

Quebec's public health director forced to resign as Omicron infections overwhelm health care system

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Quebec's national director of public health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, resigned January 10 amid the province's devastating Omicron variant-driven fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Forced to resign a year-and-a-half before his term was set to end, Arruda is being used as a scapegoat by the province's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government and its multi-millionaire former corporate CEO premier, François Legault, to deflect popular anger over its ruinous mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The forced resignation of one of the principal public faces of Quebec's response to the pandemic attests to a state of crisis not just in Quebec's public health agency, but within the CAQ government itself. "Recent comments made about the credibility of our advice and our scientific rigor," Arruda admitted in his resignation letter, "are undoubtedly causing some erosion of public support."

The situation in Quebec is dire. The province, which has already recorded more than 12,350 deaths and had one of the world's highest COVID mortality rates during the pandemic's first wave, is experiencing levels of infection and hospitalization not seen since the beginning of the pandemic. The underfunded health care system has reached the breaking point as thousands of workers are forced to take time off work due to coronavirus infection or psychological stress and burnout. Some hospitals are already employing triage, with doctors having to decide who can and who cannot obtain care.

Despite the urgency of the situation, the Legault government refuses to take the necessary measures to stem this deadly wave of COVID-19 and continues with its policy of "herd immunity," that is, letting the coronavirus rip through the population.

Following the announcement of Arruda's departure, the entire political establishment praised his work. Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, the leader of the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire party, for example, thanked Arruda for having

"served Quebec with sincerity throughout this pandemic."

Arruda's real role has been to provide a pseudo-scientific veneer for the CAQ's homicidal pro-business policies. The pandemic has revealed how the public health department is not an independent institution devoted to the rigorous application of science to promote public health, but an extension of the government and, like it, subservient to big business. This is the meaning of Arruda's affirmation in his resignation letter that "we have issued public health advice and made recommendations, the best possible, to support the government in its decision-making in a timely manner."

In particular, Arruda played a key role in justifying the CAQ government's repeated hasty reopenings of schools to in-class instruction and their push to keep schools open as infections invariably spiked again. Arruda justified the school reopening policy with lying claims that COVID's impact on children is benign, and with feigned concern about young people's "mental health," when the real objective for the government has always been to send parents back to work to allow the continued flow of profits to big business.

The list of lies and half-truths of Horacio Arruda is long. Let's recall some of them:

* Like the Public Health Agency of Canada, he promoted the false idea that the coronavirus is spread by droplets and not primarily by aerosols.

* Faced with a dearth of masks and other protective equipment, due to the authorities' lack of preparation and outright negligence, Arruda said that masks should not be worn by the population because it created a "false sense" of security. He said the same thing about N95 masks in schools and about air purifiers in classrooms.

* Arruda claimed that asymptomatic people could not transmit the virus despite studies proving otherwise.

* More recently, he supported a directive, ultimately rescinded after a public outcry, to allow children and staff who were in contact with a positive COVID-19 case but

remained asymptomatic to attend childcare.

In a rare moment of candor last spring, Arruda stated that “in making the decision to bring Grade 9, 10 and 11 students back (to in-person learning), we knew that would increase the number of (COVID) cases. This was all kind of planned.”

In other words, the government’s goal was mass infection, and it was not going to tolerate science getting in the way. As Arruda cynically acknowledged last November, in his testimony at the coroner’s public inquiry into the deaths of almost 4,000 Quebec CHSLD (long-term care facility) residents in the spring of 2020, “It’s not just science that decides.”

Having secured Arruda’s resignation, Legault immediately appointed as his replacement Luc Boileau, the current CEO of Quebec’s Institute of Excellence in Health Care and Social Services (INESSS) and the father of Health Minister Christian Dubé’s press secretary.

Boileau immediately gave the greenlight to the planned reopening of schools on Monday, January 17. In a press briefing last Thursday, he rejected the wearing of N95 masks by teachers, recycling his predecessor’s lie that “in the school environment, there is no reason to believe that there would be an advantage” over other types of masks.

At the same press briefing, Boileau said that Quebec’s public health agency does not consider schools a source of community transmission. Before the end-of-year break, however, Montreal schools accounted for nearly half of all COVID-19 outbreaks in the city. Most of these were in elementary schools.

Successive waves of the pandemic in Canada have definitively demonstrated that schools are among the main vectors of transmission for the coronavirus and that children infect their parents, who can then transmit it throughout the community. In other words, by rushing to reopen schools in Quebec and the rest of Canada, governments are preparing for the same scenario as last year, when a devastating third wave rapidly emerged after the withdrawal of the partial lockdown measures implemented in late December 2020 and early January 2021 due to an avalanche of COVID cases.

In reopening schools, the government is anticipating mass infections among school staff and students. The Education Ministry has itself said it expects “very large number” of staff absences due to COVID infections, which could “potentially lead to service disruptions in some settings or jeopardize the continuation of daycare services as they are.”

Since “the goal is to keep students in school” at all costs, the Ministry has instructed schools to identify “parent volunteers who can support students in their learning during the physical absence of the teacher.” Teachers could also be called upon to supervise several groups in different

classrooms simultaneously, with the help of a parent lacking any training as an educator.

In addition to bringing unqualified people into schools, the government, with the endorsement of public health authorities, is planning to bring potentially infectious workers back to work more quickly by reducing the isolation period from 10 to 5 days for staff and children who tested positive for COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the trade unions continue to abandon workers in the face of the CAQ’s reckless policies. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the unions have submitted to government policies and suppressed the class struggle. Despite some empty criticisms, union leaders accept that education staff should return to the classroom without adequate protection thereby endangering their health and lives.

Workers in education and all sectors must break from the pro-capitalist unions and organize as an independent political force in rank-and-file safety committees to enforce the health measures need to suppress the virus.

Teachers and educators across Canada have already begun the fight for a Zero COVID policy in schools by creating the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC). This committee is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which is fighting for a global, science-based mobilization to save lives by eliminating and eradicating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CERSC will hold its next public meeting on Sunday, January 23, at 1 p.m. eastern time. We urge all teachers, education staff, and their supporters to register today to attend by emailing the CERSC at cersc.csppb@gmail.com or by visiting our Twitter or Facebook accounts: https://twitter.com/cersc_csppb and <https://www.facebook.com/cersc.csppb>



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