

Mass protest against Quebec government's demolition of public and social services

A WSWS reporting team
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Thirty thousand public sector workers, other trade unionists, welfare recipients and youth marched on the Quebec National Assembly Saturday, November 29 to protest against the provincial Liberal government's assault on public and social services and workers' rights.

Elected last April, at least in part because they appealed to popular anger over the deterioration of public health care, education and other public services, the Liberals have instead unveiled plans to dismantle what remains of the welfare state.

In the name of "re-engineering the state," they have moved to drastically scale back the social responsibilities of the state, gut labour and environmental regulations, privatize public infrastructure, and increase or impose user fees on a gamut of government services, while lining the pockets of the well-to-do with tax cuts.

The changes the Liberals have announced to date are meant to be a mere down-payment, but they have already provoked a wave of popular opposition. They include:

- * slashing taxes by an additional \$1 billion per year for each of the next five years—and this under conditions where the government itself says Quebec faces a fiscal crisis;

- * gutting legal restrictions on the contracting out of work;

- * abolishing the almost seventy year-old provincial decree that establishes minimum wage rates and working conditions for workers in the clothing industry;

- * raising daily day care fees by 40 percent, from \$5 to \$7 per day; and

- * intensifying efforts to compel welfare recipients to provide cheap labor, by imposing severe financial

penalties on those who refuse to participate in workfare schemes or accept low-paying work.

Many, if not the majority, of those who joined Saturday's march in Quebec City were health care workers. The Liberals' plan to force hospitals to contract out non-medical services directly threatens the jobs of tens of thousands of maintenance, housekeeping, laundry, secretarial and cafeteria workers.

The demonstration was called by the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), one of Quebec's three major union federations. The rival Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL) mounted its own anti-Liberal protest on November 26. More than seven thousand participated.

The CNTU, QFL and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (Quebec Union Federation) have for decades pursued the same essential orientation, subordinating the working class to the big business, pro-independence Parti Québécois and integrating the union apparatus ever more directly into management. Their use of various sectional claims to justify fragmenting workers in rival organizations is entirely in keeping with this corporatist course.

The anger of the demonstrators—many of whom travelled up to five hours through a snowstorm to reach Quebec City—was palpable. So too was the lack of a viable political perspective to meet the Liberal government's class war assault.

While most workers saw the demonstration as only the beginning of an opposition movement and many were sceptical of the trade union officialdom, in so far as they articulated a conception of how the movement should develop it was almost invariably within the framework of trade union and protest politics—bigger protests and possibly a strike of public sector workers

in the spring.

For its part, the CNTU leadership offered demagoguery and bluster, the better to conceal its own complicity in the ruling class assault on public and social services and its continuing overtures to the Liberal government.

Under the previous PQ regime, the union bureaucrats actively participated in the downsizing of public and social services, endorsing massive public spending and job cuts in the name of fighting the deficit. Then, in last April's election, they tacitly supported the coming to power of the Liberals, arguing they were the lesser evil as compared with the neo-conservative Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ).

CNTU Vice-President Roger Valois, the opening speaker, reeled off a series of insults, proclaiming Premier Jean Charest to be "a bigger asshole than Duplessis," the authoritarian, conservative French-Canadian nationalist who was Quebec Premier for 20 years between 1936 and 1959. CNTU President Claudette Carbonneau claimed that if the rank and file mobilized for a December 11 day of protests, the government's big business allies would soon be pressuring the premier to change course.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened in the demonstration, distributing hundreds of copies of a statement entitled, "To defeat the Charest government's plans for social demolition, build an independent party of the working class." The statement warned that despite the depth of the opposition to the Charest government and the lack of support for its right-wing agenda outside big business, it would prevail unless workers consciously rebelled against the union bureaucracy, repudiated its alliance with the PQ, and joined with workers in English Canada and across North America in building a political party of the working class. Such a party would champion a socialist program to radically reorganize the economy so that essential human needs can be placed before corporate profits.



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