

Quebec: Mounting opposition to Liberals' class war agenda

A reporting team
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Hundreds of thousands of Quebecers, from all parts of the province—hospital workers, civil servants, municipal workers, construction and aluminum industry workers, teachers, and day care workers, as well as the parents of thousands of day care children—participated in demonstrations, study sessions, and information picket lines last Thursday to protest against the Quebec Liberal government's assault on public and social services and worker rights.

The "national day of disturbance" was initially called by the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU/CSN), but ultimately was joined by most unions representing workers in Quebec's public sector and many industrial unions. The 450,000-member Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL/FTQ), the province's largest, stayed largely aloof from the protests. But it did organize mass picketing at the province's four principal ports—Montreal, Quebec City, Trois-Rivières and Bécancour—shutting them down for the day.

Seven highways were also fully or partially blockaded, and traffic on several in outlying industrial regions continued to be disrupted into Friday. Fifteen workers were arrested and one hospitalized, early Friday morning when 135 members of the Quebec Provincial Police riot squad brutally attacked those blockading Quebec's Highway 175, near Saguenay.

Fifteen-hundred workers at an Alcan aluminum plant in the Saguenay region walked off the job for four hours, and workers at several nearby plants reportedly had to be convinced by union officials to remain on the job.

In Montreal, 40,000 people marched through rain and bitter cold to the office of Premier Jean Charest. The demonstration was called by the province's non-profit daycares. The parent-controlled boards of directors of more than half of the province's 1,000 *Centres de petite enfance* (government-funded, non-profit daycares) voted to close them for the day to support the anti-Liberal protests. In flagrant violation of their election commitments, the Liberals have announced plans to slash the funding for public daycares, while increasing the amount parents have to pay by \$520 per year per child.

Even the corporate media, which was uniformly hostile to the protests, conceded that the turnout for the "day of disruption" was massive.

Claiming business losses of tens of millions, spokesmen for Quebec's major employer organizations demanded that the Liberal government use the police and courts to prevent a repetition of Thursday's protests. "There are laws that forbid systematic obstruction," declared Paul-Arthur Huot, president of the Manufacturers and Exporters Association of Quebec. "When people block the only road providing access to entire regions, that's not

right."

Gilles Taillon, president of the Conseil du Patronat, the province's most important employer group, urged the Charest government to press ahead with its right-wing agenda. "The government must absolutely hold the line, otherwise we'll maintain our lag in job creation in comparison with other provinces,"

"The police authorities," continued Taillon, "must ensure that all citizens are treated in the same manner and not allow the unions just because they are powerful and have many members to flout the law."

Meanwhile, former Newfoundland premier and federal Liberal cabinet minister Brian Tobin underlined the support of Canada's political and corporate elite for the Charest government's drive to "re-engineer" the state, through privatization, deregulation and the imposition of user fees. Writing in Thursday's *Globe and Mail*, Tobin said, Charest "has rightly come to the conclusion that if Quebec is to live within its means and remain competitive, it must change the way it delivers services...."

"Make no mistake: The labour unrest that has dominated Quebec's public life in recent weeks is the first shot across the bow Canada-wide, as governments and public-sector unions square off over risings deficits and what to do about them."

Charest, for his part, has repeatedly baited the unions and vowed that a half-dozen key government bills—including legislation that hikes daycare fees, outlaws unions in publicly funded home daycares, and reorganizes the management of the health care sector so as to facilitate speed-up and job cuts—will be passed before Christmas. Of especial importance are amendments to the labor code that will give both public and private sector employers a green light to eliminate jobs and slash wages and working conditions through contracting out.

Speaking Thursday, Charest declared, "We cannot continue with a state that costs much more than anywhere else in North America. We cannot continue to tax citizens to the limit and at the same time say, 'We will deliver day care, health care.' We have to do things differently."

Significant as are the changes now being pushed through by the Liberal government, they are meant only as a down payment. Between now and the tabling of the 2004-2005 provincial budget, the Liberals have pledged to develop mechanisms to radically restructure the provincial government and the provision of public, social and municipal services, including education and health care. And the Liberals' anti-worker legislation and assault on public and social services goes hand-in-hand with their plan to reduce taxes by an additional C\$1 billion per year for the next five years, or a total of C\$15 billion.

Quebec's elite is fully in support of the Charest government. Yet the

scale and scope of the opposition has caused sections of the press to urge Charest to use more conciliatory language when speaking of the unions and the union leaders. More so than elsewhere in North America, government and big business have cultivated close ties to the union bureaucracy—developing a network of corporatist and tripartite agencies—the better to police the working class. This has been especially true when the big business, pro-independence Parti Québécois has been in power, but Robert Bourassa's 1985-1994 Liberal government also included the union leaders in pivotal decisions.

Despite the militancy of the rank-and-file, the political perspective animating Thursday's mass actions was that of the union bureaucracy—that the Quebec government should not seek to dispense with these relations and rather should, as did previous governments, involve the unions in the rewriting of the province's labor code and reorganization of public services, so as to ensure the "competitiveness" of Quebec business.

In their public statements Thursday, top union leaders repeatedly criticized the Liberals' attacks from the standpoint that they would foment labor strife and thereby hurt Quebec's economy and scare off investment. The union leaders also sought to emphasize their own role in constraining rank-and-file discontent. QFL president Henri Massé said he was facing mounting pressure to organize a general strike. "Up till now 125 local unions have sent us demands that we mount a general strike before the holidays."

"I haven't seen QFL members," continued Massé, "so outraged since 1972, [when the jailing of union officials resulted in a spontaneous, province-wide general strike] and I'm sure it's the same elsewhere.... The message is clear, the opposition is general. For the moment, this is brief, but we will come back with a program of action in January and February."

Réjean Parent, president of the province's third-largest labor federation, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), also said that he "had to hold my people back today. Some wanted to block the National Assembly next week and stop the government from adopting the legislation, I told them we were in Quebec here, not Georgia. The people are just livid."

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) and the World Socialist Web Site intervened in Thursday's protests, distributing a statement titled "A socialist perspective to defeat Charest government's plans for social demolition." It read in part: "The Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) welcome the growing popular opposition to the Liberal government, but we make this warning: the Charest government's class war program will not be defeated through a series of demonstrations and protests, however vocal and militant, under the leadership of the Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL/FTQ), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU/CSN) and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (Quebec Union Federation).

"The union apparatuses are fully committed to the defence of the existing social and political order, and, as such, have time and again over the past quarter century isolated and sabotaged militant worker struggles in the name of defending 'social peace.' Their response to big business's ever-widening offensive against public and social services and worker rights has been to integrate the unions ever more completely into corporate management, through numerous corporatist and tripartite government-union-management committees and 'labor investment' funds like the QFL's Solidarity Fund.

"This process reached a new height in 1996-97, when the QFL,

CNTU and CSQ all endorsed the former Parti Québécois regime making a 'zero deficit' Quebec's principal priority, thus supporting massive cuts in social spending. Then in the summer of 1999 when Quebec nurses defied the province's anti-labor laws and went on strike for the defence of quality public healthcare, the principal labor federations came to the rescue of the PQ government, refusing—despite an enormous groundswell of popular support—to lift a finger to support the nurses and working instead behind the scenes to coerce the nurses back to work on the government's terms and under the threat of punitive legal sanctions.

"The Claudette Carbonneau's, Henri Massé's and Cie. don't consider the current Charest government as an irreconcilable enemy of working people, but as a negotiating partner. For them the current wave of protests is not the beginning of a political counter-offensive of the working class. Rather it is a means to dissipate the pressure from the rank-and-file for action and a plea to Charest not to dispense with many of the tripartite mechanisms developed over the past quarter century, which have given the union leaders a measure of influence—and not inconsiderable perks—in return for their role in policing the working class.

"Earlier this week CNTU president Carbonneau pleaded with Charest to play what she called the premier's traditional role of social 'arbiter,' while making clear she is vehemently opposed to any challenge to his government's right to rule—that is to impose the dictates of big business. 'Of course, I don't want him [Charest] to renounce legislating. No one has the right to have such aims.' Meanwhile, the QFL published an analysis in which it specifically warned against opposing the Liberal government's agenda wholesale, claiming that to do so would make the public think the unions were engaged in a political power struggle.

"The fundamental character of the attacks launched by the Charest government on all the social gains of the working class calls for a political response of an equally profound character. If workers have suffered defeat after defeat over the past two decades, it is not because of the intrinsic strength of capital, or even less any broad popular support for its reactionary program, but because the struggles of the working class have been animated by the false perspective that the needs of working people can be reconciled with the profit system, with the power of the corporate elite to subordinate all of society to the pursuit of individual profit.

"Quebec workers must turn to a new perspective, that of a conscious struggle for political power in order to put the wealth created by their own collective labor to the service of society as a whole. This requires the building of their own political party in concert with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the United States and internationally, and dedicated to the goal of social equality."



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