

Quebec government adopts draconian law against half-million public sector workers

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An extraordinary session of the Quebec National Assembly, on Thursday, December 15, rammed through a Liberal government law that decrees the wages and working conditions of 500,000 hospital workers, teachers, civil servants, school support staff and other provincial public-sector employees until March 2010.

Bill 142 imposes a 33-month wage freeze (retroactive to June 30, 2003) and annual wage increases of 2 percent in the last four years of an almost seven-year contract. Whereas the inflation rate in Quebec has averaged 2 percent per year for the last five years, Quebec's public sector workers are to receive wage increases equal to just 1.2 percent per year from 2003 to 2010.

Bill 142 also brings an abrupt end to a reassessment of wage scales that was supposed to end gender discrimination in pay by raising the wages of workers in mostly female job classifications. The provincial Liberal government has allotted just C\$450 million to eliminating gender discrimination, a fraction of the amount required for genuine wage equity as mandated by a 1996 law and reiterated by a 2004 ruling of Quebec's highest court.

To give a pretence of legality to this *coup de force*, Quebec Premier Jean Charest cited agreements on working conditions the government concluded at the last minute with several public-sector unions under the threat of a legislated contract. In the name of labour "flexibility," the government included in Bill 142 a series of measures that undermine job security and increase the workload of public-sector employees.

For example, the bill stipulates that a civil servant "who is available can be...temporarily" transferred to a public-sector job "outside the civil service." It also eliminates a number of minimum employment thresholds in the education sector, reduces the portion of union leaves (*liberation syndicales*) paid for by the government, and forces a speedier return to work for those who have been on disability.

However, the most significant provisions of Bill 142 are a series of clauses that toughen and extend to the whole of Quebec's public sector anti-strike sanctions contained in a law that Robert Bourassa's Liberal government adopted in 1986 to suppress strikes in the health care sector. From now until March 31, 2010, any public-sector worker involved in a work stoppage faces the loss of two day's pay for every day off the job and fines of up to C\$500. Union officials face fines ranging from C\$7,000 to C\$35,000 per day and union bodies from C\$25,000 to C\$125,000.

These draconian sanctions are an indication of the intensity of the class conflict at the base of society. Since their election in

April 2003, the Liberals have revised the provincial labour code to facilitate contracting-out, promoted public-private partnerships in the management and running of public services, and cut the budgets of virtually all ministries. By lowering the axe on social spending and slashing the taxes on corporations and the rich, the Liberals are realigning social policy to unabashedly serve the private, egoistic needs of big business.

The Charest government is keenly aware of the frustration and anger among public-sector workers, who for more than two decades have faced cuts in wages and working conditions at the hands of both Parti Québécois and Liberal governments, and clearly recognizes that a strike movement among public-sector workers could galvanize popular opposition to the dismantling of social and public services.

The anti-strike provisions of Bill 142, thus, have a preventive character.

The government fears that the union bureaucracy cannot indefinitely contain the mounting anger of public-sector workers with bombast and impotent protests. The Liberals are also eager to answer criticism from right-wing newspaper editorialists that the Charest government has failed to deliver on its pledges to massively scale back public and social services. By imposing a concessions-filled contract on public-sector workers and robbing them of their union rights, Charest is sending a message to big business that he has gotten the message: his government stands ready to use the full power of the state in pressing forward with the "re-engineering of the state."

The stakes are all the more vital given that, in response to a recent ruling by Canada's Supreme Court, the Quebec government is preparing to dramatically increase the role of private, for-profit companies in the provision of health care. This retrograde step will inevitably deepen class tensions and will be met with wide and intense opposition from working people, especially health care workers. One of the obvious aims of Bill 142 is to criminalize any form of working-class resistance to the dismantling of the current universal, public health system.

Much of Quebec's business elite fervently applauded Bill 142. The Federation of Chambers of Commerce of Quebec (FCCQ), one of the province's two main business lobby groups, issued a press release welcoming "the decision of the Quebec government to issue a special bill to set working conditions for state employees. It is the FCCQ's opinion that the government clearly indicates by this measure that it intends to stay the course of a

healthy management of public finances.”

By contrast, several newspaper editorialists and columnists criticized the government for acting precipitously. Their concerns express ruling class fears that the Liberals could spark a social explosion. Twice in the past two years, Quebec has been rocked by major social protests: first in December 2003, when spontaneous walkouts erupted across Quebec in response to a battery of right-wing Liberal bills, and then last winter and spring, when the province’s universities and colleges (CEGEPs) were hit by a month-and-a-half-long student strike.

One of the most vocal critics of Bill 142 was the official opposition Parti Québécois (PQ), Quebec’s other main big-business party. During debate on the bill, the PQ leader in the National Assembly, Louise Harel, observed that since coming to power, “the premier and his government have proved unable to manage Quebec and solve problems without triggering a social crisis.” Signalling that her party does not oppose in principle emergency anti-union laws, Harel argued that there was no need at this juncture legislation like Bill 142. Said Harel, “We are not confronted with an illegal strike and back-to-work legislation.” She went on to argue that the union bureaucracy had been successful in suppressing the rank-and-file, noting that the one- and two-day regional walkouts the unions had sanctioned had given rise to “no complaint for infringement of essential services.”

Harel’s comments demonstrate that the differences between the Liberals and the PQ over Bill 142 are purely tactical. The former want to prove to big business and the most privileged middle class layers that they are ready to “take on” Quebec’s trade unions so as to impose their right-wing program. The latter advocate using the union bureaucracy to impose the agenda of the ruling class—a strategy that the bourgeoisie has used to great effect in Quebec and has been institutionalized over the past three decades in a series of tripartite government, business and union bodies.

Replying to Harel, Premier Charest pointed to the different relations that the Liberals and the PQ enjoy with the union bureaucracy. But in so doing, he highlighted the fundamental convergence between Quebec’s two main parties in attacking public and social services and the jobs and working conditions of those who administer them.

Charest quoted from an interview that former PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard recently gave to Quebec’s leading business magazine, *Les Affaires*. In the interview, Bouchard acknowledged that in 1996 he went to New York City to meet credit-rating agencies and inform them that he was determined to cut the wages of all Quebec public-sector workers by 6 percent as part of his government’s drive to eliminate the annual provincial budget deficit. Charest then added, Bouchard “came back, met with union leaders and negotiated instead a different agreement which made it possible for the government to steal from the surpluses in the workers’ pension funds and make a series of decisions which led to cuts in services to the population of Quebec”—a reference to the early retirements of tens of thousands of public sector employees, retirements that left hospitals, schools and other vital institutions chronically short-staffed.

The truth is that the Parti Québécois, no less than the Liberals, stands ready to mobilize the repressive apparatus of the state

against the working class, as is attested to by the wage-cutting decrees that the PQ government of René Lévesque imposed in 1982-1983 and the savage anti-union laws the Bouchard PQ government used to break a militant nurses’ strike in 1999.

In accordance with the bourgeoisie’s swing ever further right, the PQ is itself in the process of re-examining its relations with the union bureaucracy. While Harel criticized Bill 142 in the National Assembly, the PQ agreed to the waiving of normal parliamentary rules so as to allow the government to transform the bill into law in a single day. Even more significantly, the PQ’s new leader, André Boisclair, refrained from criticizing the Liberals, then six days after Bill 142 was adopted, announced that his party would not rescind it or reopen negotiations with the public-sector unions if the PQ is returned to power at the next provincial election.

Boisclair’s announcement was a calculated snub of the union leaders, who, in keeping with their three-decades-old policy of politically chaining the working class to the PQ, had proclaimed that workers should answer Bill 142 by defeating the Liberals at the next provincial election in 2007 or 2008 and by electing a party that would be ready to restore the “right to negotiate”—i.e., the PQ.

The union bureaucracy’s cowardice and readiness to preside over the destruction of workers’ basic rights is truly without limits. After having politically disarmed public-sector workers during the past year of negotiations by promoting illusions that a confrontation with the Liberals could be avoided and a negotiated settlement reached, the union leaders now seek to justify their abject surrender before Bill 142 by arguing that “the working class is rather pragmatic” and “will not launch into battles it is likely to lose.”

These words of Claudette Carbonneau, president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), do nothing but expose the gulf that separates the bureaucracy from ordinary workers, who have repeatedly shown their readiness to do battle with the Charest Liberal government. Even the corporate media had to admit that the majority of the public sided with the public-sector workers against the Charest government and were supportive of their demands for greater funding for public services.

Bill 142 marks a new stage in the Canadian bourgeoisie’s assault on public services and workers’ rights. A counter-offensive of public-sector workers would undoubtedly strike a powerful chord in the population. But the success of such a struggle depends on a comprehensive political break with the trade-union bureaucracy, with its defense of the profit system and political subordination of the working class to the Parti Québécois. Workers must adopt a new political perspective: a socialist strategy that articulates the common class interests of all workers—French and English-speaking and immigrant—across Canada and internationally in the fight to reorganize economic life so that social needs, not the profits of big business, are the animating principle.



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