

In defiance of Essential Services Council and union "truce"

Quebec teachers to stage one-day strike

Our correspondent
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Quebec's 80,000 public school teachers are to mount a one-day strike today in defiance of a ruling by the province's Essential Services Council that renders their action illegal and makes them liable to be held in contempt of court.

Teachers at both English- and French-language school boards are walking off the job to support their claim for a pay rise under a 1996 provincial pay equity law. On the grounds that the labor market has historically 'undervalued' women's work, the pay equity law provides for a one-time wage adjustment for Quebec public sector workers in occupations in which women have traditionally predominated.

The teachers, like other Quebec public sector workers, have had their wages frozen or cut for most of the past 15 years. Their last wage hike was in 1992 and Quebec teachers are now the third lowest paid in Canada, earning more only than teachers in the primarily rural and impoverished provinces of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island. As a result of years of budget cuts, Quebec teachers also must contend with an increased workload, burgeoning class sizes and shortages of books and equipment.

Never before has the Essential Services Council claimed that a teacher dispute falls under its mandate. Established by the Lévesque Parti Québécois government 15 years ago, the council has repeatedly intervened to block effective job action by healthcare, transit and other municipal workers. The council has outlawed strikes and even overtime bans on the grounds that they jeopardized essential services or lives. It has thus served as an important weapon in enforcing the PQ and Liberal government health care budget cuts that have truly placed the sick and the elderly at risk.

In the case of the teachers, the council concedes that a

one-day strike is at most an inconvenience for parents. Nevertheless, it asserts it has an obligation to thwart the teachers' action because it is mandated to ensure that public sector workers obey the province's labor law and the teachers unions did not conform to the legal time limit for giving notice of today's walkout.

The council's intervention is aimed at setting a precedent that will significantly expand its repressive powers. It also motivated by its fear that the provincial government is not in a position to effectively deal with labor unrest, as Quebec is currently in the midst of a provincial election campaign. In August-September 1989 the Council and the Bourassa Liberal government were unable, despite threats of severe legal sanction, to quell a strike movement by Quebec public sector workers that erupted in the midst of an election campaign. Ultimately, the strike movement was torpedoed by the union bureaucrats, who in the name of 'maintaining social peace' suspended the strikes. This opened the door for a newly reelected Liberal government to take savage reprisals against nurses and other healthcare workers.

The Essential Services Council issued its ruling on today's teachers strike in the form of a court order, meaning individual teachers can be held in contempt of court, a criminal offense for which one can be fined up to \$5,000 and jailed for a year.

The teachers' job action is also in defiance of a 'truce' that the leaders of Quebec's three main labor federations--the Quebec Federation of Labour, the Confederation of National Trade Unions and the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec (Quebec Teachers' Federation)--struck with PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard the day before he called the provincial election.

The leaders of the QFL, CNTU and CEQ, which

collectively represent the vast majority of the 350,000 Quebec public sector workers now in contract negotiations, pledged not to organize any strikes or job actions during the election campaign. In defending their decision, the union leaders claimed an election campaign is not an appropriate time to conduct high-level contract negotiations and that worker mobilizations would detract attention from the election debate!

In fact, the wages and working conditions of the public sector workers are of vital concern to all working people. Not only do public sector workers constitute a significant portion of the province's labor force, they have borne much of the brunt of the big business assault on social programs and public services. The struggle of public sector workers to defend their wages and working conditions is inseparable from, and indeed has the potential to spearhead, a struggle to defend public services and social programs.

Within 24 hours of agreeing to the truce CEQ President Lorraine Pagé was telling reporters that she been misunderstood and that the truce would not derail the teachers' plans for job action over the pay equity issue. The truth is that Pagé, who faced a challenge to her presidency at the most recent CEQ convention, had come under heavy attack from her opponents in the bureaucracy and rank-and-file teachers. They accused her of once again being too closely allied to the PQ government. Still, so as not to distance herself from her fellow bureaucrats at the CNTU and QFL leaders, Pagé has maintained that the teachers strike does not break the union truce.

'Truce' hardly begins to describe the relations between the QFL, CNTU and CEQ bureaucrats and the Bouchard government--partners or co-conspirators would be more apt. All three labor federations supported the PQ government's campaign to eliminate the annual provincial budget deficit by the year 2000--an objective that has necessitated billions of dollars in cuts for healthcare, education, welfare and other social programs.

In 1997, the unions worked with the Quebec government to reduce its labor costs by 6 percent. At their suggestion, the Bouchard government adopted an early retirement scheme that was used to slash the public sector work force by more than 10,000. The unions, thus, have actively contributed both to the

increase in public sector workers' workload and to the dismantling of vital public services.

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