

Quebec: Construction worker strike in grave danger

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The strike that 175,000 Quebec construction workers launched June 17 to defend their wages and working conditions has been sabotaged by the trade unions from the outset. Now, facing a threat by the Parti Quebecois (PQ) provincial government's to adopt emergency back-to-work legislation, the unions are working to completely snuff out the strike and impose the concessions demanded by the employers.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the trade union bureaucrats forced the majority of the striking construction workers back on the job without even allowing them the chance to vote on the concessionary tentative agreements they have negotiated with the construction bosses.

Deals have been struck covering the 57,000 workers in the residential construction sector and the 41,000 workers in the civil engineering and road construction sectors. Few details of these concession contracts have been made public, in an attempt to hide the scope of the attacks contained therein.

The little information that has been revealed concerns the pay increases to be paid workers in the civil engineering and road construction sectors and demonstrates that they will receive pay increases below the projected rate of inflation: 2 percent in the first year, and an additional 0.1 percent in each of the three remaining years of the proposed contract, meaning the annual pay rise in 2016 will be 2.3 percent.

The proposed concession deals apparently cover the most contentious questions that led to the strike, such as the employers' demands for sweeping cuts to overtime pay, the extension of the normal work-day, and the loosening of restrictions on the mobility of labour. However, the details of these provisions are remaining the closely guarded secret of the trade union bureaucrats, supposedly "to not disrupt the ongoing

negotiations." In reality they are being withheld to camouflage the unions' capitulation to the construction bosses' demands and to prevent workers from organizing to vote down the proposed contracts.

"We have respected our commitment to our members to negotiate a reasonable deal that will not impoverish them," claimed Yves Ouellet, spokesman for the Alliance Syndicale (the Construction Union Alliance), which represents the five construction trade union federations involved in the strike.

The splitting of construction workers through the conclusion of separate contract deals represents a flagrant betrayal. By forcing the workers in the residential and roads and civil engineering sectors to return to work, the Alliance Syndicale is undermining the strike and placing intense pressure on those who remain off the job—the workers in the commercial, industrial and institutional sectors—to abandon their struggle.

Ouellet enthusiastically welcomed the "end" of the strike in the two other sectors of the province's building industry. Demonstrating his complete subservience to the capitalist elite, he boasted that "the claims of union intransigence are clearly exaggerated as we have settled in these two sectors."

The construction workers' strike is in grave danger. Construction workers will prevail in their anti-concessions struggle only if it becomes the spearhead for a counter-offensive of the entire working class against the ruling elite's assault on jobs, wages, and social programs.

The essential first step is a complete break with the pro-capitalist stooges in the trade union bureaucracy, and the formation of rank-and-file committees of struggle entirely independent of these corrupt, pro-management organizations. These rank-

and-file committees must appeal to workers throughout Quebec and the across Canada to launch a common struggle in defense of the jobs and working conditions of all workers.

Above all, the strike must initiate the independent political mobilization of the working class with aim of bringing to power workers' governments in Ottawa and Quebec City that would radically transform socio-economic life so as to make social needs, not the enrichment of a tiny capitalist elite, its animating principle.

Construction workers face a political struggle. In resisting concessions they confront not only the various employers' associations, but also the government and the courts, which are completely dedicated to upholding the interests of big business and have repeatedly used their powers to impose austerity and attack worker rights.

Whilst the PQ government prefers to rely upon the trade union bureaucracy to bring a quick end to the strike, it is ready and willing to impose back-to-work legislation if the workers resist the unions' drive to impose contracts containing major concessions.

On Monday, PQ Premier Pauline Marois appointed a mediator, Norman Gauthier, to break the "impasse" in the commercial, institutional and industrial sector—a move that was warmly welcomed by the trade union leaders. Mediated negotiations are still ongoing, but the Premier has repeated her threats of last week to criminalize the strike. If there is no deal in place by the end of the week, Marois has pledged to reconvene the provincial legislature to legalize the strike. "It is certain that ten working-days lost due to the strike is a benchmark that must absolutely not be passed," declared Marois.

Since the strike began, the main opposition parties, the Liberals and the CAQ, and numerous employer groups, including the Conseil du Patronat (the Quebec Employers' Council) and the Montreal Board of Trade, have been demanding that the government legalize the strike, on the grounds it is an intolerable blow to the economy.

The union-backed PQ has a long history of imposing "emergency" laws to break strikes and impose concession contracts. In 1999, the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard passed a law that criminalized a province-wide nurses' strike that had erupted in

opposition to the brutal social spending cuts the PQ had imposed, in the name of a "zero budget deficit," in collaboration with the unions.

The courts stand with the government in acting as enforcers of the big business assault on the working class. Last week, the Quebec Provincial Association of Home Builders [APHCQ], one of the main employers' associations, obtained court injunctions to force the resumption of residential construction in defiance of the strike. The injunctions, issued by Quebec Superior Court Judge Pierre Isabelle, affected three cities: Gatineau, Quebec City, and Trois-Rivieres.

Quebec construction workers are facing the same big business-state assault as do their class brothers and sisters across Quebec and throughout Canada. Since 2011, the federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper has repeatedly illegalized strikes and threatened strikes, including by Air Canada, Canada Post, and CP Rail workers. Last winter, Ontario's NDP-supported minority Liberal government used Bill 115 to strip that province's teachers of the right to strike and impose a two-year wage freeze and other concessions.

The only way forward for the Quebec construction workers is to expand their struggle, uniting French-speaking, English-speaking, and immigrant workers across Canada in opposition to the austerity program of the capitalist elite and to fight for social equality.



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