

Journal de Montréal workers reject union surrender

Laurent Lafrance
21 October 2010

Locked out for the past 21 months, editorial and office staff at the *Journal de Montréal* voted by 89.3 percent last week to reject a proposed “settlement” that called for the elimination of four of every five jobs and numerous other draconian concessions.

The settlement, which was negotiated under the auspices of a provincial mediator during five weeks of closed door talks, was tacitly supported by the *Conseil des Syndicats Nationaux* (Confederation of National Trade Unions—CNTU). It was the CNTU that pressed Quebec’s Liberal government to appoint a mediator, claiming that provincial intervention was the key to resolving the bitter dispute, and when Quebecor’s billionaire boss Pierre-Karl Péladeau indicated his willingness to resume negotiations, CNTU President Claudette Charbonneau was quick to proclaim confidence that an agreement would be reached.

The local CNTU affiliate, the *Syndicat des travailleurs à l’information du Journal de Montréal* (STIJM), failed to oppose the surrender of their members’ jobs, wages, and rights, presenting the settlement to the membership without recommendation.

In the face of this betrayal, the *Journal de Montréal* workers, who have been on the picket lines since January 24, 2009, courageously voted to continue their struggle against Quebecor, one of Canada’s largest media and telecommunications companies.

The rejection vote underscores the workers’ willingness to fight for their rights and needs. But if their struggle is not to be defeated, the *Journal de Montréal* workers must seize control of it from the CNTU and make it the spearhead of a working-class political and industrial offensive against the drive of big business to make workers pay for the capitalist crisis through job and wage cuts and the dismantling of social services.

The proposed settlement can only be described as a provocation.

It called for the unionized workforce to be cut from 253 to 52. Just 17 of 65 journalist positions were to be retained and all copy-editor jobs were to be eliminated.

Quebecor was to have complete power to pick and choose which workers would continue to be in its employ and which would lose their jobs.

Wages were to be cut savagely, by increasing the length of the workweek by 25 percent without any additional pay, and benefits slashed by 20 percent.

Quebecor would also have gained the right to use all articles and photographs produced by the *Journal* workers in any of its other

print and web publications without the workers receiving any additional compensation.

The proposed settlement included clauses forcing the immediate shutdown of RueFrontenac.com, a web publication launched by the locked-out workers. And as a condition for their receiving severance pay, the 200 workers losing their jobs would have had to sign “non-compete agreements” that would have barred them from working for the *Journal*’s principal competitors or from participating in the launching of any new French-language publications in the Montreal region for at least six months. For high-seniority workers, the non-compete agreements were to have lasted significantly longer.

One worker observed that Quebecor had financed the proposed severance payments (an average of \$100,000 per worker, for a total of about \$20 million) through the lockout: “The millions they put on the table, they need to be considered within the context of how they saved such a sum ... They’re our wages from the first year of the lockout.”

Exploiting the CNTU’s steadfast refusal to lift a finger to mobilize the working class in support of the locked-out *Journal de Montréal* workers, Quebecor greatly increased its concession demands from when it first put the workers on the street more than 600 days ago. Initially the *Journal* management wanted to cut 75 jobs or 30 percent of the workforce. Under the proposed settlement 80 percent of the jobs were to be eliminated. The newspaper, which is one of the most profitable in Canada, began by demanding 233 contract changes. During mediation it sought more than 700.

The CNTU has sought to justify its isolation of the locked-out *Journal de Montréal* workers by claiming that theirs is a local conflict against one particularly bad employer.

In fact, Quebecor’s offensive against the *Journal* workers has relied on the support of the state—the courts, police and government—and the political establishment.

The courts have issued a series of injunctions rendering picketing a token gesture. Early on in the conflict, the courts gave a green light to Quebecor’s scabbing operation, when they ruled that Quebec’s anti-scab law applies only to the *Journal*’s offices. This means the company has carte blanche to employ scabs off site to write articles and perform other functions normally performed by the *Journal* workers.

And the courts imposed savage fines on workers who participated in a brief, non-violent sit-in of the *Journal*’s

offices—penalties Quebecor then used to justify firing nine of the locked-out workers.

Through the *Caisse de dépôt et placement* (which manages Quebec's public pension plans) the government is a major shareholder in the Quebecor Media wing of Péladeau's media and telecommunications empire. The Caisse owns more than 45 percent of Quebecor Media shares. As *La presse* business columnist Michel Girard noted, "For the top management of the *Caisse de dépôt et placement*, the eventual profitability of its \$3.2 billion investment in Quebecor Media is manifestly a thousand times more important than the harsh methods used by Péladeau to get there."

The *Caisse de depot*, it should be emphasized, has been used by Liberal and Parti Québécois governments alike for decades to promote the development of large Québécois-owned corporations. Far from being a rogue company or "bad apple" Quebecor is one of the flagships of Quebec Inc.

The significance of the *Journal* workers' struggle and the potential for, and necessity of, mobilizing the working class in Quebec and across Canada in their support is underscored by the role Péladeau and his Quebecor Media play in Quebec and Canadian politics.

The *Journal de Montréal* and Péladeau have been among the most fervent promoters of *les lucides*—a group of journalists, academics, and former Liberal and PQ politicians led by ex-PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard—that since 2005 have been pressing for Quebec's government to veer sharply to the right by slashing public services, embracing privatization and dramatically hiking electricity rates and university tuition fees.

In its budget of last March, the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest, as several prominent *lucides* boasted, began to implement many of their key demands. But the *Journal* denounced the budget as inadequate.

The *Journal* has also been in the forefront of whipping up prejudice against immigrants and religious minorities, seizing on and distorting a series of minor incidents to claim that "Quebec values" are threatened.

In recent months Péladeau, with behind the scenes support from Stephen Harper's Conservatives, has been seeking a television license to launch a Canadian news network patterned after Fox News. Owned by Rupert Murdoch, Fox News is infamous for spewing out right wing lies and promoting militarism and reaction over US airwaves.

Péladeau's offensive against the *Journal de Montréal* workers is aimed at imposing a media "convergence" model aimed at integrating all of Quebecor's media operations so as to squeeze bigger profits from a vastly reduced workforce. But this drive is intertwined with Péladeau's promotion of a sharp political turn to the right aimed at eliminating what remains of the public and social services associated with the "welfare state" and further reducing taxes on big business and the rich.

Péladeau has frequently complained that the unions have too much power in Quebec. In fact, as the *Journal de Montréal* attests, the unions are opposed to any mobilization of the working class against big business. For the past three decades, they have suppressed the class struggle. Time and again they have imposed

jobs and wage cuts, while integrating themselves ever more closely with management and government through myriad institutionalized tripartite bodies, and becoming significant shareholders in numerous business through union-led mutual funds like the Quebec Federation of Labour's Solidarity Fund and the CNTU's Fondation.

When Péladeau rails against the unions, his real target is the rights won by the working class in the militant struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and the continuing strong popular support for Medicare and other social programs.

The CNTU, for its part, hopes to convince big business that it doesn't need to join Péladeau in calling for the Quebec government to repudiate the cozy corporatist relations it established with the unions in the 1970s. The union bureaucracy can continue to be relied on to police the working class, even if that means meekly submitting before a flagrant state-supported unionbusting campaign.

For 21 months the CNTU has told the *Journal* workers that they must fight alone and submit to the pro-employer edicts of the courts. No appeal, for example, can be made to the unionized workers who print the *Journal* because any job action they might take would be illegal.

In the aftermath of last week's rejection vote, the union has made clear it is ready to accept almost all of Péladeau's terms. Raynald Leblanc, the president of the STIJM, has said, "Were it not for the non-compete clause, I sincerely believe the [defeated] offer would have been accepted." (Leblanc claims that RueFrontenac.com is on the verge of becoming a viable commercial enterprise and could provide jobs to 50 or 60 of the current *Journal* workers.)

Meanwhile, the CNTU is calling for a consumer boycott, an anemic tactic unions have repeatedly turned to when administering last rites for workers' struggles. It is also urging workers to lobby the big business Liberal and PQ politicians to amend the anti-scab law.

The reality is that the existing inadequate law was only adopted in 1977 after a decade of explosive class battles—including the United Aircraft strike—and as part of the new-elected PQ government's ultimately successful attempt (from the standpoint of it and the bourgeoisie as a whole) to promote corporatist collaboration between the unions, management and the state.

The *Journal* workers must reject the pro-capitalist perspective of the unions and turn to the working class. They could and would win mass support if they transformed their struggle into a catalyst for a working class counter-offensive against the assault on workers' jobs, wages and rights.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact