

Quebec government allows multinational Glencore to continue poisoning the population of Rouyn-Noranda

Louis Girard
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The right-wing CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) provincial government is continuing its manoeuvres to stifle popular anger after new revelations about the massive and deadly pollution generated by the Horne Foundry, owned by the multinational Glencore, in Rouyn-Noranda in northwestern Quebec.

Premier François Legault's government recently announced that the daily arsenic emissions threshold, set at 100 nanograms per cubic metre (ng/m³) for 2021 by the previous Liberal government, should be phased down to 15 ng/m³ by 2027—which is still five times higher than the provincial cap of 3 ng/m³.

It has long been known that the massive emission of arsenic and other heavy metals from the smelter, one of Canada's most polluting facilities, is causing serious health problems for the population of Rouyn-Noranda. This includes a significantly higher rate of lung cancer than the provincial average, 50 percent more cases of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a much higher number of low-birth-weight babies, and a life expectancy of up to five years less than the provincial average in neighbourhoods near the smelter.

The Legault government's announcement will not change this health catastrophe. The CAQ's policy follows in the footsteps of the Liberals and the PQ who preceded it in power and who have known about the consequences of emissions since at least the mid-1970s. Then, as now, the authorities' primary concern is preserving the profits generated by the Horne smelter.

First, the new threshold, even if respected, continues to pose a threat to the health of the population of Rouyn-Noranda, as well as to the fauna and flora at least 50 km from the smelter. Dr. Clodel Naud-Bellavance, who practices in Rouyn-Noranda, told CTV “it is not

reasonable to accept that ... the next 5 years will be above 15 nanograms.” She points to the increased risks for children, who are more affected by arsenic emissions because of their small size and because they tend to play in the soil contaminated by the fallout of emissions. “Five years, it's long in the life of a child,” Naud-Bellavance noted.

Second, the announcement from the environment minister was tailor-made for Glencore, which has just handed out an additional \$4.5 billion to its shareholders. Prior to the government's announcement, the company stated that it was prepared to invest \$1.5 billion over 10 years to reduce its emissions. Talks are underway between Glencore and the Legault government, which has indicated that it is open to providing public funds to the company. In addition, the Horne smelter itself proposed a relatively similar threshold of between 20 and 64 ng/m³.

Third, what the company will actually do in the next five years will, to a large extent, be kept secret. The government's “requirements,” announced with great fanfare in the media, are in fact recommendations that the company will have to include in its next certification which is up for renewal by the end of the year. Glencore's Horne Foundry, like 88 other production sites across the province, has a “right” to pollute above the province's standards, on the grounds that the plant existed before new, more stringent standards were implemented.

The five-year certification specifies the nature and quantity of contaminants the company expects to emit. But the document is not available to the public. Anne-Sophie Doré, of the Quebec Environmental Law Centre, tweeted: “It's like saying to people: we're

going to infringe on your rights, but we won't tell you how."

The CAQ, like its Liberal and PQ predecessors, is resorting to these undemocratic methods to defend the interests of big business. Significantly, it was the former National Director of Public Health, Dr. Horacio Arruda, who blocked the publication of data demonstrating the highly toxic nature of emissions at the Horne smelter by comparing the state of health in Rouyn-Noranda with the rest of the province.

Arruda went on to oversee the disastrous response of the CAQ government to the COVID-19 pandemic. As in Rouyn-Noranda, the CAQ has put profits before human lives across the province. It has demanded that factories and most workplaces remain open, as well as schools, so that profits could continue to be extracted from the labour of the working class. It has abandoned all efforts to combat the pandemic in the name of the deadly "live with the virus" policy. The result is that the province now has over 16,000 deaths, millions of people infected at least once with COVID-19 and a health care system that is crumbling.

Québec Solidaire (QS), the party of the pseudo-left in Quebec that represents layers of the affluent middle class, has played a key role in sowing illusions in the Legault government and preventing the key political issues arising from industrial pollution from being raised.

Émilise Lessard-Therrien, QS MP from Abitibi-Témiscamingue where Rouyn-Noranda is located, occasionally criticizes the Legault government. But she punctuates her tweets with futile appeals for the government to listen to reason. Addressing the Quebec environment minister, she wrote: "Will he take on his responsibilities and demand the Quebec standard or continue to act as a little clerk of the economy?"

Legault's cordial attitude toward Glencore's management is not an aberration. It is just one example of the objective role of the bourgeois state, "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie," in the words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, founders of scientific socialism.

QS presents the pollution in Rouyn-Noranda as a purely local problem. "If the safe standard is 3ng [per cubic metre] for Quebec, why should it be any different here?" tweeted Lessard-Therrien. Yet it has been revealed that no less than 89 companies, all over the

province, can pollute beyond the standards and thus cause countless health problems.

Environmental pollution, which stems from the complete incompatibility of social needs and a system based on private profit and competition between rival nation-states, cannot be overcome on a local or even national basis. As a promoter of the most narrow-minded nationalism and regionalism, QS rejects any orientation towards the international working class, the only social force capable of reorganizing production on a rational and environmentally sound basis.

As for the unions, they came to the company's defence by declaring that the Horne Foundry is among "the least polluting of its kind in the world," in the words of Dominic Lemieux, Quebec director of the United Steelworkers union, which nominally represents 1,500 Glencore employees in the province.

As inveterate defenders of the profit system, i.e., the right of big business to accumulate billions on the backs of its employees while sacrificing the health and lives of the surrounding population, the unions have entirely adopted the company's positions.

Adding his voice to Glencore's efforts to obtain new government subsidies, Lemieux said, "We are confident that with the money injected, Glencore will be able to further reduce its arsenic and carbon emissions. More than 3,000 direct and indirect jobs depend on it."

Workers must reject the idea that the economy can function only at the expense of their health. The massive pollution generated for decades by the Horne smelter, as well as countless other factories around the world, raises crucial questions: Who should run society and organize production? The capitalist class on the basis of private profit? Or the working class on the basis of human needs, including environmental preservation?



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