

Top Quebec union leader opposes reinstatement of mask mandate in schools

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Like everywhere else in Canada and much of the rest of the world, Quebec's health care system is in acute crisis. Across Quebec, hospital emergency and ICU (intensive care) units are overflowing and children's hospitals are struggling to treat a record number of young patients. Pharmacies are also hit by a persistent shortage of drugs, including Tylenol for children.

This situation is mainly due to a particularly severe influenza season, an increased number of cases of respiratory syncytial virus in children and the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to spread in the population, including in schools, where the mask mandate was lifted as far back as last May.

Faced with a "saturated system," the College of Physicians recommended on November 13 that Quebecers wear masks in public places. This basic public health measure, which would help reduce infections and diminish hospital overcrowding, has been rejected by the trade unions representing teachers and other education workers.

Éric Gingras, the president of Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ, Quebec Union Federation), the province's third largest labour federation and biggest teachers union, declared that "teachers and school staff ... do not want to go backwards on the issue of masks." He said it would be "unacceptable" for masks to be imposed in schools "if it is to replace inadequate ventilation." In fact, the lack of proper ventilation is all the more reason to reinstate a mask mandate. During the more than two-and-half-year long pandemic, the education unions, it need be added, have done nothing to mobilize their members and the public to demand proper ventilation units for every classroom.

Continuing to rely on the complicity of the unions to implement its criminal laissez-faire pandemic policy,

Quebec's right-wing Coalition avenir Québec (CAQ) government announced November 16 that it will not reintroduce a mask mandate in elementary and high schools. It merely *recommended* that masks be worn in all "busy public places." It further stipulated that even this recommendation does not apply to schools and day care centers—no matter that children are being especially hit hard by the current triple wave of respiratory infections and schools have repeatedly been shown to be major vectors of COVID-19 transmission.

As a consequence of this policy, which flouts the most elementary public health norms, infections are spreading like wildfire. This week there have been more student absences in Quebec than ever before.

The government's refusal to implement science-based measures to combat COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases is just the latest iteration of the "profits before lives" policy that the CAQ government has been implementing since the coronavirus emerged in early 2020.

Under the pretexts of "herd immunity" and then "living with the virus," the government of Premier François Legault, a multi-millionaire and former CEO, prematurely lifted the minimal measures put in place in March 2020 to combat COVID. Like his counterparts in other provinces and with the support of the federal Liberal government, Legault quickly reopened nonessential businesses and schools so that profits extracted from workers could continue to flow to the big banks and wealthy investors.

To date, this policy has resulted in seven waves of COVID-19, a massive death toll in nursing homes in the first months of the pandemic, more than 17,150 officially-recognized Quebec pandemic deaths and the infection of three-quarters of the province's adult population. In Quebec as in all of Canada, 2022 is

already with well over a month to go the deadliest of the three years of the pandemic.

In the name of “national unity,” the opposition parties, including the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, refrained from criticizing the CAQ and instead supported the reopening of businesses and schools, often urging Legault to act even more hastily.

The unions, which in recent decades have become junior partners of the state and big business and accumulated vast privileges for services rendered to the ruling elite in suppressing the class struggle, have also staunchly supported the CAQ’s pandemic policies.

Thus the education unions, including the CSQ-affiliated Fédération de la Santé du Québec (FSQ-CSQ) and the Fédération Autonome de l’Enseignement (Autonomous Teachers Federation) which together represent most of the province’s teachers, have remained silent on the disastrous consequences of the reopening of the schools.

They propagated the lie that the few anti-COVID mitigation measures that were put in place, and which have now been completely rescinded, would be sufficient to protect staff and students. They suppressed school workers’ opposition to the reopening of schools, to the point of prohibiting any discussion of the issue among their members.

Gingras, when he was president of the Champlain Union, which with 10,000 members is one of the CSQ’s largest locals, used bureaucratic maneuvers to prevent debate on a motion from a rank-and-file worker calling for an emergency meeting to discuss a policy to protect workers and students from the pandemic.

The complicity of the unions has allowed the Legault government to present its mass infection policy as the only viable option and to spread its anti-science propaganda without being contradicted. The confusion among the general public and teachers in particular about the science of COVID-19 is a direct result of the unions’ role.

Only the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) is fighting for a science-based Zero Covid policy to protect lives and eliminate the deadly virus once and for all. Teachers, school staff, students and parents are encouraged to join this fight by visiting the CERSC Facebook page or contacting the CERSC via email at cersc.csppb@gmail.com.



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