

Quebec public sector workers launch rotating strikes

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17 November 2005

The Common Front—a coalition of unions representing hospital workers, public school board employees, CEGEP (junior college) personnel, and other provincial public sector workers affiliated with the Confederation National Trade Unions (CNTU) and the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ)—has launched a series of one-day regional walkouts.

The first took place Thursday, November 10, in eastern Quebec. Today tens of thousands of CNTU and QFL members in the Montreal region will walk off the job.

The CNTU and QFL leaderships have sanctioned this limited job action after months of foot-dragging. Their aim is not to prepare for a confrontation with the provincial Liberal government—a right-wing regime that has intensified the drive of the previous Parti Quebecois (PQ) to scale back public and social services and that routinely baits the unions. Rather, the Common Front leaders are seeking to relieve the pressure for action from rank-and-file members who have been without a contract since July 2003 and are angered by the government's demands for significant rollbacks in their wages and working conditions.

The union leadership's overriding concern is to contain this groundswell of anger within the straitjacket of collective bargaining and prevent it from turning into a working-class political challenge to the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest.

Since 1982-1983, when the union-supported PQ government of Rene Levesque reopened the contracts of all government employees by decree to impose wage cuts and change work rules, contract negotiations in Quebec's public sector have become a thoroughly ritualized affair. A privileged labor bureaucracy, which defends the profit system and functions as a key pillar of support for the big business, pro-Quebec independence PQ, makes some noise about resisting the government's concessionary demands, sanctions the occasional limited protest action, and after a long-drawn-out bargaining process that serves only to demoralize the rank-and-file submits to a government-dictated contract.

And if the union leaders prove unable to contain rank-and-file opposition, as was the case with the 1999 nurses' strike, the government resorts to a battery of strike-breaking laws, passed by PQ and Liberal governments alike, which union officials then invoke to justify their own cowardice and prostration before the government.

The same scenario is being played out this year, differing perhaps only in the union bureaucracy's shamelessness in abandoning the interests of the rank-and-file and the intensity of their pleas to the government not to make their job harder by being too brazen in its drive to contract out public-sector jobs, privatize public services, lower wages, and reduce corporate taxes in order to boost profits.

Union negotiators have already conceded a key government demand by accepting that the new contracts will be for the unprecedented length of five and a half years. The CNTU-QFL Common Front, which represents a majority of the province's nearly half-million public sector workers, have also scaled back their wage demands from a 12.5 percent increase over three years to 13.5 percent over five and a half years, not counting a long-promised adjustment in pay scales to reflect gender equity.

The government, meanwhile, has not budged on its initial offer of a combined 12.6 percent increase over six years including the wage-equity settlement. This would amount to a significant cut in real wages, since Quebec's annual inflation rate is over 3 percent.

Government negotiators are also seeking separate deals on working conditions with smaller unions in a clear bid to divide public-sector workers so as to undermine provisions governing job security and work rules.

An agreement is reportedly in the making with the nurses' union, FIIQ, and another has been signed with the civil service union, the *Syndicat de la fonction publique du Quebec* (SFPQ). While details are sketchy, the SFPQ leadership is known to have abandoned its demand for increased restrictions on contracting out and has reportedly agreed instead to a system of union-management committees in which the union will be able to make the case that its members can provide an operation the government wants to contract out more cheaply. In other words, the government will be able to use private-sector competition to press for increased worker output. SFPQ President Michel Sawyer has hailed this process in which the union apparatus will take on the function of a labor contractor, declaring that in "the vast majority of cases, contracting out costs the government more than when the work is done by its own employees."

The government's hard-line stand is not a sign of strength. Opinion polls show that only a quarter of the population support the Charest government. At the same time, there is increasing dissatisfaction within ruling class circles over the government's failure to press forward with tax cuts for business and the well-to-do, consumer electricity rate increases, the ending of a freeze on university tuitions and other socially regressive measure. Last month, former PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard and several other prominent public figures in Quebec, both *indépendantistes* and federalists, joined forces to decry the popular resistance to such changes and the strength of anti-big-business sentiment.

But the Charest government is counting on the union bureaucracy to ensure (to use a phrase much used by the union officialdom in Quebec) "social peace," just as it did in December 2003, when mass protests and strikes erupted against a series of regressive Liberal bills.

Under conditions in which they themselves were warning that the protests were escaping their control, the union leaders made noises about organizing a one-day general strike some time in the future, used the impending holidays to shut the protests down, then moved to further tighten their ties to the PQ, through the creation of a new “left” faction within the PQ, the *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre*.

Similarly, last spring, when a weeks-long university and college (CEGEP) strike threatened to become a catalyst for wide protests, the unions worked with the government to shut it down.

It is precisely because they are conscious of the weakness and unpopularity of the Charest government that the union bureaucracy is so intent on avoiding any serious worker mobilization, for fear it could spur a wider social movement.

A previously scheduled one-day strike last September was cancelled at the last minute by the Common Front under the pretext that there were “signs of goodwill” coming from the government side.

Perhaps the most open admission of the labor bureaucracy’s impotence came from CNTU President Claudette Carboneau. The government “seems to favor confrontation over a negotiated settlement”, Carboneau lamented in her opening address to a gathering of the union’s leading body last month. “The QFL-CNTU Common Front, on the other hand, leaves ample room for negotiations.” She then warned that “legal pressure tactics” would “get harsher” if the government continues to refuse to negotiate. “It is in this spirit that we are seeking four-day rotating strike mandates to be used in mid-November if negotiations remain bogged down.”

To the all-out assault on social programs, wages and working conditions being spearheaded by the Charest government at the behest of big business, the CNTU president can oppose nothing more than pleas that the government become more reasonable and use, rather than bypass, the union bureaucracy’s services in imposing a concession-laden contract on public-sector workers.

What is at stake is not merely the working conditions of public sector workers, but the continued existence of universal social programs such as public health care. The Charest government, following in the footsteps of the previous Parti Quebecois government, has been promoting the increased use of private clinics for diagnostic tests and the privatization of so-called peripheral hospital services such as food, cleaning and maintenance.

This agenda of turning health care into a profit-making operation has been given legal sanction and a tremendous boost by last June’s Supreme Court of Canada ruling that the Quebec government’s prohibition on private health care insurance, given the long waiting lists in the public system for basic health services, constitutes a violation of basic human rights under Quebec’s Charter of Rights and must be overturned by June 2006.

Government officials have since served notice that they agree with the Court’s ruling and will in the coming months establish the legislative framework for full-blown private health care in the province, which will have far-reaching consequences for Canada as a whole.

After decades of governments at all levels starving public health care of needed financial resources, the resulting deterioration in the form of long waits for essential medical procedures is being used to justify opening the system up to private interests that will offer the latest technology and the best-trained personnel to those having the money to pay while the rest of the population will have to content themselves with a crumbling public system.

In her address, Carboneau washed her hands of this vital issue, saying, “The right to life has been endangered by our governments. It is up to them to react to guarantee this right under the Canadian and Quebec Charter of Rights.” Her only advice was that the Quebec government should “demand from Ottawa the money that is due to Quebec for health care,” as if the mere transfer of control over the health care budget from one level of government to another would change anything under conditions when both are committed to the same agenda of tax and social spending cuts that has paved the way for privatization.

In a clear demonstration of the union bureaucracy’s political subordination of the working class to the PQ, the other party of Quebec’s ruling elite, Carboneau went on to say that it is “high time for the Parti Quebecois MPs to remember that they are the official opposition.” Not once, it should be noted, did Carboneau even mention the courageous strike carried out last month by British Colombia teachers in defiance of back-to-work legislation introduced by the provincial Liberal government, a government like Charest’s that is spearheading the drive to cut taxes and privatize public services.

Appealing to the PQ while ignoring a significant struggle by public-sector workers in English Canada are the two sides of the union bureaucracy’s nationalist orientation and decades-long attempt to divide workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of North America and tie them instead to a section of the Quebec ruling class.

A counter-offensive by Quebec’s public-sector workers for the defense of working conditions, quality public education, and an expanded public health care system that does not fall prey to the profit motive is only possible to the extent that workers break free of the bureaucratic apparatus that is paralyzing their struggles. They must build alternative fighting organizations ready to make a bold appeal to other sections of working people in Quebec, Canada, and internationally.

This is not simply a matter of an organizational break. The labor bureaucracy’s treacherous policies are rooted in their defense of the existing profit system. A revival of the best traditions of working class solidarity and militancy requires as a critical component a revival of its socialist traditions, the conscious struggle to rebuild society on higher foundations based on social need rather than individual profit. The central issue facing Quebec’s public-sector workers and working people as a whole is the building of their own independent political party, dedicated to the struggle for a workers’ government and social equality.



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