

Quebec government threatens to criminalize province-wide construction strike

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Bowing to Parti Québécois government threats, leaders of the Construction Union Alliance (l' *Alliance syndicale*) have announced that they will resume contract negotiations this morning with the bargaining agents for Quebec's building contractors and work with them to quickly end a province-wide construction strike.

In a radio appearance Thursday, Quebec Premier Pauline Marois said she will not hesitate to illegalize the strike if Quebec's 175,000 unionized construction workers are still off the job at the beginning of next week. "We will not accept that the situation continues for very long," declared Marois. "They have a few days to settle it. ... We cannot accept that a whole economic sector like construction is paralyzed for days."

Since the strike began last Monday, employer groups and the province's main opposition parties have been demanding the provincial legislature be recalled to adopt an emergency strikebreaking law. "According to the *Conseil du patronat* (Quebec Employers Council) this strike will cost \$1 billion a week," exclaimed Liberal labour critic Guy Ouellete. "The Quebec economy can't allow this."

Till Wednesday, the PQ flatly rejected calls for strikebreaking legislation, choosing instead to rely on the union bureaucracy, with which it has a decades-long partnership, to suppress the strike. Labour Minister Agnès Maltais repeatedly denied that the government had any intention of forcing an end to the strike, characterizing back-to-work laws in the construction industry as a thing of the past.

But with the big business clamouring for state action to end the strike, Marois made an about-face Wednesday. "If in two weeks" the strike was still continuing, said the PQ Premier, "drastic measures" would be necessary. 24 hours later, Marois was

demanding that construction workers be back on the job early next week and threatening to use strikebreaking legislation to make it so.

Faced with these escalating threats, the unions have responded as the government and corporate elite knew that they would. They have signaled that they will order their members to comply with any strikebreaking law, but that their preference is to make such a law unnecessary.

The unions are anxious to cut a deal with the contractors so as to demonstrate to big business that they play a pivotal role in regulating class relations on its behalf—or, to use a favourite expression of Quebec's union officialdom, in "preserving social peace."

Time and again, unions in Quebec and across Canada have used the threat of impending back-to-work legislation as an alibi for their acceptance of "negotiated" concessionary contracts.

The negotiations "must unblock," Yves Ouellet, the spokesman for the Construction Union Alliance and the Director-General of the Quebec Federation of Labour's construction wing, said at the conclusion of a closed-door meeting Thursday afternoon with Quebec Labour Minister Maltais. "A strike needs to be resolved by a settlement, a negotiated settlement. ... We will go [to the bargaining table] with openness. We have things to propose."

During nine months of negotiations, the Alliance, which unites five building union federations, has repeatedly shown "openness" by ceding to the construction bosses' concession demands. "We've already given up a lot," said Gérard Cyr, president of the Quebec Provincial Council of the AFL-CIO Building Trades, following Thursday's meeting with Maltais.

Inadvertently blurting out that the unions have

corporate interests independent of—and indeed hostile—to the workers they represent, Cyr added, “An emergency law does not suit anyone, not the union, not the employers and often the workers also lose.”

The construction bosses are demanding sweeping concessions in a four-year contract. These include: wage increases of just one percent—well below inflation rate—for the first three years; the right to schedule work on Saturdays and as early as 5:30 AM and as late as 7:00 PM at regular pay rates; the elimination of double-time except for work on Sundays and public holidays; and cuts in the money given workers to compensate for long commutes to their work-sites.

The PQ government’s threat to criminalize the construction workers’ fight to maintain their living standards and working conditions has been made at the behest of the most powerful representatives of Quebec’s big businesses like the *Conseil du Patronat* and the Montreal Board of Trade.

It is only the latest volley in a ruling class offensive that targets all the social gains made by the working class through the convulsive struggles of the last century—decent wages and pensions, Medicare and other public services, and collective bargaining and other worker rights. And when workers resist, governments—whether federalist like the Harper Conservative government or pro-Quebec independence like the PQ—criminalize their struggles. Just in the past two years, the Harper government has illegalized strikes by Canada Post, Air Canada and CP Rail workers. And last year Quebec’s Liberal government adopted an emergency law, Bill 78, which illegalized the Quebec student strike and placed draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue, anywhere in Quebec.

Quebec construction workers have themselves been specially targeted by anti-worker legislation twice in just the past year-and-a-half. In December 2011, Quebec’s Liberal government, with the backing of the PQ, handed over control of construction industry hiring to the employers. The Conservatives in their federal 2011 budget changed the rules governing Employment Insurance (EI) to attack seasonal workers, including the many seasonal construction workers, slashing the benefits paid “repeat EI recipients” and introducing measures aimed at compelling them to accept low-wage employment.

The unions have smothered the opposition of workers in Quebec and across Canada to the ruling class offensive, including colluding in the imposition of job cuts and concessions and the dismantling of public services, for they agree that workers’ wages and rights must be subordinated to investor profits.

If the construction workers’ anti-concession struggle is not to be strangled, whether through the unions’ policing of a strikebreaking law or their imposition of giveaway contracts, rank-and-file workers must organize committees independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatus. Defiance of any strikebreaking law must be tied to the fight to mobilize the working class across Quebec and Canada against all wage, job, and social-spending cuts and to the development of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at bringing to power workers’ governments in Ottawa and Quebec that would make fulfilling social needs not investor profits the animating principle of socio-economic life.



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