

As Quebec faces its sixth wave of COVID-19 pandemic, CAQ government continues to put profits before lives

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A sixth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is now underway in Quebec, fueled by the Omicron BA.2 variant, which is up to 30 percent more contagious than the first Omicron strain. BA.2 infections already accounts for two-thirds of new cases.

Hospitalizations are rising, after several consecutive weeks of decline following the ravages of the Omicron-driven fifth wave in December and January. Total hospitalizations rose by 60 last weekend, 27 on Monday, and 47 on Wednesday. As of Wednesday, 1,200 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 in Quebec, an increase of more than 10 percent in one week.

The province is officially recording between 1,600 and 1,800 new cases a day, but the restriction of PCR testing to a tiny portion of the population means the true number is much higher.

Experts at the inter-university center CIRANO estimate that the actual number of new cases per day during the week of March 17-22 was between 13,500 and 19,500. These numbers are as high as those recorded at the beginning of the Omicron wave, until the right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government banned access to PCR testing for the general population on January 9.

Test positivity rates are also on the rise, reaching 17 percent across Quebec on Wednesday. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers the pandemic out of control when the positivity rate exceeds 5 percent.

The increase in infections among health personnel is even more marked: approximately 8,600 are absent due to COVID, an increase of 60 percent over one week.

Pointing to this latest statistic, as well as an increase in outbreaks at care facilities for seniors, Dr. Donald Vinh, an infectious disease specialist at the McGill University Health Centre, warned that a sixth wave was underway in the province. “I think these are signals that cannot be ignored and interpreted any other way than to say we are already in that wave,” he told the *Montreal Gazette*.

The danger of a new, potentially more deadly wave of COVID-19 is looming across Canada. In Ontario, wastewater data suggest cases have been on the rise since at least mid-March. Saskatchewan reported that the BA.2 subvariant accounted for more than a quarter of cases during the week of March 13-19, up from 5.4 percent the week before. And British Columbia has reported increased hospitalizations in recent days.

Despite these alarming data, the CAQ government, led by former Air Transat CEO François Legault, continues to prioritize corporate profits over human lives.

Having announced the abrupt and reckless elimination of all measures to fight the pandemic over the course of a few weeks in February, the Quebec government is now seeking to downplay the scope and dangers of the new wave.

At a press conference last Sunday, Quebec’s Director of Public Health, Dr. Luc Boileau, was forced to admit that the more contagious BA.2 subvariant was now dominant in the province. But said he “cannot confirm at this time that this is really a sixth wave.” Instead, he described the situation as “an increase that continues to take hold,” a purely verbal distinction whose only purpose is to downplay the situation.

After the euphoric reports of a “rebound” of Quebec’s economy” in the wake of the March 24 announcement that the province’s GDP rose 6.1 percent in 2021, the last thing the ruling class is prepared to contemplate is a return to lockdowns and other measures that infringe on their profit-making activities.

Boileau’s remarks at his March 27 press conference also underscored that the government was well aware that its elimination of all remaining public health mitigation measures would fuel a new wave of mass infections, hospitalizations and deaths. He said that the government was “preparing for an increase in cases,” that its pandemic policy is “a calculated risk” and the increase in infections is “not a surprise.”

Demonstrating the indifference of these servants of the

capitalist class to human life, Quebec's "chief doctor" added that he anticipated that the new wave would cause "only" half the infections that were seen last January during the Omicron wave. With approximately 3 million Quebecers infected during the pandemic's fifth waves according to the government's own estimates, this means the government of François Legault is now ready to accept the additional infection of 1.5 million people.

In fact, not only is the CAQ government prepared to accept further mass infections, it intends not to lift a finger to prevent them. On March 23, when the media revealed that Quebec health officials had secretly warned hospitals and health centers to prepare for a sixth wave, Premier Legault said his government had "no plan for new restrictive measures." The next day, Legault announced that he had been infected by the virus. Since then, a minister in his government and seven MPs from various parties have also tested positive.

With new COVID cases and hospitalization surging, Health Minister Christian Dubé finally admitted Thursday morning that a sixth wave is now underway in Quebec and that 10,000 health workers are currently off work due to COVID-19. Yet he insisted this was all "foreseen." "There is no reason at the moment to change strategy," said Dubé, "because people have to learn to live with the virus." He added that it was a "good thing" COVID-stricken health workers can go back to work after five days. In fact, this will only cause more outbreaks.

Dr. Boileau also used his March 27 press conference to insist that there will be no return to anti-COVID mitigation measures. He stated that "there is no question" of putting public health measures back in place and refused to comment on a possible extension of the mask mandate in public places, the last remaining mitigation measure, which is set to expire April 15.

Echoing Legault's mantra, Dr. Boileau said it was time to "learn to live with the virus on an ongoing basis." With testing unavailable to the majority of the population, the government dismantling its contact tracing system and closing vaccination centers, and the health system not even able to sequence sufficient samples to track the BA.2 variant, "learning to live with the virus" actually means accepting mass infection, hospitalizations and the deaths of dozens of people every day, with no end in sight.

The rapid succession of the Omicron and Omicron BA.2 waves within two months of each other demonstrates the fraudulent nature of the scenario painted by the government and some establishment-oriented scientific "experts," according to which COVID-19 has become "endemic" and nothing more than a flu that will strike Quebec in a benign way every winter.

In an attempt to disguise its deliberate policy of sacrificing human lives so that big business can continue to reap huge profits off the backs of workers crammed into dangerous workplaces, the government is again playing the "personal responsibility" card. Dr. Boileau stated that infections occur mostly in gatherings of family and friends and that "each person must act responsibly."

The fallacy of this individualistic view of the disease was revealed when Dr. Boileau admitted that people infected with the BA.2 variant could be contagious for up to ten days. Yet the government only requires a 5-day isolation period for symptomatic people—and none for those showing no symptoms. Refusing to change this, Dr. Boileau hypocritically asked those infected with COVID to "overprotect others" by wearing masks if they resume their activities after five days. With such phony appeals, the government can blame the inevitable rise in cases and deaths on the "carelessness" of Quebecers.

In reality, the disease is spreading primarily in workplaces and schools and the sixth wave is the result of the Legault government's premature elimination of all health measures.

In Europe, where the BA.2 variant has been wreaking havoc for several weeks now, the regional director of the World Health Organization, Dr. Hans Kluge, has bluntly stated that infections are on the rise again because the governments of some "countries are lifting the restrictions brutally."

The COVID-19 pandemic is a collective and international problem. Elimination of the virus requires a globally coordinated policy that includes measures such as multiweek lockdowns with full compensation to affected workers, effective contact tracing, isolation of infected or potentially infected individuals, and mass vaccination.

The policy adopted by Legault with the full support of the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government, and by almost every government in the world for more than two years, makes one thing clear: a Zero-COVID program is unthinkable under the capitalist system because it would impinge on the flow of profits.

The COVID-19 pandemic can only be ended through the independent political intervention of the working class, the revolutionary force in contemporary society, on a program guided by science and focused on human lives and social needs, not private profits.



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