Quebec public sector workers protest government concessions drive

A WSWS reporting team
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More than 75,000 Quebec public sector workers and their supporters marched through downtown Montreal last Saturday to protest against the provincial Liberal government's concession demands.

Coming from all parts of Quebec, including such outlying regions as the Gaspé Peninsula and the Lac St. Jean region, the demonstrators included hospital workers, nurses and other health care workers, civil servants, and elementary, high school and CEGEP (junior college) teachers and support staff.

In 2005, Jean Charest's Liberal government used legislation to strip the province's half million public sector workers of their rights to bargain collectively and strike and imposed a six-and-a-half year contract that included a three-year wage freeze.

In the current negotiations, which are to replace the contracts imposed by government fiat in 2005, the Liberals are out to impose a five-year-contract, further cuts in real wages, and regressive work-rule changes. These include raising class-size maximums and forcing high-seniority nurses to work night shifts.

In recent days, the government has signaled that it is preparing to again use legislation to impose a "settlement." Speaking Friday, on the eve of the inter-union or Common Front demonstration, Treasury Board President Monique Gagnon-Tremblay said she is prepared to let the negotiations continue a few days after the expiry of the current contracts on March 31, but will not allow the talks "to go on endlessly." "That's why for me," said Tremblay, "it's now a negotiating blitz."

Saturday's boisterous demonstration was testimony to growing anger in the working class over declining living standards and deteriorating public and social services. But for the union leaders the demonstration was a ploy—a maneuver aimed at dissipating rank-and-file pressure, not a means of preparing a working class counter-offensive against the Liberal government and the ruling class, which has been agitating for Charest to use the resurgent provincial deficit and aging of the population as the pretext for expanding private health care, hiking university tuitions, electricity rates, and daycare and other user fees, and otherwise slashing state services.

The short speeches made at the demonstration by Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) head Claudette Carbonneau, Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) President Michel Arsenault, and Dominique Verreault of the Sécretariat intersyndical des services publics (SISP) were vapid and parochial. The union leaders appealed to the right-wing Charest government to bargain in good faith. They made no mention of the assault being mounted on public services and public sector works by the federal Conservative government and provincial governments across Canada, let alone the struggles that have erupted in Greece and elsewhere as workers resist the attempts of big business to make them pay for the capitalist crisis.

In an interview published in Saturday's *La presse*, Premier Charest made clear that he understand and appreciates that the unions are mounting a mock struggle. "We are generally satisfied with the approach adopted by the union leaders," said Charest. "They're making their protests. … I won't say it's theatre, they're making their representations to have their piece of the cake."

Although the government has repeatedly signaled its readiness to impose concessions contracts through

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legislation, the unions are not even talking about launching a strike prior to September. And the union leaders have said nothing as to what workers should do if the government once again legislates public sector workers' contracts, a sure sign that they will claim that their hands are tied and that nothing can be done except to await the next election and replace the Liberals with their big business rivals, the Parti Québécois or PQ

Since the union-supported PQ of René Lévesque imposed massive contract concessions on public sector workers in 1982-83, the unions have repeatedly bowed before strike-breaking legislation and contracts imposed by government decree. And in 1996, they gave their full support to the PQ government's campaign to eliminate the annual provincial budget deficit, joining hands with government to impose massive social sending cuts and authoring an early retirement scheme that facilitated the elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs.

In the current negotiations, the PQ not surprisingly has solidarized itself with the Charest government. In January, PQ leader Pauline Marois termed the unions' wage demands "excessive."

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) intervened in Saturday's demonstration distributing a statement that explained the need for public sector workers to make their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class in defence of public services, jobs, and worker rights.

It read in part: "In order to carry out this struggle, workers must first and above all break with the privileged bureaucracy which controls the trade unions. A long international historical experience has shown that the trade union form of organization is incapable of defending social conquests won in past struggles, let alone of winning new ones. Since the end of the 1970s, the trade unions have responded to the turn by the ruling elite from a policy of relative social compromise towards one of open class warfare, by themselves openly imposing capitalism's austerity measures. In so doing, they have integrated themselves thoroughly into government and management institutions through trip artite committees, the Solidarity Fund and other union-controlled investment funds, etc.

"To oppose these hardened bureaucrats and defenders of capitalism, workers must revive their militant traditions of class struggle. Above all they must turn towards a new political perspective: the fight for a workers' government which will utilize the vast available social resources to satisfy the needs of all, and not the profit needs of the privileged minority."

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