

Montreal transit mechanics' union capitulates before threat of strikebreaking law

Our reporters
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The union representing Montreal's 2,200 striking bus and subway mechanics and maintenance workers concluded a tentative contract agreement with the public transit commission Friday, just hours before a 48-hour deadline set by the provincial Liberal government to end the four-day-old strike via negotiations was to expire.

The government's threat to intervene if the dispute was not resolved by 2 p.m. Friday was universally interpreted as meaning that it was readying strikebreaking legislation to end the dispute, even though the union had scrupulously adhered to an order from the Essential Services Council that reduced the strike to little more than a token protest.

In December 2005, the Liberal government of Jean Charest used an emergency law to impose a concessions-laden, seven-year contract on half a million provincial public sector workers. This law provides draconian penalties should workers walk off the job.

Friday's tentative settlement was first announced not by the union or by the management of the Société de Transport de Montréal (STM) [the Montreal Transport Corporation], but by provincial Labour Minister David Whissell. This turn of events underlines the role that the government played in bullying the union into accepting management's demands for a contract that will cut the mechanics' and maintenance workers' real wages.

Although neither the union nor the STM would immediately divulge details of the agreement, there can be no doubt that the union abandoned the workers' demands and capitulated before the witch hunt that the political establishment and corporate media have mounted against the strike.

The union, which is an affiliate of the Confederation

of National Trade Unions, hastened to call for a membership meeting Friday afternoon so as to press the mechanics and maintenance workers to immediately return to work.

Under an order of the Essential Services Council, a body created by a Parti Québécois (PQ) government in 1982 so as to render public sector strikes impotent, the striking transit workers have been required to provide full bus and subway service at peak hours and at the end of the evening during both the week and on weekends.

Despite these severe restrictions, the politicians and press have accused the strikers of holding the "public" hostage and have depicted them as overpaid fat cats who are indifferent to the inconvenience the strike represents for the low-paid workers, pensioners, unemployed and students who constitute the bulk of Montreal transit-users.

In fact, the transit workers have been resisting a big business offensive that is aimed at slashing the wages and working condition of workers as a whole. The STM has insisted on a wage freeze for 2007 and wage increases of just 2 percent per year for the following four years, which would mean a cut in real wages even if inflation remains around the current 2 percent level. The STM has also refused to revisit a concession extracted from the workers in an earlier negotiation that stipulates that workers retiring after 2020 will only be able to receive full pensions if they have worked 35 years, not the current 30.

The campaign against the strikers was spearheaded by Mario Dumont, whose right-wing populist Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) was catapulted from marginal status into the official opposition in the March 26 provincial election. Within hours of the transit workers launching their strike, Dumont was demanding

that the Liberals legislate them back to work.

The Liberals, who were reduced to a minority government by the recent election, lost little time in following Dumont's cue. Labour Minister Whissell issued his ultimatum the next day.

The government's hard line against the strike is in keeping with the sharp swing to the right it has effected in recent months in an effort to win back the favor of big business, which has promoted the ADQ as a means of pushing politics far to the right.

On Thursday, the Liberals introduced a provincial budget that included more than a \$1 billion in corporate and personal income tax cuts, the latter heavily skewed to favor the most well-off sections of society, and announced the creation of a commission on healthcare that is meant to pave the way for the privatization of medical services and the imposition of user fees.

For the union leadership, which is a close political ally of the big business PQ, there was never any question of linking the transit workers' struggle to a broader working class offensive in defence of public and social services and workers' wages, jobs and working conditions.

Yet the repeated social movements in Quebec in recent years—the mass demonstrations in 2003 against the Iraq war, the wave of anti-Charest protests and walkouts in late 2003, and the 2005 post-secondary student strike—have shown there is an enormous well of opposition to the program being pursued by the Quebec and Canadian corporate elite and political establishment.

As for the furor the press and politicians tried to whip up against the transit strikers, there is much evidence to show that this had little if any impact on working people. The media had to concede that a protest against the strike organized in the name of transit users failed to attract even a handful of people.

The reality is that essential services—healthcare, education and social programs—in Quebec, as across Canada, have been ravaged by years of budget-cutting carried out by PQ, Liberal, Conservative and NDP governments.

In the case of Montreal transit, the portion of the system financed through provincial and municipal government grants as opposed to transit fares has shrunk from 44.5 percent to 41.2 percent since 2000.



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