

Quebec's CAQ government defends massive, deadly pollution by mining giant Glencore in Rouyn-Noranda

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The disclosure of previously suppressed government statistics showing that the citizens of Rouyn-Noranda have been poisoned for years by the mining giant Glencore has provoked a wave of popular outcry throughout the province of Quebec.

The Horne Foundry in Rouyn-Noranda, a small industrial town in northern Quebec, produces copper anodes from recycled electronics heated to very high temperatures. After operating for decades under various owners, it was acquired in 2013 by Glencore, one of the world's largest and most profitable resource companies. Operating in 35 countries, it manages around 150 facilities in mining, metallurgy and oil production.

It has long been known—but ignored by successive provincial and federal governments—that the processes employed at this plant emit tons of heavy metals into the air at levels far exceeding established environmental standards, making it one of the most polluting plants in Canada. The first serious study on the toxic materials it emits was carried out in 1975 and the Rouyn-Noranda community has mobilized on numerous occasions to demand an end to these uncontrolled emissions.

The information revealed over the past few weeks has provided new evidence of the harmful, and deadly, consequences of the massive pollution generated by the Horne Foundry. It has also highlighted the role of the right-wing CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government in working closely with the company—following in the footsteps of its predecessors—to secure its profits at the expense of the health and lives of the residents of Rouyn-Noranda.

Radio-Canada revealed in June that in 2019, the then national director of public health in Quebec, Dr. Horacio Arruda, intervened after a meeting with Glencore executives to block the publication of data comparing health indicators in Rouyn-Noranda with the rest of the province.

The substantial discrepancies recorded suggested that emissions of arsenic and other heavy metals at the Horne Foundry were responsible for the serious health problems afflicting the city's population. The chilling statistics—only made available in May 2022 after being suppressed for more than two and a half years—include the following:

- A much higher number of low-birth-weight births;
- A life expectancy significantly lower than the Quebec average, up to five years less in neighborhoods close to the smelter;
- Fifty percent more cases of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD);
- A lung cancer rate of 140.3 cases per 100,000 population between 2013 and 2017, compared to 107.7 for the province as a whole, while smoking rates remained about the same.

This damning information was contained in an appendix—removed under Arruda's orders—to a biomonitoring study conducted by the Abitibi-Témiscamingue Public Health Directorate (DSPu) and published in 2019.

The study reported high levels of arsenic, including 3.7 times higher levels in the fingernails of children in the Notre Dame neighborhood near the smelter than in another city in the region. The DSPu wrote at the time that “the population of this neighborhood is ... exposed simultaneously to multiple metals that can act together and increase their toxicity in the body.”

Arruda, the official most directly responsible for suppressing the information on Rouyn-Noranda's higher rates of lung cancer, would become the CAQ government's point man in its disastrous response to the coronavirus pandemic a few months later.

As in Rouyn-Noranda, the CAQ government is putting profits ahead of human lives across Quebec. It has demanded that factories and most workplaces remain open, as well as schools, so that profits can continue to be extracted from the labor of the working class. It has abandoned all efforts to combat the pandemic in the name of the homicidal, anti-scientific policy of “living with the virus.” The result is that the province now has nearly 16,000 deaths, millions of people who have been infected at least once with COVID-19, and the health care system on the verge of collapse.

The results of the 2019 biomonitoring study are not surprising. The CAQ and its predecessors in government—the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party—have known for decades about the abnormally high levels of arsenic and lung cancer rates in Rouyn-Noranda, not to mention the massive

emissions of other heavy metals and related health issues among the town's residents.

Ruthlessly defending Glencore's gigantic profit margins, the Quebec government allowed the Horne Foundry to emit 200 ng/m³ of arsenic (reduced to 100 ng/m³ in 2021) while the standard for all of Quebec is 3 ng/m³ since 2011. Recent research has demonstrated the neurotoxic effects of arsenic at concentrations as low as 15 ng/m³, particularly in children. As for Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, it has washed its hands of the whole affair, as the industry is under provincial jurisdiction.

The CAQ also allowed the Horne Foundry to develop its own "action plan," i.e., to "self-regulate." Not surprisingly, this "action plan" was adopted virtually unchanged by government officials, including Arruda. The plan, tailor-made to protect Glencore's profit interests, rejected the main demands of physicians, public health experts and citizens of Rouyn-Noranda for bringing arsenic emissions down to the provincial standard and adding new sampling stations to better measure the levels of arsenic and other heavy metals in the region.

The years following the implementation of Glencore's "action plan" have seen a significant increase in arsenic emissions. Emission rates have increased from 69 ng/m³ in 2020 to an average of 100 ng/m³ in 2021. A peak of 1170 ng/m³ of arsenic in the air was even recorded on January 22, 2021. According to the National Pollutant Release Inventory, the foundry released 36 tons of arsenic into the air in 2021. One has to go back to 2004 to find a year when the foundry released more pollutants, at 52 tons. Arsenic, once released, contaminates the soil.

The damning statistics finally released in May 2022, and the revelation that Arruda intervened in 2019 to suppress them, have escalated popular anger across the province.

Fifty local physicians signed an open letter asking health authorities to act immediately to bring the foundry's emissions of arsenic and other heavy metals down to the provincial standard.

Opposition from the medical profession was echoed in the prestigious *BMJ*, (formerly the *British Medical Journal*), in an article documenting the impact of the highly toxic emissions on the health of the people of Rouyn-Noranda while showing that the CAQ was fully aware of them. It also exposed the numerous pretexts advanced by Arruda to justify his suppression of vital information.

The government has responded to the public outcry by launching a new public relations operation, showing once again that it is willing to lie brazenly to defend the profits of big business.

In a visit to Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec's Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault blamed the previous governments and claimed that progress had been made under the CAQ, which is clearly refuted by recent figures on arsenic emissions.

The president and CEO of Abitibi-Témiscamingue's

Regional Health Center, Caroline Roy, claimed that it is "only recently that we have noticed the health inequalities" in Rouyn-Noranda. In fact, it was revealed as early as 1998 that life expectancy in the Notre-Dame district next to the foundry was nearly 10 years lower than the provincial average.

Dr. Luc Boileau, Arruda's successor as Quebec's national director of public health, insisted that it would be "a serious mistake" to link the serious health problems observed in the city—abnormally high incidence of lung cancer, significantly lower life expectancy, a greater proportion of low-birth-weight babies—with the massive emissions of arsenic and other heavy metals from the foundry.

Glencore's contamination of Rouyn-Noranda is one of many examples of the subordination of social needs to capitalist profit, with devastating consequences for the environment and the lives of millions. To cite just three of the most notorious examples:

- In Ontario, the Anishinabe community of Grassy Narrows was contaminated with mercury by Dryden Chemical, a pulp and paper company that dumped tons of the toxic chemical into the English-Wabigoon River between 1962 and 1970. Approximately 90 percent of the community members have physical symptoms of mercury poisoning.

- In Japan, at least 75,000 people developed symptoms of methylmercury poisoning after the chemical manufacturer Chisso dumped thousands of liters of untreated water into Minamata Bay between 1951 and 1968.

- In Flint, Michigan the switch to improperly treated water from the polluted Flint River in 2014 resulted in lead leaching into the city's tap water, poisoning the city of 80,000. None of the politicians responsible for the disaster have been prosecuted.



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