

Quebec: 175,000 construction workers mount province-wide strike

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19 June 2013

Workers in all sectors of Quebec's construction industry launched an unlimited strike Monday—the first province-wide walkout since 1986—paralyzing billions of dollars' worth of building projects across the province, including various hydro-dam projects and the construction of Montreal's two mega-hospitals.

Involving 175,000 workers, the strike is the largest in Canada since the 2008 global financial meltdown.

Quebec's building workers are determined to resist the construction bosses' demands for unprecedented contract concessions, including a cut in real wages and the gutting of overtime rates. Members of five different union federations, they voted 95 percent in favor of strike action.

Even before the strike began, various big business representatives were urging the Parti Québécois (PQ) government to recall the provincial legislature to legalize the walkout through an emergency back-to-work bill.

The strike came after nine months of negotiations over four-year (2013-17) collective agreements covering the four major sectors of the province's building industry—industrial, institutional, and commercial, residential, civil engineering, and roads.

Only with great reluctance and trepidation did the unions sanction job action. Just hours before the walkout began, Yves Ouellet, the spokesman for the construction-union coalition *l'Alliance syndicale* and the executive-director of the FTQ-Construction, told the press "It's a sad day. This hasn't happened since the 1980s. We would've liked it better if it didn't happen now." Ouellet declared the unions anxious to see the dispute "rapidly settled," adding that they had already accepted a number of the employers' concessions demands.

The *Association de la construction du Québec*, the building contractors' bargaining association, is demanding that the workers accept annual wage increases of just 1 percent, which is significantly below the inflation

rate. They are also seeking to extend the 40-hour workweek over a potential six days instead of five, meaning workers could be forced to work Saturday at regular rates. Similarly the contractors are pushing to extend the regular work-period (during which standard wage rates apply) by three hours, from the current 6:30 AM to 5PM to 5:30 AM to 7 PM.

To further slash overtime costs, the contractors are demanding that the first 8 hours of overtime no longer be paid at double time, unless it is worked on a Sunday or an official holiday. They also want to eliminate the compensation paid workers when the workday has to be cancelled due to bad weather and to reduce the monies given workers for commuting over substantial distances to building sites.

In addition, the construction bosses are demanding a big increase in the ratio of their own hand-picked permanent employees that they can use on building jobs. Whereas currently it is 3 in every 6 or 50 percent, the contractors are demanding the ratio be 8 in every 10 or 80 percent.

Quebec big business is firmly behind the contractors. Yves-Thomas Dorval, the president of the *Conseil du patronat*, the province's biggest employer group, has endorsed the contractors' attempt to impose annual wage increases of 1 percent, claiming, in an obvious lie, that this would be adequate to protect workers' purchasing power. "But to go beyond that would entail real economic risks. ... It's just as important to maintain global costs that remain competitive for the givers of work so as to avoid undermining the competitiveness of the construction industry, investment and public finances in Quebec."

The corporate media in Quebec has long portrayed construction workers as overpaid. In fact, wage rates are far below those in western Canada. The average annual salary is only about \$35,000 and this for work that is physically taxing, dangerous and must often be performed in bad weather. Many construction workers depend on

Employment Insurance (EI) for income at least part of the year. This means that they are targets of the federal Conservative government's recent EI "reform," which reduces benefits for "repeat" EI recipients and threatens them with the loss of benefits altogether if they are unwilling to accept jobs paying substantially less than did their previous one.

Over the past three decades, Quebec governments have repeatedly stripped or threatened to strip construction workers of the right to strike. The two major opposition parties, the Liberals and CAQ, have signaled that they would be ready to support such action again. Speaking late last week, the Liberal's labor affairs critic, Guy Ouellette, declared a strike an unacceptable threat to Quebec's economy: "The economy is not going too well, construction is not going too well, there's a back-up in the construction sectors ... Quebec cannot be on strike because it's gonna hurt the economy." Quebec City's rightwing populist mayor, Régis Labeaume, responded to the strike's launch on Monday by declaring, "If it was up to me, they wouldn't pass the week on strike ... I'd demand an emergency law."

The PQ has frequently used such laws to break strikes and impose concessions. In 1999, the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard passed legislation criminalizing a strike by the province's nurses and threatening them with massive fines.

In this instance however, the PQ prefers, at least for the moment, to rely solely on the unions to bring the strike to a quick end. PQ Labour Minister Agnès Maltais has repeatedly denied that the government has plans to introduce back to work legislation, asserting that the solution to the dispute "necessarily lies through negotiation and therefore compromise."

The unions in Quebec as across Canada have for decades suppressed the class struggle, collaborating with employers in imposing job and wage cuts and with governments in the dismantling of public services. The 1999 nurses' strike was a rebellion against the conditions created by the savage social spending cuts the PQ had made, in the name of a "zero deficit," with the full support of the unions.

Last spring the unions worked with Quebec's elite to force an end to the Quebec student strike, which, by rejecting the government's reactionary "user pay" principle for public services, constituted an implicit challenge to the austerity program of the ruling class across Canada. First the leaders of Quebec's principal unions sought to bully the students into accepting a

sellout agreement that would have imposed the tuition increases in full. Then, they announced they would obey the government's draconian Bill 78, and sought to channel the mass opposition to the Liberals among students and workers behind the election of the big business PQ.

Elected with the support of the unions, the PQ has quickly pivoted to the imposition of austerity measures, including across-the-board budget cuts that go beyond even those of its Liberal predecessor.

If construction workers are to prevail in their struggle against concessions, they must recognize that the unions are no less an opponent of their basic interests than the contractors or the government, which, notwithstanding Maltais' claims, stands ready to pass back-to-work legislation if the unions do not quickly end the strike by abandoning key worker demands. Already the unions have signaled that they will retreat on their modest wage demands..

Quebec's construction unions exemplify the transformation of the unions worldwide into corporatist auxiliaries of big business and the state that work to ensure investors' profits and corporate competitiveness at the expense of workers, and which are controlled by privileged bureaucrats with six figure salaries and lavish expense accounts.

As a result of the revelations concerning systematic corruption in Quebec's construction industry—including bid-rigging and a web of kickbacks to municipal politicians and provincial parties —workers have learned that leaders of the province's construction unions and the Quebec Federation of Labour's Solidarity Fund have intimate personal and business dealings with the construction bosses. The Solidarity Fund purchased properties of construction boss Tony Accurso at above market prices, while QFL President Michel Arsenault was entertained on Accurso's luxury yacht.

Just last week, the chief negotiator for the *Alliance syndicale*, Donald Fortin, announced he was stepping down for health reasons after the rightwing *Journal de Montreal* published a report claiming that construction companies had supplied him with free labor and material to build a luxury home so as to "buy labor peace."



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