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Quebec

Health Care Workers Demand Real Solutions and an End to Ministerial Decrees

Quebec health care unions are speaking out against the changes announced by Health Minister Dubé to the ministerial order granting temporary bonuses to health care professionals, saying that they "miss the mark." A press release published on November 26 on the website of the Service

Employees Union of Quebec (SQEES) on behalf of health care unions in Quebec, says that "these changes show that the government is not hearing our message that it must put an end to management by decree and implement the solutions put forward by union organizations that are in tune with the needs of the network. In addition, they reiterate that they will never negotiate a ministerial decree."

The Ministerial Order was issued on October 16, 2021 and provides for bonuses offered to workers who sign an agreement to work full-time for a year, an order which the government claims would address the staffing shortage crisis in the province. According to the order, the bonus is conditional on an individual accepting working conditions that health care professionals are opposed to and that violate provisions of recently negotiated collective agreements. For example, to get the bonus, a worker has to agree to being assigned to work outside of their regular work assignment. In the original order, a leave without pay or unpaid absence could result in loss of eligibility for the bonus or a requirement to repay a bonus already received. With the changes announced on November 26, various exclusionary and punitive measures are maintained, including the requirement that a worker unable to work full time due to an injury on the job would have to repay the bonus, a violation of the labour law.



The unions point out that the staffing shortage in health care is a complex issue that requires more than temporary measures and invites the government to seriously consider the proposed solutions that the unions have been putting forward for years, including measures already contained in the collective agreement. They also point out that weeks after the ministerial order was made there is still a failure to attract and retain nursing and cardiorespiratory care workers to meet the urgent needs on the ground, proving that Minister Dubé is on the wrong track.

The unions have asked the government to meet with them to discuss lasting solutions that are based on recognizing the essential work their members do and they have put forward 15 proposals in response to the problems that the ministerial decree has created.

"By refusing our outstretched hand," the statement says, "the government is missing a great opportunity to respond to the concerns of health care professionals. His [Dubé's] ministerial decree does not resolve the situation because to do so, one must hear the solutions of the people who are on the ground. With its announcement today, the government is showing that it is more interested in managing everything on its own than in improving the situation. Its anti-union attitude has serious consequences, as it has the effect of depriving the population of its right to essential care and services in the healthcare network. Service breakdowns are still common in the network."

The unions repeated their desire and availability to discuss long term solutions to resolve the crisis of the shortage of personnel and professional burnout, making it clear that the decree of working conditions and incentives that bypass the unions as representatives of the workers is unacceptable, that negotiations on working conditions must be held with the unions and be based on the labour laws and existing collective agreement. With regard to the incentive program they have put forward various proposals to eliminate discriminatory and punitive conditions.



United States

Health Care Workers Demand Government Provide Federal Standards for Safe Conditions



Health care workers in the United States have continued to demand that federal standards be developed to provide safe working conditions for all, workers, patients and community members alike. As a result of determined struggle, in June 2021, some COVID-19 protections for nurses and other health care workers across the country were provided by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). These were far from sufficient but did include the most basic safety protocols, like masks -- something that the big health care monopolies should have adopted long ago. Full personal protective equipment (PPE), free and regular testing, staffing ratios, paid sick days, all remain demands in many hospitals and nursing homes.

OSHA provided a minimal federal standard through an Emergency Temporary Standard (ETS). This is about to expire. Spearheaded by National Nurses United (NNU), one of the largest unions of nurses nationwide, the demand is for OSHA to expand the standard and make it permanent.

As NNU brings out: "Nurses have been on the front lines of this pandemic from the start, fighting for the lives of millions of people. Being forced to wear the same N95 respirator for a month in a war against an aerosol transmissible disease -- in one of the wealthiest industries in one of the wealthiest nations -- is not just insulting, it's an injury, and it's incredibly dangerous for nurses, other health care workers, and patients." They also reflect the social responsibility they have demonstrated throughout the pandemic by demanding safe conditions and basing them on the workers' own experience:

"The standards we have developed from our experience with COVID must form the foundation for a separate, broader standard to prepare for future pandemics and to protect all workers from workplace exposure to aerosol transmissible diseases. To save as many lives as possible and to keep our communities safe," NNU calls on OSHA to make its COVID ETS permanent and immediately

create a new standard for infectious diseases going forward that provides safe working conditions for all.



(Photos: UNN)



Worldwide

Millions Demand Wealthy Countries Stop Blocking Patent Waivers for COVID Vaccines



New York City, November 30, 2021

More than 2.5 million nurses from 28 countries worldwide filed a complaint with the United Nations (UN) November 29, calling on the UN to investigate rich countries blocking a proposed patent

waiver for coronavirus vaccines. The demand came as new COVID variants are emerging and the pandemic persists worldwide. The campaign is coordinated by Global Nurses United (GNU), with Canadian and U.S. unions participating.

In a detailed letter addressed to Dr. Tlaleng Mofokeng, the UN Special Rapporteur on Physical and Mental Health, dozens of nursing unions said "the end of this pandemic is nowhere in sight" as "COVID-19 cases continue to soar in numerous parts of the world, while pharmaceutical companies and governments have failed to ensure that critical treatments and vaccines are distributed." Vaccines are instead being hoarded by rich countries, like the U.S. and European countries, and ability to produce the vaccines in poorer countries is blocked by patents -- that is private ownership of what is clearly a public necessity.



The letter continues, "This unequal distribution of vaccines is not only grossly unjust for the people in low- and moderate-income countries who remain at high risk for contracting and further transmitting COVID-19, it also provides for the possibility for the development of new variants, some of which may be resistant to the current available vaccines," the filing reads. "The development and spread of new variants pose a dire risk to all people around the world."

The complaint specifically targets the European Union, Britain, Switzerland, Norway, and Singapore, as key countries standing in the way of a patent waiver.

The nurses state that a small group of rich nations is "endangering millions of lives around the world." They say, "This is a clear violation of our right to health -- of nurses, caregivers, and patients." In addition to the letter they have circulated a petition and are also going to court. To the UN they said, "We demand an urgent investigation into the obstruction of the waiver by these COVID-19 criminals."

The letter brings out that the richest countries have secured upwards of 7 billion vaccine doses, while financially poorer countries have only been able to secure about 300 million doses. This has created what public health advocates around the world confirm is "vaccine apartheid." The apartheid extends to health care workers as well, with less than one in 10 healthcare workers being fully vaccinated in the African and Western Pacific regions, for example.

"Nurses and other healthcare workers have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic response, and we have witnessed the staggering numbers of deaths and the immense suffering caused by political inaction," the letter continues. They bring out that the continued refusal by governments to waive patent restrictions "is resulting in the violation of human rights of peoples across the world," and that "these countries have violated our rights and the rights of our patients -- and caused the loss of countless lives -- of nurses and other caregivers and those we have cared for."

The nurses call for "a new international health order" to eliminate the vaccine inequality and to provide for "collective benefit, based on the principles of sovereignty, solidarity, and the universal right to life."



Geneva, Switzerland, November 30, 2021.

(Photos: A. Ciezadlo, GNU, MSF Access Campaign)



Note to Our Readers

With this issue, *Workers' Forum* ceases regular publication until mid-January 2022. The break is to give us, hardworking editorial and technical staff, time off and an opportunity to prepare for 2022.

Workers' Forum will nonetheless be published on request as required by the needs of the workers' movement. Please continue to send your news, press releases, views and photographs which are very helpful in keeping our readers from coast to coast informed and encouraging them in their own endeavors. We are one workers' movement with one aim, informed by rich experience in tackling the problems we all face, nationally, regionally, locally and on the grand global scale as well.

Sharing experiences is helpful to everyone facing similar problems. Importantly, it also helps smash the silence imposed on our struggles to isolate us, discourage us and make us feel we are insignificant and disposable. We will never accept this and pledge to step up our efforts to strengthen this work in the New Year.

Help us by getting new subscribers, distributing the paper to your co-workers, sending whatever funds you can afford and your photos and news.[1] Thanks to the links established with working people all over the country, we are a *de facto* news agency which gives accurate and timely information. We hope to strengthen this with timely audio reporting next year.

With this, we thank you for your support in 2021 and wish you and your families a safe holiday filled with social solidarity and care for one another.

Season's Greetings!
Editorial and Technical Staff

Note

1. To contribute make out a cheque or money order payable to “MLPC” and send it to P.O. Box 666, Station C, Montreal, QC H2L 4L5. For more information or to make a contribution directly using paypal [click here](#).



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