

Striking Quebec construction workers speak out

A WSWWS reporting team
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175,000 construction workers have been on strike across Quebec since last Monday, paralyzing an estimated \$50 billion worth of building projects, including the construction of several Quebec Hydro dams.

All four sectors of the industry—residential homes, roads, civil engineering, and industrial, institutional, and commercial—are impacted by the strike.

Negotiations between the Construction Union Alliance (*l'Alliance syndicale*) and the employers' bargaining agents resumed yesterday, less than 24 hours after Parti Quebecois Premier Pauline Marois threatened to illegalize the strike if the workers are not back at their jobs by the beginning of next week. (See: "Quebec government threatens to criminalize province-wide construction strike").

Marois' threat was supplemented by a warning from the head of the government's Construction Commission that it will sanction any striker who is found to have "intimidated" construction workers who remain on the job.

Big business and the two major opposition parties have been clamouring since the strike began for the government to take action to criminalize it, claiming that the strike is as an intolerable threat to the province's economy.

Predictably the unions have signaled that they will obey a back-to-work law. But they hope to obviate the need for strikebreaking legislation, by cutting a quick deal with the contractors and thereby demonstrating to big business that they continue to play a pivotal role in suppressing the class struggle on its behalf.

The contractors, for their part, are determined to impose an historic reversal on Quebec's building workers. Their concession demands include a cut in real wages and the gutting of overtime pay through the

institution of a more "flexible" work-day and work-week and the elimination of almost all "double time." Other demands include increasing the ratio of hand-picked permanent employees that contractors can use on building projects and slashing the monies given workers who have to commute long distances.

The Construction Union Alliance only called the strike—the first since 1986—after nine months of negotiations, during which, according to union officials themselves, they ceded to many of the construction bosses' concessions demands. Although there is a long history in Quebec of governments "suspending" construction workers' right to strike and imposing collective agreements by government decree, the unions studiously avoided any discussion of how they would respond to a back-to-work law, so as to leave workers completely unprepared for such an eventuality.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking construction workers picketing the site where Montreal's new French-language mega-hospital is being built.

"The construction bosses demands are exaggerated," said Jean-François, a labourer specialized in elevator installation. "They want to force us back 20 or 30 years, to the conditions that existed in the 1970s. The contractors want to cut overtime, force us to work at regular rates on Saturdays if there's been bad weather in the previous week, and pay the first eight hours of overtime at time-and-a-half rather than double-time.

"You have to fight in this life to defend your rights. Going backward shouldn't be part of it. Our strike is a social question. If the construction bosses succeed in imposing concessions on us, who will be next?"

Daniel Doré, a construction laborer, said he would be prepared to defy an emergency antistrike law. "We have lessons to learn. It's 2013 and in France and

everywhere people go into the streets to fight for what is right. The unions should wake up working people, like the students did last year. There can never be too many people in the streets. I would welcome it if the unions overthrew the government.”

When the WSWS observed that far from fighting to overthrow the government, the unions have bowed before federal and Quebec government strikebreaking laws and systematically isolated last year’s Quebec student strike, Daniel said, “If the unions don’t fight for our demands, it will be official: people will see that we are losing, even while dues keep rising, and they will wake up. Maybe then we’ll see a day when workers say, ‘We’re taking things in hand’.”

Cédric, an elevator mechanic, expressed strong support for the strike. “The bosses want to roll back our working conditions, rights that have been there for many collective agreements.”

Asked about the threat of a back-to-work law, Cédric said, “There are pressures from all sides for the government to oppose an emergency law and I don’t see why they wouldn’t impose one. They’ve already done it in the past.”

Repeating what the workers have been told by union officials, Cédric said a government-imposed settlement would “surely mean the status quo, with a salary increase equal to the inflation rate. But it would just be a truce. The bosses would come back with exactly the same demands in three years and we would be in the same predicament.”

When the WSWS reporters pointed to the federal Conservative government’s criminalization of a series of recent strikes or impending strikes, including by Canada Post, Air Canada and CN Rail workers, Cédric said, “It is certainly very alarming. We also shouldn’t forget the omnibus federal budget that rolled back several rights. The [Conservative government’s] changes to Employment Insurance (EI) are an outright theft, continuing on from what the Chretien Liberal government did.

“With the latest EI reform, seasonal workers are screwed. They will no longer have the chance to continue practicing their trade. Many construction workers are seasonal workers and draw EI in the winter. With [Conservative Prime Minister] Harper and Marois we’re being attacked on two fronts.”

In reply to a question about the role of the unions and

the close ties that exist between top union officials and contractors—such as Quebec Federation of Labour President Michel Arsenault who was gifted jewelry by Tony Accurso, the head of one of the province’s largest construction companies, Cédric said: “We shouldn’t deceive ourselves. We know there’s cronyism. But now we have to concentrate on today’s fight. One problem I see is that there’s no work being done to muster support for workers in other sectors—something that was done a lot in the past. There’s no reason, for example, we can’t go at some point and picket in support of workers at Couche Tard who’ve been thrown out of work.”

Like many workers, Cedric participated in demonstrations during last year’s Quebec student strike. “My circle of friends includes many students and I have a pretty good idea of what life is like for the average student. The strike was a good electric shock for Québec and I hope we’ll keep going in that direction. However, it isn’t over. Students didn’t win much. They were able to force a temporary retreat, but it will continue. What is different between workers and students is that workers have means of pressure that are much more effective than do students. Stopping studying is one thing, but when 175,000 workers stop work, that rocks the whole economy.”



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