

Quebec public sector workers confront a political struggle

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
24 March 2010

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) distributed the following statement at a 75,000-strong demonstration of Quebec hospital workers, nurses, health care technicians, teachers, school support staff, and civil servants held in Montreal March 20. For a report on the demonstration see: Quebec public sector workers protest government concessions drive.

On March 31 the contracts of Quebec's 500,000 provincial public sector workers expire. The provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest is standing fast to its "offer" of a 7 percent pay increase spread over the next five years, which, if inflation continues at the current rate of 2 percent per year, will mean a significant further decrease in workers' real wages. The government has signalled that if the unions do not agree to this and other concessions in the coming days, it will impose new contracts by decree, as it did in 2005, when it passed a special law to impose six-year contracts that included a three-year wage freeze.

The worsening working conditions for public sector workers are directly tied to the marked deterioration of public services. Years of budget cuts, by both Liberal and Parti Québécois

(PQ) governments, have devastated the health, education and social service systems.

There are daily reports of a dysfunctional health system: overcrowded and overflowing emergency rooms, the closure of intensive care beds due to personnel shortages, and patients who are dying because they are not operated upon in time. In the schools, there is a lack of dictionaries and reference books; even pencils are sometimes in short supply. Nurses are forced to work overtime to make up for the lack of personnel, and teachers must contend with increases in the number of pupils per class.

Even as it cuts funds to public services, the government is making the public foot more of the bill. Electricity rates have increased by 20 percent since 2004, and the Charest government is currently considering a new rate hike which will cost the average family up to \$265 per year. The price of a monthly pass for Montreal's public transit system has increased by 50 percent in the last ten years. University tuition fees are to increase dramatically, from \$1668 (per year) in 2007 to \$2168 in 2012.

By starving public services of funding, Liberal and PQ governments alike have paved the way for privatization—for making health care and education a source of profit for big business, not a basic right guaranteed to all. This process is already well underway.

The number of private schools in Quebec has risen by a dozen each year. Their total budget has increased from \$376 million in 2005 to \$452 million today.

There are now over 140 private placement agencies in the health system. In 2007-8, hospitals and other public agencies paid these private, for-profit enterprises close to \$325 million.

Since the Charest Liberal government adopted Bill 33 (in Dec. 2006), outsourcing in the health care system has grown by leaps and bounds. Large public hospitals now pay private clinics to perform high-tech diagnostic tests and surgeries and other medical procedures.

Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) worth well over a billion dollars are being considered for the construction and maintenance of the two large university hospitals in Montreal (CHUM—the Centre Hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal and the McGill University-affiliated CUSM).

The combined assault by the ruling elite on public sector workers and on social programs is part of a campaign—not just in Quebec, but across Canada and internationally—to place the burden of the world economic crisis of capitalism on the backs of the working class. One of the first objectives of this campaign is to complete the three-decades-old dismantling of the welfare state.

Millions of workers in Quebec and across Canada face the same conditions as public sector workers: falling real wages, deteriorating working conditions, shriveling public services. The conditions have thus been created to make the fight of public sector workers the spearhead of a vast counteroffensive by the entire working class.

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 to 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 tripartite committees, the Solidarity Fund and other union-controlled investment funds, etc.

To oppose these hardened 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 drive of a privileged minority.

In order to justify the large concessions being demanded of public sector workers, the Charest government has raised the specter of the provincial deficit, which reached \$4.7 billion in the 2009-2010 fiscal year. Almost \$2.5 billion of this deficit—over half the total—comes from tax cuts which benefited businesses and wealthy individuals. By eliminating the capital gains tax and by granting businesses a “tax holiday” previously reserved for those enterprises that invested in productive capacity, the Quebec government effectively gave up almost \$2 billion in revenue.

As for the successive income tax cuts made by Quebec governments over the past decade, they have disproportionately favored the wealthiest individuals. Today the maximum taxation rate is 21 percent as opposed to 30 percent in the late 1990s.

Since the eruption of the international economic crisis in 2008, governments around the world have channeled trillions in public funds to the financial aristocracy—to the bankers and investors whose speculative and criminal practices brought the world financial system to the point of collapse.

On behalf of the same predatory financial interests, governments the world over are now demanding that the working class pay for the crisis, including making good the astronomical sums given the banks and financiers. The situation in Greece provides a perfect example: the big banks and investment houses have demanded draconian austerity measures as the condition for providing the loans needed to keep Greece from sliding into state bankruptcy, and the Greek government has responded by announcing a freeze on pensions, an increase in retirement age, a 10 percent reduction in public sector wages, and an increase in regressive taxes on gas, alcohol and cigarettes.

These are the kinds of measures that the Quebec ruling class has been loudly demanding for years. Right-wing economists and retired PQ and Liberal politicians like Lucien Bouchard and Claude Castonguay have competed with each other in publishing manifestos and reports demanding the destruction of the welfare state and the slashing of taxes on business profits and the incomes of the rich.

The pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy plays its part in the assault on the working class. Its role is to stifle workers' struggles, the most recent example being the torpedoing of the powerful movement of popular opposition to Charest's government that erupted in November-December 2003.

The trade union organizations did not lift a finger in 2005 when the Liberals passed a special law imposing a three-year wage freeze and six-year contract on the half million public sector workers. And today they are preparing once again to capitulate before the Quebec government's ultimatums.

Even as the government signals its intention to impose its concessionary demands through a new special law in the coming weeks, the unions have announced that they have no plans for any significant job action for six months or more. The unions are contemplating “work slowdowns, pressure tactics such as the slow grading of pupils' assignments and work-to-rule campaigns or measures of this sort,” said Louis Roy, first vice-president of the

Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN). “Were there to be a strike of the Common Front [of public sector unions], it would not be before the end of September,” he continued, evoking “legal stumbling blocks” such as the “mediation waiting period” and the provision of “essential services in the hospitals.” These are classic arguments by the trade union bureaucracy to justify its cowardice before the government and big business.

The treacherous role of the labor bureaucracy finds its consummate expression in its political alliance with the big business Parti Québécois. In 1996, in support of the PQ government's “zero (budget) deficit” campaign, the unions proposed and implemented an early retirement scheme that allowed the government to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs in the health care and education sectors. The current head of the PQ, Pauline Marois, has allied herself with the Liberal government of Charest against the public sector unions, calling their demand for an 11.25 percent wage increase over three years “excessive.”

In order to defend their working conditions and quality public services, workers in the public sector must turn to a new political perspective: a common struggle with their class brothers and sisters across Canada against the failed capitalist system.

The vast economic resources must be used to satisfy crying social needs, not to enrich the wealthy minority. The first step must be to build committees of struggle, completely independent of the trade union bureaucracy, so as to mobilize public sector workers as well as the entire working class in industrial and independent political action.

We invite all those who agree with this perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Party.

SEP (Canada), 20 March 2010



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact