

Quebec government to tax the unvaccinated—a reactionary diversion

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Quebec Premier François Legault announced at a January 11 press conference that his right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government plans to impose a “significant health tax” on Quebec adults who are not vaccinated against COVID-19.

Legault has reiterated this commitment several times since. While providing no further details about the new tax, the multimillionaire ex-Air Transat CEO has used every occasion to blame the unvaccinated for placing a “disproportionate” burden on the public health system. In Quebec, about 600,000 unvaccinated people, or 10 percent of adults, are said to account for up to 50 percent of hospitalizations, the total number of which now exceeds 3,400—an absolute record since the beginning of the pandemic.

The health tax announced by the Quebec government is a reactionary diversion in the face of an accelerating health and social crisis. Legault is seeking to deflect popular anger over his government’s catastrophic mishandling of the pandemic, which last week bumped the province’s seven-day average of daily COVID-19 deaths above 70.

Legault announced the tax on the unvaccinated at a press conference held to introduce Dr. Luc Boileau as the province’s new interim Director of Public Health. Boileau is replacing Dr. Horatio Arruda, hitherto a close ally of the premier in prioritizing safeguarding business profits over human lives, but whom the government decided to make a scapegoat for Quebec’s disastrous Omicron-driven fifth wave of the pandemic.

Legault’s proposed tax is so transparently an attempt to divert attention from the government’s pandemic record and policies, that even the three opposition parties in Quebec’s National Assembly, which have seldom made any criticism of the government’s pandemic response, were forced to criticize it. Quebec Solidaire, a party that claims to be “of the left,” and the pro-independence Parti Québécois have pointed out the obvious unfairness of the proposed tax, since the unvaccinated include many of the most vulnerable, from poor immigrants and the homeless to people with mental

illnesses.

These criticisms are entirely opportunistic as the opposition parties have also announced that they will continue to work with Legault behind the public’s back, participating in confidential weekly meetings where the Premier lets them know his intentions in advance and where they can give him “their point of view.” Only Liberal leader Dominique Anglade has stopped attending, as of last week, a decision she justified on the grounds she was being “instrumentalized” by the Quebec premier, not opposition to the government’s rush to reopen schools and non-essential businesses.

At the federal level, Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has conspicuously avoided criticizing Legault’s plans to subject the unvaccinated to a special tax. When asked about it, he said he supports measures to “encourage” people to get vaccinated, then added that the Quebec measure will need to comply with the Canada Health Act’s criteria of universal, government-funded not-for-profit health care—criteria that are already under constant attack.

In reality, the Trudeau government is supporting the campaign to paint the unvaccinated as those principally responsible for the continued spread of the pandemic. Prior to Legault bring forward his tax plan, the federal government had announced the unvaccinated will no longer be eligible for federal unemployment insurance benefits.

Conservative Party leader Erin O’Toole, as well as his fellow hard-right Conservative Alberta and Ontario Premiers, Jason Kenney and Doug Ford, have taken a demagogic stance in opposing Legault’s tax, with Kenney flaying the proposal as “un-Canadian.”

In doing so, the various big business politicians are reprising their respective roles from last September’s election campaign. Trudeau, who called the election in the midst of the pandemic’s fourth wave in a failed bid to win back his parliamentary majority, portrayed himself as the leading proponent of vaccines, while O’Toole courted the far-right by opposing vaccine-mandates and other necessary health measures in the name of “freedom.”

This sham debate was aimed at disguising the fact that all the parties—from the Liberals and Conservatives to the social-democratic NDP—have supported and, where in office, pressed for the full reopening of the economy and the abandonment of virtually all public health restrictions. For decades these parties have also implemented capitalist austerity, resulting in chronic hospital overcrowding and months-long queues for critical medical procedures even before the pandemic struck.

Having rejected the necessary health measures to curb the pandemic in order to preserve business profits and investor wealth, Legault and Trudeau are now joining an international campaign by capitalist politicians to scapegoat the unvaccinated for the catastrophic impact of their own policies. In France, where the “let the virus rip” policy is responsible for record numbers of infections, the “president of the rich” Emmanuel Macron attacked the unvaccinated in an obscene rant earlier this month. Italy, Greece, Austria and Indonesia have either adopted taxes akin to that proposed by the CAQ or other punitive measures targeting the unvaccinated.

The rapid development of vaccines that effectively protect against COVID-19 is an important scientific advance, and mass vaccination to stop the virus’ spread a basic public health requirement. In response to the far-right anti-vaccination campaign, the *World Socialist Web Site* affirmed last summer, “There is no legitimate reason for workers who have ready access to COVID-19 vaccines to reject them.” In particular, workers should reject the claims made by far-right libertarians and outright fascists, and echoed by some petty-bourgeois anarchists, that there is a “right” to refuse anti-COVID vaccination: No individual has the “right” or “freedom” to infect others with a debilitating and potentially fatal disease.

However, vaccination alone cannot defeat the pandemic—especially with the vaccine nationalism of Canada and the other imperialist countries blocking access to COVID-19 vaccinations in large parts of the world and thus allowing the coronavirus to spread and mutate into new, potentially more contagious and lethal variants.

As highlighted by the emergence of Omicron, mass vaccination must be combined with the systematic application of the full range of anti-pandemic public health measures developed over centuries so as to eliminate community transmission of the coronavirus worldwide. These measures include the closure of schools and non-essential production, with full compensation for all workers forced to shelter at home, isolation of infected individuals, contact tracing, and mandatory use of N95 or higher quality masks.

The campaign to blame the unvaccinated for the

continuation of the pandemic is the flip side of the “vaccines only” policy of Canada’s federal Liberal and CAQ, NDP and Conservative provincial governments—a policy closely tied to their premature reopening of the economy. To preserve the illusion that vaccination alone is sufficient to stop the pandemic, the ruling elite wants the population to believe that its failure to halt the virus’ spread is due to the small percentage of people that refuse to be vaccinated.

The failure to contain or even curb the mass infection of the population is in fact the result of the “profits before life” policy pursued by all capitalist governments. It is precisely this failure—together with the government and corporate media lies minimizing the danger of the virus, especially for children—that has opened the door to the far-right’s agitation against vaccination, masks, lockdowns and other elementary public health measures. This agitation has itself been encouraged by the ruling elite as part of its effort to suppress working class opposition to its homicidal policies.

Around the world, it is the right and the far right—including openly fascist elements in the US and Germany—that have spearheaded the movement to lift health measures in order to keep the economy open and profits flowing for the wealthy.

Workers must oppose measures like the Legault government’s “health tax” that demonize the unvaccinated to cover up the culpability of capitalist governments for mass death.

The imposition of a tax on the unvaccinated would, it also need be emphasized, open the door to other reactionary measures that would accelerate the privatization of the health care system. If the unvaccinated have to pay for the “burden” they place on the health care system, why not smokers or those who don’t exercise regularly?

In opposition to Legault’s reactionary “health” tax, the working class must fight for its own program aimed at the elimination of COVID-19. In addition to proven public health measures such as closing schools and non-essential workplaces, workers in alliance with principled scientists must push for a sustained public education campaign to refute the pseudo-scientific nonsense of the far-right “anti-vax” forces, as well as the anti-scientific propaganda of the ruling elite that vaccination makes it possible to “live with the virus.”



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