The right-wing record of the “Quebec First” CAQ government

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28 September 2022

As the Oct. 3 provincial election approaches, polls show a strong lead for the Coalition avenir Québec (CAQ), the right-wing chauvinist party that has governed the province since October 2018 under the premiership of François Legault, a one-time Parti Québécois cabinet minister and multi-millionaire, ex-Air Transat CEO.

The CAQ’s first term in power was marked by a disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, brutal anti-worker measures and the promotion of virulent Quebec chauvinism.

Profits before lives

Under the successive slogans of “herd immunity” and “learning to live with the virus,” the Legault government has pursued a pandemic policy that has prioritized protecting the profits and investments of the ruling class over public health.

This policy has resulted in over 16,700 deaths, almost all of them preventable, just in Quebec. The same criminal indifference to human life at all levels of government in Canada has resulted in over 45,000 COVID-19 deaths across the country.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Legault government, like the federal government and its counterparts in the other provinces, did nothing for almost two months to mobilize resources to counter COVID-19, although by mid-January 2020 it was evident that the new coronavirus that had appeared in China represented a potentially grave global threat.

It was not until mid-March 2020, and under pressure from workers, that the CAQ government imposed a temporary lockdown. This period was used by Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government—supported by all the provincial governments, the NDP and the unions—to implement a $650 billion bailout for the banks and big business.

As early as April 2020, the CAQ government began hastily lifting all lockdown measures and called for the complete reopening of schools, daycare centers, and non-essential industries in the name of “reopening the economy,” i.e., returning workers to unsafe workplaces so that the capitalist class could resume extracting profits.

Legault then publicly invoked “herd immunity” to justify his government’s actions, particularly his government’s push to reopen schools. According to this criminal, pseudo-scientific policy, the virus had to be allowed to infect the majority of the population on the grounds that this would provide them natural “immunity.” Although Quebec’s premier was later forced to retract his public endorsement of it, herd immunity remained central to his government’s response to the pandemic.

The government’s inaction in January and February and its reckless lifting of lockdown measures in April and May led to a catastrophe in nursing homes. They recorded some 4,000 deaths between March and June 2020, contributing to Quebec having one of the highest per capita death rates in the world during the first wave of the pandemic.

The reopening of schools in the fall of 2020, under conditions where most public health measures had been lifted, triggered a second wave that ravaged Quebec and reached its peak in late December 2020 and early January 2021.

At the height of this wave, the Legault government was forced to implement some limited public health measures—a province-wide curfew, the partial closure of restaurants, limits on private gatherings etc. . But it kept schools and most non-essential business, especially resource industries, construction and manufacturing, operating at full tilt so that profits could continue to flow. The limited and insufficient COVID-mitigation measures were tolerated by the ruling elite only long enough for infections to stabilize.

This deadly cycle—a surge in COVID-19 cases that quickly brought the health care system to the point of collapse; implementation of limited mitigation measures; stabilization of new infections; precipitous elimination of the anti-COVID measures leading to a new rapid rises in cases—was repeated for a third wave that peaked in early May 2021, and a fourth wave in the fall of 2021.

After the discovery of the highly contagious Omicron variant in South Africa in November 2021, the Legault government again ignored the warnings of scientists. A fifth wave hit Quebec hard in December 2021 and January 2022, infecting 3 million people (out of a total population of about 8.5 million). The initial Omicron wave caused some 1,800 deaths between December and February, the highest number of any wave except the first.

The infection of more than a third of Quebecers in the space of two months, which was welcomed by Quebec’s Director of Public Health, Dr. Luc Boileau, marked the beginning of the campaign to completely and definitively eliminate all public health measures on the pretext that the population had to “learn to live” with the virus.

In February of this year, as infections and hospitalizations reached record levels far exceeding anything seen in the first 4 waves, the “Freedom Convoy” was incited and promoted by a powerful faction of the ruling elite. The far-right movement occupied downtown Ottawa for three weeks and demanded an end to all anti-COVID measures. Trudeau and all levels of government in Canada were quick to give in to the demands of these fascist elements. The Legault government eliminated all remaining health measures and dismantled the last vestiges of the contact tracing and tracking system.

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Since then, the virus has been circulating freely in Quebec, infecting an unknown number of people every day, and killing hundreds of people every month. In the last four weeks, no less than 409 people have died from COVID in Quebec, with the ruling class and the mainstream media showing utter indifference to this loss of life.

Attacks on workers

The CAQ's first-ever term in government has also been marked by an accelerated assault on the living conditions of the working class.

The Legault government, with the full cooperation of the union apparatus, has imposed rotten contracts on more than half-a-million public sector employees, including nurses and school staff.

After presenting Quebec nurses as "heroes" and "guardian angels" during the early stages of the pandemic, Legault "rewarded" them in August 2021 with a contract containing salary "increases" of 6 percent over three years. This represents a drastic pay cut when inflation is taken into account, which at the time was 3.6 percent per year and has now soared to over 8 percent.

While the pandemic has accelerated the deterioration of a health care system, already bled dry by decades of budget cuts, the nurses' collective agreement contained no serious measures to combat staff shortages and perpetuated the hated mandatory overtime system.

Teachers and school staff, who have been forced to work in the midst of a pandemic in dilapidated, crowded and poorly ventilated schools, received contracts that provide for "salary increases" of no more than 2 percent per year, meager conditional bonuses, and no serious measures to address staff shortages and reduce workloads.

Private sector workers have also borne the brunt of the CAQ's pro-employer policies. In the spring of 2019, a few months after coming to power, Legault intervened obtrusively in the lockout at the Bécancour aluminum smelter (ABI), denouncing the "high wages" of Quebec's industrial workers and the province's supposedly onerous labour regulations for job losses.

The Legault government publicly supported management during the strikes at the Olymel slaughterhouse in Vallée-Jonction and the Exceldor plant in Saint-Anselme. During the conflict at the Port of Montreal, CAQ Minister of the Economy Pierre Fitzgibon, another millionaire, praised the criminalization of the dockers' strike by the federal Liberal government. The CAQ has repeatedly threatened to illegalize workers job action, including a threatened strike by construction workers in May-June 2021.

Virulent Quebec nationalism

In its first few months in office, the government pushed through Bill 9 to reduce Quebec's annual intake of immigrants and require prospective immigrants to demonstrate their compatibility with "Quebec values." This first reactionary law set the stage for a flurry of other chauvinist measures.

Religious minorities have been targeted by Bill 21, which prohibits the wearing of religious symbols by public school teachers and government employees "in a position of authority," denies essential public services to fully veiled Muslim women and contains a "notwithstanding clause" to shield it from legal challenge even though it violates rights "guaranteed" by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Bill 21, whose passage has led to a sharp increase in hate crimes, follows a long campaign against religious minorities that began in the early 2000s with a phony debate on "unreasonable accommodation" in which all political parties participated. Quebec Solidaire (QS), which is a supposedly "left" pro-Quebec independence party, even called the debate "legitimate" and proposed its own version of the Marois PQ government's Charter of Quebec Values bill.

Under Bill 96, which the CAQ government passed into law with the support of QS last May, immigrants will be only allowed to use French when communicating with the government or accessing essential public services after they have resided in Quebec for six months. This anti-democratic law also expands the discriminatory clauses of Bill 101 to ensure the French-speaking middle class greater access to executive and administrative positions in small and medium-sized businesses. Like Bill 21, Bill 96 has been shielded from constitutional challenge by a blanket invocation of the anti-democratic "notwithstanding clause."

The CAQ has promoted Quebec nationalism by introducing "Buy Quebec" obligations in public tenders, and creating an obligatory Culture and Quebec Citizenship program that will indoctrinate the province's elementary and high school students in "Quebec pride." Explaining the course's purpose, Deputy Premier Geneviève Guilbault did not even try to hide that it will have "a little chauvinistic flavor."

The CAQ's chauvinist measures are the outcome of the provincial ruling elite's promotion of ever-more virulent forms of Quebec nationalism. The primary objective of this shift is to prevent a unified struggle of all workers against its reactionary policies, by splitting them along religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic lines, and to divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the US and beyond.

Legault has himself justified his response to the pandemic and his chauvinistic nationalist measures by invoking the importance of the state promoting "social cohesion" and "national cohesion," in language reminiscent of the far-right. This underscores that the ruling class is prepared to take the most extreme measures, and to use the most reactionary forces in society, to thwart and suppress opposition from the working class.

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