

# Quebec unions shelve plans for one-day strike

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Quebec's principal labor federations have shelved plans for a "general strike"—a one-day province-wide walkout—against the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest, despite massive rank-and-file support for such action.

Predictably, the leaders of the Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) and the CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec) are blaming each other for the scuttling of the mass protest. The CNTU said it would have to "rethink everything" ("toute revoir") after the leadership of the QFL, the province's largest union federation, made clear it has no intention of acting on the strike threat. The QFL, for its part, criticized the CNTU and CSQ for explicitly ruling out a strike of more than 24 hours.

In reality, the union bureaucracy is united in seeking to suppress the mass working-class opposition to the Liberals, by diverting it into impotent protests and politically subordinating it to the big business Parti Québécois (PQ). While the union officialdom touts the *indépendantiste* PQ as a "progressive" party, when it held office between 1994 and 2003, the PQ instituted massive social spending cuts and slashed corporate taxes, thereby paving the way for the Liberals' current drive to "re-engineer the state" through privatization, deregulation and tax cuts skewed to benefit the well-to-do.

Like the Charest Liberal government, the union bureaucracy was rattled by the largely spontaneous wave of mass strikes and demonstrations that swept Quebec last December in response to a battery of socially regressive Liberal bills. Among other things, these bills gave employers a green light to contract out work, stripped thousands of workers of the right to unionize, and increased charges for daycare and other public services. Fearing the protest movement was escaping their control, the union leaders seized on the

threat of a general strike in the New Year as a political lifeline. They could posture as leading the struggle against the Liberals, while, relying on the holiday season and the passage of the Liberal legislation to dampen the militancy of the rank-and-file.

From the outset, the QFL, CNTU and CSQ leaders made clear that what they envisaged by a general strike was a protest writ-large, not a political challenge to the Liberal government. Not only did they make the focus of their attack on Charest his repudiation of the "Quebec model" of government-business-union collaboration, but they repeatedly made explicit that the union protests were in no way meant to call into question the Liberals' right to rule. Typical was QFL President Henri Massé's February 2004 statement that he wasn't "calling for the defeat of the government. It is there for four years. It is doing its job. If it adopts damaging policies, we will always criticize it."

The maneuvers of the union leadership notwithstanding, the general strike call did evoke a powerful response among workers. All the unions recorded massive strike votes. Even the corporate media was forced to concede that there was widespread popular support for the opposition movement and not only among trade unionists. Such is the popular opposition to the Liberals, QFL President Massé has voiced his exasperation at how difficult it is to calm his members. "When we speak of some correct government measures," said Massé, "people are still outraged and don't want to listen."

In trying to justify the shelving of the strike threat, the union leaders have claimed that the Liberals have been forced to moderate their policies. Said QFL Secretary-General René Roy, "They [the Liberals] are more ready to discuss than before. They're taking more time and it is in this direction that we want the government to go."

It is indisputable that the Charest government was

shaken by the groundswell of opposition to its right-wing program. But the Liberals have repeatedly said that they intend to press forward with the key elements of their agenda: the privatization of much of the provincial public sector, including parts of the health system; dramatic tax cuts for business and the better off; and a major reduction in state expenditures.

Within days of the unions shelving their plans for a one-day general strike, the Quebec government tabled its wage offer for the almost half-million hospital workers, teachers, civil servants and other public sector workers whose contracts expired in the summer of 2003. The government is proposing an unprecedented six-year contract, with a wage freeze for the first two years and a total average wage increase of just 12.6 percent (including any and all adjustments for gender wage-equity)

While this offer was universally condemned by the union leadership, the various rivals unions and union federations are all determined to separate the public sector workers' struggle over their terms of employment from the struggle to defend public and social services.

The unions' suppression of militant protests and industrial action goes hand in hand with their efforts to tie the working class to the big business PQ. During the just-completed federal election, the unions went all out to muster support for the PQ's sister party in the federal parliament, the Bloc Québécois. And a series of high level union bureaucrats, recently founded a new group within the PQ—*Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* (Unionists and progressives for an independent Quebec)—with the purpose of refurbishing its tattered “left” credentials.



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