

Quebec union head condemns “social strike” against Charest government

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The president of the Confederation National Trade Unions (CNTU), Quebec's second-largest labor federation, has ruled out any possibility that the unions will organize even limited job action against the Quebec Liberal government of Jean Charest, its austerity agenda and draconian Bill 78.

Following the adoption of Bill 78—legislation that criminalizes the four month-long student strike and places sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue anywhere in Quebec—leaders of CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity) suggested that the struggle needed to be broadened through a “social strike.”

The character of this “social strike,” its duration, leadership, and purpose, were left deliberately vague. However CLASSE, which long argued students could pressure the government into abandoning its tuition fee hikes through a single-issue protest campaign, clearly conceives of the “social strike” as a larger protest, involving unions and community groups in one of more “days of action. By “social strike” it does not mean a general strike aimed at bringing down the Charest government and at developing an independent political movement of the working class in Quebec and across Canada to fight for a workers’ government.

But for the unions any mobilization of the rank and file and anything that smacks of a political strike is anathema.

The unions have been long working to bring an end to the student strike, precisely because of their fear it could become the catalyst for a mass movement of the working class. In early May, the presidents of Quebec three largest union federations joined with Charest and Education Minister Michelle Courchesne in bullying the leaders of CLASSE and the other more moderate student associations into accepting a sellout entente that was subsequently massively repudiated by the students. No sooner was Bill 78 adopted than the unions announced they would obey all its provisions, including those stipulating that they must do all in their power to ensure that teachers and other university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) employees assist the government in breaking the student strike.

The unions are now mounting a concerted effort to divert the student strike and the wider opposition movement that erupted against Bill 78 behind the big business Parti Québécois—as exemplified by the Quebec Federation of Labour’s slogan “After the streets, to the ballot box”—while seeking to stamp out the calls

for a “social strike.”

Earlier this month, *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* (Trade Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec), an unrecognized PQ faction that serves as a mouthpiece for the union bureaucracy, issued an open letter denouncing the “social strike,” claiming it would play into Charest’s hands. (See: Union mouthpiece denounces Quebec student strike)

And it has now come to light that QFL President Michel Arsenault wrote to Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti to demand that unions outside Quebec deny the striking students any support. “The situation in Quebec,” wrote Arsenault, “is very volatile. ... [M]ore radical wings are calling for social strike and we do not believe that this is the strategy to be promoted for the moment. ... [T]he best approach is to facilitate a settlement instead of fueling fires.”

CNTU President Louis Roy, for his part, recently delivered a public harangue against a social strike in response to remarks that CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois made at a June 9 colloquium organized by *Alternatives*, an anti-globalization protest group.

“The event was the stage for attempts at a closer coordination and in this spirit Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois appealed to the CNTU,” writes *Alternatives* in the report on the colloquium published on its website. “The spokesman called for a social strike in September, underlining that the conjuncture is currently favorable and that one might have to wait 20 years to see such a window of opportunity reoccur.”

Roy responded by categorically rejecting the call for a “social strike,” on the pretext that workers would never support it. In making this claim Roy asserted that workers won’t fight both because they are too conservative, living as they do in “comfort and indifference,” and because they are too oppressed to recognize that they are exploited and have been cowed by savage anti-union laws.

“It would be too great a risk at this point,” declared Roy, pointing to a series of repressive laws, including Bill 160, that threaten public sector workers with severe criminal sanctions if they walk off the job.

Clearly grasping for any argument that could be used to justify his vehement opposition to working-class action against the Charest government, Roy said “when it comes to the question of the social strike in Quebec we have no expertise, no one does”; then moments later he implied that although he opposed such

action now it could not be ruled out indefinitely, “Myself I’m not an agreement with Gabriel on the fact that the next window will perhaps be in 15 or 25 years.”

Roy, who made his career in the CNTU officialdom by posing as a “left,” began his attack on the “social strike” by painting the CNTU in “radical” colours. First off he made a reference to a CNTU resolution adopted 40 years ago that “demanded the abolition of capitalism,” then hailed the one day protest strike that the unions in Quebec and across Canada organized in 1976 to protest the Trudeau Liberal government’s imposition of wage controls. Next he jumped to the beginning of the 2000s when he claims “we in the CNTU, decided to return to what we call the strategy of risk.”

Roy’s “historical review” was, to be polite, a fraud.

The 1972 resolution Roy cited was a temporary verbal adaptation to the worker upheaval that rocked Quebec at the time and which was part of an incipient revolutionary offensive of the international working class that included the 1968 French General Strike, the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-75, and the 1974 British miners’ strike that forced the resignation of Ted Heath’s Conservative government.

The CNTU and the other labor federations suppressed the worker rebellion in Quebec, isolating it from the struggles of the working class in the rest of North America, and harnessing it behind Quebec nationalism and the big business Parti Québécois.

The three decades Roy chose to skip over in his potted history of the CNTU were dominated by the systematic efforts of the unions to suppress worker resistance to the big business assault on wages, working conditions, jobs, and public services and by the union apparatuses’ incorporation into numerous union-management and tripartite committees, in which the union officialdom serve as auxiliaries of big business and the state in increasing the exploitation of the working class.

During the 1980s, the CNTU and the other labor federations repeatedly torpedoed militant strikes that threatened the sitting provincial government, most infamously in 1983, when they isolated a strike by teachers opposing the PQ government’s reopening of their contracts to impose a 20 percent wage cut.

In 1996, the CNTU and the other unions and labor federations signed onto the PQ government’s “zero deficit” plan and proposed an early retirement scheme that the government used to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs in education and health care. When nurses revolted in 1999 against the brutal working conditions crated by these cuts, the unions left them alone to face the government and a savage strikebreaking law.

Roy sought to justify his opposition to any, even limited, job action against the Charest government by claiming that “in 2004,” the unions had “wanted to mount a social strike,” but the workers would have none of it. This is a lie. In December 2003 mass working class opposition erupted in the form of spontaneous demonstrations, walkouts and highway blockades. In order to bring this movement back under its control, the unions made noises about organizing a one-day general strike “after the holidays.” Then having demobilized and dissipated the opposition movement, Roy and his fellow bureaucrats sought to lay the blame on the workers.

Roy’s comments were animated by hostility to the workers he purports to represent. At one moment he denounced them for being hostile to the students, at the next moment for being too scared to defy anti-union laws.

Said the CNTU president, “We are speaking of reversing [a neo-liberal] ideology that is extremely well implanted, and in which our members live a little ... [in] comfort and indifference.”

Complaining about workers’ purported lack of “political education,” Roy declared, “It’s more than 10 years that we speak in our meetings about the question, for example, of free trade, of globalization, of neoliberalism. We have worked all those years. But we are not able to harvest the fruits of our work.”

Later he contradicted himself arguing that workers are so exploited and threatened by the savage sanctions in various anti-union laws that they are terrified of joining a “social strike.” “Explaining the principle of the social strike in a meeting, with people who are already exploited, for example, the workers at Loblaws or at the Metro supermarket, it’s not obvious. ... When we are in front of workers who are practically at the minimum wage, those types of heavy fines make people scared. ... It’s fear that make people submit.”

The reality is the unions have systematically policed the anti-strike laws—just as they have pledged to abide by Bill 78—and when struggles have erupted in defiance of them, as in the case of the 1999 nurses’ strike, they have isolated them, thereby ensuring their defeat.

The unions’ vehement opposition to the call for a social strike, their concerted efforts to force an end to the student strike, and their attempt to divert the opposition movement into the ruling class mechanism of elections and behind the big business PQ all underscore that these organizations do not speak for, or represent, the working class. Controlled by a privileged bureaucracy whose material interests are bound up with their role in policing the working class on behalf of big business, the unions are state-supported institutions for smothering working class resistance.

The mobilization of the working class in support of the students and against the austerity agenda of the Charest and federal Conservative governments and the entire ruling class cannot take place through this pro-capitalist organizations. Rather it will only take place through a rank-and-file rebellion against them and the development of new organs of working class struggle, above all a revolutionary socialist party.



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