

Quebec to criminalize two week-old construction strike

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1 July 2013

Quebec's Parti Quebecois government called the provincial legislature into special session Sunday morning to adopt "emergency" legislation criminalizing a two-week-old strike by 77,000 workers employed in industrial, commercial, and institutional construction.

The government wanted the law to be adopted by early Monday morning. This could still happen, but demands from the two major opposition parties to weigh the legislation even more heavily in favor of the building contractors have thrown the government's timetable into doubt.

The unions, for their part, have signaled that they will submit to the diktats of the big business politicians in the National Assembly and order workers to obey the terms of Bill 54 no matter how egregious the attack on their rights.

The Liberals and the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ), who between them hold the majority of seats in the National Assembly, are vowing to amend Bill 54, so as to strengthen the employers' hand in pushing for sweeping concessions on overtime pay, the mobility of labour, and the definition of the regular work-day (during which base wage rates apply).

The PQ's proposed back-to-work law illegalizes job action of any kind by construction workers in the ICI (industrial, commercial and institutional) sector through April 30, 2017. It imposes wage increases of 2 percent from July 2 through April 30, 2014, thereby stripping workers of retroactive pay for the May-June 2013 period. For the following three years, it provides for annual pay increases of 2.1 percent, 2.2 percent, and 2.3 percent retrospectively.

When inflation and federal and provincial government hikes in taxes and user fees are taken into account, these increases will result in a cut in

construction workers' real wages over the life of the four-year, government-imposed contract. To justify this, the government is pointing to the fact that the construction unions have already accepted the same pay hikes for 98,000 workers employed in the residential and roads and civil engineering sectors.

The PQ is otherwise proposing to extend the terms of the expired contract that covered the ICI sector.

This has incensed the contractors and the Liberals and the CAQ, who want no delay in the gutting of overtime rates and the imposition of other concessions. So as to give the unions "incentive" to be "flexible," the opposition parties are demanding that the terms of the expired contract be extended for just ten months and that the wage increase for the July 2, 2013-April 30, 2014 period be limited to no more than the official inflation rate—currently estimated at 1.6 percent.

Under the PQ's Bill 54, "One of the parties, the union party, doesn't really have an incentive to resume negotiations," said Liberal leader Philippe Couillard.

CAQ leader Francois Legault was even more forthright in demanding the government use its legislative power to force through concessions. "We're taking away the employers' bargaining power," complained Legault. "We're giving wage increases above 2 percent yet on the other side, we're not touching the other contract terms.

"We can't remain for four years," continued Legault, "stuck in *l'immobilisme* (the status quo). Adjustments must be made to increase productivity."

The PQ has urged the opposition parties to reconsider. It has noted that if it had followed their advice and responded to the strike with an immediate back-to-work law, "negotiated" agreements would never have been reached in the residential and roads and civil engineering sectors. And it has warned that if

the National Assembly imposes a lower wage increase on workers in the ICI sector this could “threaten peace” on the province’s construction sites and cause labor shortages as workers leave the ICI sector for the now-higher paid residential and roads sectors.

The PQ also disputes the opposition parties’ claim that Bill 54 will enable the unions to spurn the employers’ demands for concessions. The across-the-board freeze in benefits will, it argues, force the unions to continue negotiating with the contractors. Bill 54 stipulates that the terms it imposes can be superseded by any contract clauses negotiated by the employers and the unions.

The *Alliance Syndicale* —the coalition of the province’s five construction union federations—has opened the door to the PQ’s strikebreaking legislation and to the imposition of a cut in real wages and other concessions on construction workers.

Only with great reluctance and trepidation and after agreeing to significant takeaways did

the unions even call a strike. Then, in response to the government’s threats to impose a back-to-work law, they split the construction workers. At the beginning of last week, they announced they had reached negotiated settlements covering the workers in the residential and roads and civil engineering sectors and ordered the 98,000 workers in those two sectors to immediately return to work. These workers have still not been apprised of the terms of the proposed settlements, let alone allowed to vote on them.

Last Friday evening, the leaders of the *Alliance Syndicale* were secretly informed of the terms of the government’s back-to-work bill and signaled their support. Speaking to reporters Saturday afternoon after the collapse of last-ditch negotiations, *Alliance Syndicale* spokesman Yves Ouellet went out his way to praise the government that was in the process of criminalizing construction workers’ job action and cutting their real wages. The PQ, said Ouellet, “had done their part in the way they acted during the negotiations and in the manner in which they presented to us (their proposed emergency law.) Yes, it was well done.”

For decades, the unions in Quebec, as across Canada, have suppressed the class struggle—imposing wage-, job-, and social-spending cuts and enforcing back-to-work laws. A key element in the betrayal of the Quebec

unions has been their systematic subordination of the working class to the big business PQ.

In the latter half of the 1990s, the unions worked with the PQ to impose, in the name of a “zero budget deficit,” the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, including the elimination of tens of thousands of health care and education jobs.

Last year, the unions isolated the militant Quebec student strike and diverted the mass opposition to the austerity measures of the Charest Liberal government behind the PQ’s election campaign. Since it came to power last September, the union-supported PQ has carried out the same class war agenda as the Liberal government that preceded it and the federal Conservative government—slashing public services, hiking university tuition fees, victimizing welfare recipients, and criminalizing workers’ resistance.



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