

Quebec government's trade union-backed Bill 19 sanctions dramatic rise in child labour

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The right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government's proposed "Act respecting the regulation of child labour," which was introduced in the National Assembly as Bill 19 at the end of March, is part of an all-out attack on the social rights of the Quebec and Canadian working class.

The political establishment—including the pseudo-left party, Québec Solidaire, and the trade union bureaucracy—is cynically promoting Bill 19 as a means of ensuring the safety and personal "development" of young people.

In reality, it gives a legal veneer to a dramatic increase in the exploitation of children by capitalist enterprises.

Child labour has always been a sombre reality under capitalism. It took generations of working class struggles to limit it and win access to education for working-class children. In the 20th century, the ruling classes were forced to pass laws to regulate and restrict child labour, but the phenomenon has persisted, especially in the most impoverished countries dominated by Canada and the other imperialist powers.

The new legislation proposed by Quebec Premier François Legault and CAQ Labour Minister Jean Boulet is part of an international push by the capitalist elite to normalize and expand child labour, reviving the most retrograde elements of the Victorian era of capitalism's rise. Just last month, the Republican-controlled Iowa Senate tabled a bill which would dismantle many child labour restrictions in that US state, expand the types of jobs minors can legally do and extend the maximum length and end-time of shifts.

The exploitation of young people has intensified in recent years, particularly since the pandemic. Under the "profits before life" policy adopted by capitalist governments the world over in response to COVID-19, businesses and schools were prematurely reopened, causing the mass infection of workers and youth. Employers, both large and small, turned to increasingly younger and lower-paid employees to overcome a long-standing labor shortage exacerbated by the pandemic.

While the hiring of 16-year-olds has long been

commonplace, the hiring of 12- to 14-year-olds has become normalized in recent years. According to a January 2023 survey of 18,000 high school students in Quebec's Eastern Townships region conducted by the CIUSSS de l'Estrie, a government health agency, 62 percent of them were working—a 26 percent increase in just one year. Most alarmingly, among 12-year-old Secondary 1 (i.e., Grade 7) students, 54 percent of respondents said they were working in 2023 as compared to 13 percent in 2022. One-fifth of respondents in Secondary 1 or 2 (Grades 7 and 8) said they were working more than 15 hours per week.

The political establishment and the mainstream media are cynically portraying child labor as a "rewarding experience." Yet there is a consensus among experts that the adverse consequences of employment on young people's mental health and education can be dramatic. In addition to stress and anxiety, the time and energy wasted on the job results in young people being plagued by fatigue and sleep deprivation, which can impact academic achievement and cause them to drop out. As Audrey Mckinnon, Executive Director of the Quebec Network for Educational Success, points out, "Studies show that at 15 hours [per week], it's difficult, and at 20 hours, you fall into critical areas for many young people."

The number of workplace injuries among young people has risen exponentially over the past decade. According to the Comité consultatif du travail et de la main-d'œuvre (CCTM)—a Quebec government consultative body staffed by Ministry of Labour officials and union and employer representatives—the annual number of work-related injuries for those aged 16 and under increased from 278 to 447 between 2017 and 2021, that is by 60.8 percent. For children under 14, the number of accidents increased from 10 to 64 per year, a 540 percent increase. According to experts, these figures are a marked underestimate.

Child workers are also victims of workplace fatalities. In February, 16-year-old Zohaib Aamir Shafiqui was hit and killed by a snowplow while retrieving shopping carts at the Laval grocery store where he worked. In 2021, 14-year-old

Charles-Antoine Poulin died after being ejected and crushed by the protective structure of the forklift he was driving for the first time, without supervision or training.

Such fatal accidents and the rapid expansion of child labour in Quebec have led to increasing calls from the public for legislation to better restrict, if not outright abolish, child labour. The CAQ government's Bill 19 aims, on the one, hand to stifle these protests and, on the other, to normalize and make legal this retrograde practice. By calling its legislation "perfectible," the reactionary "Quebec First" CAQ government tacitly acknowledges that its safeguards are largely meaningless and that employers will be able to carry on business as usual.

To lend an aura of legitimacy to the process, Legault and Boulet involved the CCTM, one of the countless government-management-union tripartite committees that serve to subordinate the interests of the working class to the Quebec ruling elite.

Bill 19 is essentially based on the committee's recommendations. The text is written in such a way that it opens the door to numerous exceptions and exemptions. Officially, the minimum working age would be set at 14. But a child under 14 would be able to work with parental permission in "low-risk" areas such as "babysitting, homework help, summer camps, artistic practices" and at "a family business with fewer than 10 employees" if "a child of the owner." Officially, the maximum number of hours is to be set at 17 hours per week, with a maximum of 10 hours during the five-day school week.

Employer organizations, particularly those representing the service sector and small businesses whose profits are highly dependent on very low wages, have criticized the bill and are calling for more "flexibility," i.e., greater access to child labour. These include the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) and the Union des producteurs agricoles du Québec (UPA), which represents dairy, poultry and other farmers, many of whom run large multi-million-dollar commercial enterprises. They are demanding the uninhibited "right" to hire 90,000 children under 14 as they did in 2022, regardless of the economic sector.

Their calls have been heard by Québec Solidaire (QS), the pro-Quebec independence "left" party. It has joined with the big business Liberal Party in urging Bill 19 be amended to allow children under 14 to work as farm labourers. QS labour critic Alexandre Leduc said he was "moved" by the UPA president's arguments that turning children into wage slaves is a good thing "for parents who can't afford to send their children to day camp."

In fact, QS is in full agreement with Éric Duhaime, the far-right libertarian who leads the Conservative Party of Quebec. He has vaunted the ethical values supposedly

inculcated in children when they do wage-work, while plainly stating that children "help many Quebec entrepreneurs stay open."

Significantly, the trade union apparatuses, including the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), whose representatives sit on the CCTM, have given their seal of approval to the expanded exploitation for-profit of children. Although "imperfect," the FTQ noted in a press release, the law "is a step in the right direction." This position is only the latest indication of the rightward shift of these pro-capitalist apparatuses that uphold the "right" of corporations to make profits, by enforcing wage and job cuts and unsafe working conditions.

The corporate media has played a particularly pernicious role in normalizing child labour. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were loudly proclaiming that children should return to school, even if it meant being infected with a potentially deadly and debilitating virus. In-person schooling was declared to be important, indeed vital, for children's "socialization," "getting them away from screens" and combatting "sedentary lifestyles." Of course, these were hypocritical pretexts for sending parents back to work churning out profits for the corporations. Ironically, the media are now using the same justifications to normalize child labour. Any concern about the threat to young people's education has conveniently vanished.

In fact, there are a multitude of ways to develop initiative, autonomy, responsibility and other personal and social qualities in children other than through wage-labor. The basic problem is that the capitalist system demands that workers, often parents, have to work more and more to enrich the ruling class and have virtually no quality time with their children. Most concerning, in a context of soaring inflation and low wages, more and more young people will be forced to work to support themselves and their families.

Workers and youth must oppose this social regression. There are ample resources to provide a decent wage to all working adults and to allow young people to develop physically and intellectually to the best of their ability. The capitalist profit system has nothing to offer the working class and youth but exploitation, war and reaction. Only by abolishing this moribund system and establishing a socialist society will humanity rid itself of the scourge of capitalist exploitation, including its most sordid form, child labor.



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