

Quebec government and unions conspire against Vidéotron strikers

Keith Jones
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Negotiations between the Quebec-based cable and internet company Vidéotron and its 2,200 striking workers resumed Wednesday following an appeal from Quebec Premier Bernard Landry and the inclusion of his predecessor, Lucien Bouchard, on the company's negotiating team.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has welcomed Vidéotron's appointment of former Premier and Parti Québécois leader Bouchard and says it is approaching the new negotiations with "prudent optimism." "The two parties cannot allow another failure." Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL) President Henri Massé has also joined the talks.

The intervention of the Parti Québécois (PQ) leadership in the strike must be taken as a warning that the union leadership is intent on surrendering before Vidéotron's demand for massive wage and job cuts. Not only has the union bureaucracy for decades subordinated the working class to the big business PQ, agreeing under Premier Bouchard, for example, to billions of dollars in cuts to health care, education and social services. The PQ government, through the provincial government-controlled pension fund plan, the *Caisse de dépôt et placement*, has been egging Vidéotron on in its demand for annual concessions of at least \$30 million from its technicians and repairmen.

Two years ago, at Premier Landry's urging, the *Caisse* financed the purchase of Vidéotron by the printing and publishing giant Quebecor, thwarting a rival takeover bid by Toronto-based Rogers Communications. The aim was to create a francophone-owned media and telecommunications giant that could be a world-player in the new era of information technology "convergence." But the crash in the valuation of telecommunication stocks has rocked Quebecor and, with the support of the *Caisse*, which

holds 45 percent of Quebecor Media's stock, it is now seeking to compensate by squeezing far higher profits from the Vidéotron workers.

Prior to his appointment the *Caisse*'s new CEO Henri-Paul Rousseau was critical of the Vidéotron deal as a politically-motivated investment. However, no sooner was he installed as the head of the *Caisse* than he solidarized himself with the attack on the Vidéotron workers. "The economies sought by Vidéotron," declared Rousseau, "are important for the value of our investment. The company needs them."

Backed by the Quebec government and key players in Canada's political elite—former Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney is on Quebecor's board of directors—Quebecor has waged an all-out assault on the Vidéotron workers, including hiring strike breakers.

CUPE and the QFL, meanwhile, have done everything to isolate and politically neuter the strike. They have gone so far as to allow QFL members employed by a sub-contractor to perform work usually done by the striking Vidéotron workers and have directed the strikers not to appeal for support from the working class, but to press for the big business PQ to intervene in the strike. Yet through the *Caisse* the government has been complicit in the war on the Vidéotron workers from the strike's first day.

The capitalist media is acutely aware of the role being played by the labor bureaucracy. In its lead article Thursday, Montreal's largest daily *La Presse* praised QFL President Massé for "working hard to ensure the conflict doesn't degenerate into an all-out confrontation."



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