

Quebec legislature debate on pandemic lays bare ruling class' prioritization of profits over lives

Hugo Maltais
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As a result of the Quebec government lifting virtually all anti-COVID-19 mitigation measures over a matter of weeks in February and March, Canada's second most populous province now finds itself in the midst of a sixth wave of mass infections and death, driven by the highly contagious Omicron BA.2 variant.

The daily number of new infections is unknown, because the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has banned access to PCR testing for the general public. However, government health officials estimate that between 40,000 and 60,000 Quebecers are now being infected with the virus each day. These infection numbers are even higher than those during last winter's Omicron wave, which, according to the government, infected approximately 3 million people or almost 40 percent of all Quebecers.

Hospitalizations and deaths, lagging indicators for new cases, also provide insight into the magnitude of the current wave. On Tuesday, the province announced a net daily increase of 145 in hospitalizations, bringing the total to 1,938, up 31 percent from the previous week. There were also 35 deaths due to COVID, bringing the daily 7-day average to 20, a 41 percent increase in one week.

Ravaged by decades of capitalist austerity that have created permanent staff shortages, the public health system is once again being overwhelmed by a surge in COVID-19 infections. As of April 8, some 13,000 COVID-stricken health care workers were absent from the job. As a result, hospitals have had to cancel medical procedures deemed less urgent.

The government is keeping the system afloat with reckless and punitive policies. It is encouraging health care facilities to force employees who have contracted COVID to return to work after 5 days while they may still be contagious, and to continue their longstanding practice of subjecting workers to brutal schedules and workloads.

The CAQ government, led by multimillionaire former Air Transat CEO François Legault, is determined to continue its "profits before lives" policy of allowing the virus to spread freely and imposing no public health measures that would impinge on the ability of big business, banks and wealthy

shareholders to exploit the working class and generate gargantuan profits.

At a press conference on April 8, Quebec Director of Public Health Dr. Luc Boileau admitted that he did not see "any improvement" for another two weeks. Despite this gloomy prediction, he reiterated that there is "no question" of reintroducing public health measures to combat the dangerous virus. Openly adopting the language of the libertarian far-right, Boileau rejected the imposition of "health measures that will coerce people" in favor of what he called "reasonable [individual] behavior."

The type of necessary measures being rejected by Quebec's ruling elite—lockdowns, mass testing, contact tracing, isolation—have represented the scientific basis of infectious disease control for decades.

But since the temporary lockdowns of spring 2020, largely provoked by work stoppages and other spontaneous working class protests, the capitalist ruling class has seen the public measures needed to suppress the virus as an unacceptable impediment to their profit-making. Ever more brazenly, they have pushed for workers in nonessential industries to remain on the job and in schools to provide in-class instruction, so their parents can be compelled to work, resulting in one wave of mass infection and death after another—even after the development of COVID-19 vaccines.

This has been accompanied by an ever-escalating campaign on the part of governments and the corporate media dedicated to promoting the lie that basic life-saving measures are "heavy-handed" and are causing greater harm than COVID-19 itself.

The murderous character of the CAQ government's profits before lives policy, which has been implemented with the full support of Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, was inadvertently laid bare by Dr. Boileau in recent testimony before Quebec's parliamentary committee on Health and Social Services. This committee is studying Bill 28, legislation ostensibly aimed at putting an end to the province's official health emergency.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Legault government used the Public Health Act (PHA) to declare a health

emergency and arrogate sweeping executive powers, including the right to order the temporary closure of businesses and schools, award contracts for medical supplies without a call for tenders, and override health workers' collective agreements and work rules.

On its face, Bill 28 calls for an end to the health emergency that has been in effect since March 13, 2020. In reality, it extends it until December 31, 2022, since all decisions made by the government under the health emergency will remain in effect until that date. In addition, contracts awarded without competition since March 2020, with an estimated total value of \$13 billion, can be extended for up to 5 years.

Since the Legault government has already lifted virtually all of the health measures imposed under the PHA, pledged to eliminate those that remain like the mask mandate by May 1, and repeatedly vowed it will do everything in its power to avoid reimposing them, it is blatantly obvious that the primary reason it wants to retain "emergency powers" until the end of the year is so it can continue to violate health workers' rights and trample on their working conditions.

This is part of a reckless attempt to deal with the current wave of COVID-19 infections and the future waves that the government knows are inevitable, given its official policy of "learning to live with the virus," without providing the health system with the massive injection of resources it requires to hire sufficient nurses and other health care staff and develop genuine surge capacity.

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Boileau admitted as much in his testimony. He first confirmed that the government no longer intends to use its emergency powers to "renew or recommend new public measures" since Quebec is in a "transitional phase of the pandemic" during which the government, to use his words, is implementing "the famous policy of living with the virus." The only reason he could then provide for the government maintaining "transitional (emergency) powers" was that they are necessary in "hiring temporary personnel" and for "human resources management in the health network."

This admission was seized upon by Claire Samson, who recently defected from the CAQ to join the even more right-wing Conservative Party of Quebec (PCC). The PCC promotes the anti-vax movement and its leader, Éric Duhaime, was a full-throated supporter of the far-right "Freedom Convoy" and its demand that all anti-pandemic measures be lifted immediately.

Pressed by Samson to explain why emergency powers are still necessary since the government says COVID must be normalized, Dr. Boileau blurted out, "If we stop all this (i.e., the health emergency measures), right now, we're going to be heading towards huge risks and then we're going to kill people."

This is a damning indictment of the entire pandemic policy of the ruling class. The refusal to pursue a Zero-COVID

elimination strategy, and their premature lifting of the limited anti-COVID mitigation measures they did impose, has killed more than 14,500 Quebecers to date. And it will continue to kill them as long as the virus is allowed to circulate, and circulate ever more freely.

By extending the health emergency until the end of the year, while lifting the already insufficient public health measures against the pandemic, the CAQ government is setting the stage for the health care system to be brought once more to the verge of collapse. Its only response will be to use its "emergency powers" to force exhausted and psychologically taxed nurses and other health care workers to work additional hours, under brutal and unsafe conditions.

As for the opposition parties—the Parti Québécois, the Quebec Liberal Party and Québec Solidaire—they have all collaborated with the Legault government in implementing its "profits before lives" policy throughout the pandemic. The supposedly "left-wing" Quebec Solidaire, for instance, all but endorsed Legault's "herd immunity" policy of letting the virus rip through the population, pressing at times for an even more aggressive timetable for the reopening of businesses and schools.

Adopting language little different from the libertarian right, the opposition parties' focus in recent weeks has been on denouncing the state health emergency as "appalling," "dangerous for democracy" and "authoritarian." During the parliamentary debate, they have doubled down on their attacks on Bill 28 from the right, with an increasingly hysterical and vociferous campaign.

Workers must oppose Bill 28 from the left, by demanding the repeal of the government's emergency powers to trample upon collective agreements in the public sector. Emergency measures must be taken, instead, to mobilize all of society's available resources, on the basis of science, to end the COVID-19 pandemic once and for all, by combining lockdowns with full financial compensation to all affected workers, mass testing, contact tracing and the speedy isolation and treatment of infected people.



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