

Quebec government scraps remaining COVID-19 mitigation measures

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Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is in a mad dash to remove all remaining public health measures against COVID-19.

François Legault, the multimillionaire ex-CEO who serves as the province's premier, set the tone at a February 8 press conference. He announced a "plan" to end "lockdowns" and pledged that "the bulk" of the remaining anti-COVID the measures will be eliminated by no later than March 14.

As of Saturday, February 12, the government allowed private gatherings of 10 people, in time for mass infection parties during the next day's Super Bowl, and an increase in restaurant capacity. February 14 saw the reopening of fitness centers at 50 percent capacity and the resumption of indoor sports activities. Mandatory remote working for most office workers will end on February 28. As of March 7, school students will no longer have to wear masks in class. Finally, on March 14 the government will lift all capacity limits at restaurants, theaters and other commercial establishments.

Underscoring the government's recklessness, it has scrapped most of the measures aimed at limiting contact in nursing homes, where more than 4,000 have died during the pandemic's devastating first wave.

During his press conference, the premier again repeated that Quebecers would have to "learn to live with the virus." In January, Legault admitted that this phrase meant accepting more hospitalizations, deaths and a probable sixth wave of the pandemic. Demonstrating once again his complete disregard for human life, he presented his plan as a "calculated risk," meaning that the government is willing to accept an unknown number of deaths in order to remove all restrictions on the accumulation of private profit.

Legault may deny reality and order Quebecers to "get back to normal," but the fact remains that the pandemic continues unabated as capitalist governments around the world, including the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau, let the virus rip through the population by lifting all health restrictions.

On February 8, when the CAQ announced its plan to abolish all public health measures, 56 people died of COVID-19. Nearly 2,400 people were still hospitalized with the disease, more than three times the number the government cited at the beginning of the Omicron wave as representing regular hospital

capacity and 400 more than the so-called "critical threshold."

Despite a slow downward trend, the daily average of deaths over 7 days now stands at 25, and nearly 1,800 people remain hospitalized.

In addition, even though the government has limited access to PCR testing, the positivity rate is about 9 percent, nearly double the threshold at which the World Health Organization deems the pandemic to be out of control.

On February 10, Acting Director of Public Health Dr. Luc Boileau revealed that an estimated 2 million Quebecers, a figure later revised to 3 million, have been infected since the start of the Omicron-fueled fifth wave in December 2021. This staggering statistic, covering well over a quarter of the population, was welcomed on the unscientific basis that it would facilitate "herd immunity." According to the Montreal daily *La presse*, health officials similarly called it "reassuring" when they announced that between 35 percent and 40 percent of children have been "in contact" with the virus during the Omicron wave.

In reality, these horrendous levels of infection mean continuing death and debilitating Long COVID on a massive scale.

Since December 1, Quebec has officially recorded 2,350 additional deaths, a more than 20 percent jump in the total deaths COVID-19 has caused in the province in less than three months. This is the highest number of fatalities since the first wave in 2020, when vaccines were not available and Quebec had one of the highest per capita death rates in the world.

Not only is the Omicron wave far from over, but preliminary studies warn that the Omicron BA.2 subvariant, which is already present in Quebec, could be even more contagious and deadly.

Despite this dire situation, Legault's reckless plan was not enough for the ruling class, which is determined to end once and for all any public health measure that might impinge on the exploitation of the working class and the channeling of huge profits into the pockets of the wealthy.

In unveiling their plan to "end lockdowns," Legault, Health Minister Christian Dubé and Dr. Boileau claimed that the vaccine passport, which limits the unvaccinated's access to nonessential venues, was here to stay. Yet within days, the

government reversed itself and announced on February 15 that this measure would also be lifted by March 14. Dr. Boileau justified this decision with a series of lies about Omicron, claiming that it was “less virulent” and that there was a “before and after Omicron.”

Boileau then reiterated that no change was planned for the mask mandate, claiming that “the epidemiological situation does not allow us to remove the mask at this point.” This was another lie.

On February 19, *La Presse* reported that “public health authorities will seriously analyze this weekend the possibility of announcing the end of mandatory masks in primary and secondary schools.” In support of this reversal, which has since been confirmed, Dr. Boileau recited a litany of anti-scientific falsehoods used around the world to attack the mask mandate: that the millions of people recently infected, including hundreds of thousands of children, would be unlikely to be re-infected and that masking hinders children’s development.

Then on Wednesday, the CNESST, Quebec’s workplace health and safety commission, ruled that masks will no longer be mandatory in workplaces as of February 28 provided a two-metre distance can be maintained between each worker. Yet it has long been established that COVID-19 is principally disseminated through aerosols that can spread far beyond two meters and can rapidly accumulate in poorly ventilated schools and workplaces.

Quebec’s government, like those across North America and Europe, have responded to the Omicron wave by moving to eliminate all remaining mitigation measures designed to protect the population from the debilitating and potentially deadly COVID-19 virus. They have doubled down on their homicidal “profits before lives” policy in which workers are forced to work full tilt amid a global pandemic so as to enrich the banks, big business and wealthy investors. The new mantra is “life must return to normal.”

That the CAQ’s campaign to dismantle anti-COVID measures went into overdrive in early February is no accident. It coincided with the occupation of downtown Ottawa by the so-called “Freedom Convoy,” a far-right movement demanding the immediate end to all anti-COVID-19 measures. This movement has been promoted and encouraged by powerful sections of the Canadian ruling elite because it serves as a battering ram against the widespread opposition of the working class, the vast majority of the population, to their homicidal policies.

In Quebec, a “Freedom convoy” of fringe and in some cases criminal elements has twice staged weekend-long protests in downtown Quebec City, encouraged by far-right sections of the Quebec ruling class. Quebec Conservative Party (PCQ) leader Eric Duhaime, who is close to conspiracy theory and anti-vaccine circles, is supporting the demonstrations and using them to call for an immediate end to vaccine passports and all anti-COVID-19 mitigation measures.

Duhaime, the head of what has hitherto been an almost invisible party, is now being promoted by the mainstream media because of his virulent opposition to public health measures. As a result, the PCQ’s support in opinion polls has shot up above 10 percent, a development the ruling class will seek to use to push politics still further right.

Legault has himself invoked the far-right Convoy protests in justifying his government’s drive to eliminate the remaining COVID mitigation measures. “Beyond the demonstration,” he told his February 8 press conference, “I think that we should note that there are more and more Quebecers who find that there are too many constraints due to COVID.”

This turns reality on its head. The polls all show strong popular support for maintaining the public health measures. If there is any unease among a sections of workers, it is because of the disorientation caused by the Legault and Trudeau Liberal governments’ ruinous pandemic policies. In particular, their gutting of all financial support for workers and small businesses affected by the pandemic; and their rejection of a science-based Zero COVID policy, in favour of a profits-driven “mitigation” and “vaccine only” strategy that has led to five successive waves of mass infection and death.

As the absence of any criticism by the opposition parties and pro-capitalist trade unions demonstrates, the ruling class and the privileged sections of the middle class are united in their desire for a return to capitalist “normality.”

This is the case for the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire. It denounces the Legault government-imposed public health emergency, not because it has served as a pretext for attacking the working conditions of public sector employees, but from the right as an overly restrictive measure that should have been lifted as part of the “plan to end lockdowns.”

Only the independent political mobilization of the working class in the fight for a Zero COVID policy that prioritizes saving lives over capitalist profit can put an end to the pandemic nightmare that continues to cover the planet with a veil of death, disease and misery without end in sight.



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