

Tensions rising between Quebec government and public sector workers

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1 October 2005

Contract talks in the Quebec public sector have been seized upon by the provincial Liberal government to step up its assault on wages and working conditions, re-igniting popular anger against its right-wing program and raising fears in the ruling elite of a hot autumn.

Close to 500,000 workers across Quebec—nurses and other hospital employees, public school and CEGEP (junior college) teachers, school support staff, and civil servants—have been without a contract since June 2003. The Liberal government is pushing for a six-year contract with a total wage increase of just 12.6 percent. This includes a wage freeze for the first two years, increases of 2 percent in each of the four following years, a wage equity settlement equivalent to 2 to 3 percent of the overall salary bill and increases of 1 to 2 percent in night shift and other bonuses. The total amount of \$3.2 billion in increases represents a gross increase of \$20 on an average weekly paycheck. (And this does not include the substantial sum the government concedes it will recuperate through the tax system—more than a billion dollars.)

In addition to this major cut in real wages (inflation already exceeds 6 percent since contracts expired in June 2003), the government is targeting working conditions. While teachers have long been calling for a reduced teacher-pupil ratio, the government wants to take this issue out of the province-wide contracts and make it a local issue so as to weaken teachers' bargaining strength position. The end result of such a change would be to increase disparities in the public education network, with richer school boards in a position to provide a better teaching environment while teachers in poorer districts would have to contend with an acute lack of resources.

In the health care sector, following the merger of hospitals with local clinics (CLSCs) and long-term recovery centers, workers are already being moved from one department or workplace to another with little regard

for their qualifications or preferences. This merger of health centers covering widely different needs has significantly disrupted patient care. It was ordered by the government before contract talks had even started, with the aim of removing all constraints on the assignment of personnel and pushing forward with privatization and the casualization of the workforce. As it stands, some 50 percent of all jobs in the health care sector are part-time or non-permanent.

The government's hard-line approach—refusing to budge on its wage offer while legislating to worsen working conditions—is part of a concerted drive to re-engineer—that is, to scale back—the state. The post-World War II welfare state is to be transformed into a globally competitive state.

Dedicated to the interests of the ruling elite, the Liberal government of Jean Charest is seeking to create conditions for a faster accumulation of profits through outsourcing or privatizing whole swaths of public services, relaxing environmental and worker health and safety standards, and using welfare recipients as a source of cheap labor.

This is the essential content of the policy pursued not only by the current Quebec Liberal government, but also by its Parti Québécois predecessor. In the name of reducing the province's annual budget deficit to zero, the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry carried out massive social spending cuts. While the pro-*indépendantiste* PQ claims to be the arch-enemy of the federalist political elite, its assault on social and public services between 1994 and 2000 mirrored that of the federal Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin.

The Charest government's assault on the welfare state goes hand in hand with its drive to implement tax cuts that will benefit the wealthy and deprive the government of the resources required to maintain, let alone widen,

urgently needed social programs and public services. A central element of Charest's 2003 election platform—whose implementation was slowed down in the face of popular opposition—is to cut taxes by an additional 1 billion per year for five years, for a total tax cut of \$15 billion.

The government's attempt to portray public sector workers as privileged because a dwindling number of them have a certain measure of job security has failed. According to an opinion survey carried out last month, a majority of Quebecers (6 out of 10) support the public sector workers' contract demands.

The government's reaction has been to try to pit one section of public sector workers against another, ordering its negotiators to apply more pressure on the teachers' and civil servants' unions (most of which already accepted the government wage offer) to come to a separate agreement on working conditions.

The other major unions, those affiliated with the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) and the Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL), have formed a common front. The Common Front, which represents the majority of public sector workers, initially turned down the government's wage offer, demanding instead a 12 percent wage increase over three years. It has since followed the other unions in capitulating before the government, announcing its readiness to accept a 5-year contract containing total wage increases of 13.5 percent.

In August and early September, the Common Front mounted some small-scale protests. These included a couple of one-day strikes by support staff at several CEGEPs and most public schools. A third day of action was postponed under the pretext that there had been substantial progress in negotiations over the last few days, a claim that was immediately denied by government spokesmen.

The one thing that all the trade union leaders agree on is the need to prevent any working-class mobilization that could escape their control and call into question the political legitimacy of the Charest Liberal government. We would have rapidly moved toward a general strike 15 or 20 years ago, said QFL President Henri Massé. Today, we give negotiations more chances for a settlement.

Even more than words, it is the actions of the trade unions that demonstrate that they are partners of the government. The union officialdom took an active part in the dismantling of public and social services with its wholesale support for the Bouchard-Landry PQ government's drive for a zero deficit. The union

leadership both proposed and promoted the early retirement program that the PQ government used to slash tens of thousands of jobs in health care and education.

Even if occasionally they pose as opponents of the Charest government, the trade union bureaucracy is determined to derail any genuine opposition movement. In December 2003, after a spontaneous outpouring of working people into the streets to protest against the newly elected Liberal government's policy of social demolition, the trade union leadership hastened to put an end to the movement, promising to restart it after the holiday period—a promise that was quickly broken. Earlier this year, at the height of a province-wide strike of post-secondary students, Massé rushed to the rescue of Charest with his insistence that the student associations will have to make compromises. Fearing that the student strike could become the catalyst for a movement of the working class, beginning with the public sector workers, the union bureaucrats then used their close ties to the government and financial-organization muscle to help it engineer the strike's end. The labor bureaucracy's defense of the existing order is above all exemplified by its decades-long subordination of the working class to the other big-business party in Quebec, the Parti Québécois.

Such, however, is the popular anger building up against the right-wing program of the Charest government that the trade-union bureaucracy is finding it increasingly difficult to contain and deflect rank-and-file opposition. As CNTU official Ginette Guerin recently noted, impatience is growing among our members.

An opposition movement from below would be immediately confronted with the need to organize a rebellion against the union leadership and to adopt a new perspective, diametrically opposed to the pro-capitalist outlook of the unions. Such a perspective would be founded on an understanding of the need to unite the struggles of Quebec workers with those of their class brothers and sisters across Canada and around the world and of the urgency of mounting a political struggle to reorganize society so as to place the social needs of the majority before the profit interests of a few.



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