

In late November, Omicron, first detected in South Africa, began to spread around the world. On November 29, Quebec reported its first case.

Despite warnings from many experts about the increased risk of transmission during the colder winter months, when people spend more time indoors, combined with the spread of Omicron, Legault, like his counterparts in other provinces and the federal Liberal government, has done nothing to prepare for the predicted tsunami of infections and hospitalizations.

Mass infections and overflowing hospitals

The pandemic situation in Quebec is now catastrophic. On December 17, the province recorded 3,768 new cases of COVID-19, surpassing by more than 500 the previous record set during the peak of the second wave in January 2021. The number of new cases has been rising ever since, reaching 5,000 on December 21, 10,000 on December 24 and 15,000 on December 31. Since then, the daily number has remained between 14,000 and 17,000. In a province with a population of about 8.5 million, these numbers are staggering. Yet they underestimate the full impact of the pandemic as the government has slashed access to testing.

In the wake of this wave of mass infections, hospitalizations are also reaching record levels. While the number of cases increased by 223 percent between December 1 and 16, even before the full effect of Omicron was felt, Legault and his health minister Christian Dubé took no action to slow the spread on the spurious grounds that the number of hospitalizations—deemed to be the only reliable indicator of the state of the pandemic—was not increasing. As experts have been repeating for most of the past two years, the number of hospitalizations is an indicator that lags behind the increase in cases by 2 to 3 weeks.

On December 16, 305 people were hospitalized due to COVID-19, 63 of whom were in intensive care. These numbers increased dramatically to over 500 hospitalizations on December 27, 1,000 on December 31, 1,500 on January 4 and finally 2,000 on January 7. As of January 10, over 2,500 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 in Quebec, including 248 in intensive care. Hospitalization of children, in particular, has increased significantly as Omicron appears to be affecting young people more seriously than previous strains of the virus. Tragically, on December 16 a 2-month-old baby died from COVID-19 at Montreal's Sainte-Justine Hospital.

The extraordinary number of hospitalizations and the spread of the virus among health care workers has completely overwhelmed the health care system. Approximately 11,600 health care workers were out of the system, either infected or in preventive isolation, as of January 4.

In a desperate and dangerous move, the CAQ government announced on December 28 that health care workers who are

infected with COVID-19 will have to continue working if they are symptom-free. Health care institutions also announced that they would again use the emergency decrees adopted in 2020 to suspend vacation and days-off for nurses and other health care workers, a decision that has understandably provoked outrage from these exhausted workers.

On January 4, three regions in Quebec went up to Level 4 of a plan to ramp down critical procedures for non-COVID-related medical conditions. Other regions will follow this week as their current status of Level 3, which calls for the cancellation of 50 percent of surgical procedures, has not been sufficient to free up enough beds and staff to care for COVID-19 patients in most of Quebec. At Level 4, 80 percent of surgical procedures will be cancelled. In addition, some emergency rooms will be closed and “semi-urgent” appointments for patients being treated for cancer or other serious illnesses will be rescheduled.

There is no doubt that these measures will lead to deaths. Fatalities that, although not added to the official COVID-19 death toll, will be entirely attributable to the Legault government’s disastrous handling of the pandemic.

Despite the relentless propaganda by the mainstream media that the Omicron variant is “mild” and unlikely to cause severe symptoms or death, deaths are increasing dramatically in Quebec. At least 20 people have died daily from COVID-19 since January 4, and 44 deaths were registered on January 8.

The CAQ government’s response: “profits before lives”

After fueling the crisis by ignoring scientists’ warnings in November and early December, the CAQ government is now refusing—with the full support of Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government—to implement the public health measures needed to quickly stem the mass infections, hospitalizations and deaths. As in previous waves, its response is entirely subordinate to the interests of the banks, big business and the wealthy.

Between December 20 and January 4, the Legault government adopted a few token measures. As the number of infections exploded and hospitalizations jumped, the CAQ continued to brazenly lie to the public in surreal press conferences in which Dubé, Legault or Education Minister Jean-François Roberge claimed that the very last measure they announced would be the one to end the catastrophe.

Predictably, none of those piecemeal measures have served to slowdown the spread of COVID-19—whether it be the closing of schools a day early for the holiday school break, mandatory remote work for office workers, the closing of restaurant dining rooms, limiting “private parties” from 10 persons for Christmas to 6 persons as of December 26 and to “family bubbles” as of December 31, a night-time curfew, or the requirement to present a vaccination passport to enter government-run alcohol and cannabis stores.

Despite the claims of reactionary opponents of the health measures, Quebec is far from being in “lockdown.” Businesses are

only closed on Sundays and non-essential workplaces continue to operate. The government has insisted that primary and secondary schools, the main vector of transmission of the virus, will reopen for in-person instruction on January 17, no matter what.

At the same time, the government has taken a series of decisions whose objective is to cover up the extent of the crisis and satisfy the demands of the employers. Since January 4, the isolation period for infected workers has been reduced from 10 to 5 days. This anti-scientific measure is aimed at getting workers back to work as quickly as possible so that the flow of profits to the rich can continue uninterrupted. This announcement was received “very positively” by the employers’ associations, which admitted that they had asked the government for it. Since science has shown that those with COVID can transmit the virus up to 12 or 14 days after contracting it, the measure big business dictated to its CAQ lackeys will result in even more workplace outbreaks and mass infections.

On January 5, the Legault government announced that PCR tests in health clinics, the most reliable method of detecting COVID-19, would be restricted to certain people deemed “vulnerable.” The general population will have to use rapid tests, which are notoriously difficult to obtain in Quebec and provide much less accurate results.

This measure will quickly lead to a significant underestimation of cases, allowing the Legault government to present an optimistic picture to the public. Legault is thus adopting the strategy of former US President Trump, who declared that to have fewer cases all one had to do was test less!

It is also the abandonment of one of the recognized measures in the fight against infectious diseases: the detection of cases makes it possible to isolate infected people and to have a clear picture of the spread of the virus to better target other measures. From now on, Quebec authorities will be flying blind into the deadly pandemic storm.

The Omicron wave clearly demonstrates that in Quebec, as elsewhere in the world, the fight against the pandemic is a class issue—which class controls society and in whose interest.

The capitalist class is determined to continue its policy of profits before lives that requires children be sent back to infection-prone schools so that their parents can pile into unsafe workplaces. For the financial markets, big business and the rich, this policy means more profits and wealth accumulation. For the mass of working people, it means mass infection, disease and death.

The working class is the only force in society that can advance a progressive solution to this crisis. To do so, it must intervene as an independent political force, breaking out of the straitjacket imposed by the pro-capitalist unions and building rank-and-file safety committees fighting for a “Zero COVID” policy.



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