

Quebec: Mass protest against gutting of municipal workers' pensions

A WSWS reporting team
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More than 50,000 Quebec municipal workers and their supporters marched through downtown Montreal on Saturday to protest against the provincial Liberal government's plans to slash their pensions and wages through legislative fiat.

The Liberals' Bill 3 is the opening salvo in a frontal assault on all public services and the wages, jobs and rights of the workers who deliver them. Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard and Finance Minister Carlos Leitaó have declared that public services, including health care and education, must be radically "reformed," and some programs axed entirely, if Quebec is to avoid a "Greek-type" financial crisis.

Couillard has also repeatedly vowed that his government will not make any substantive changes to Bill 3, which would dramatically hike worker pension-contributions (an effective wage cut), and require the restructuring of all municipal pension plans at the expense of retirees, through the "suspension" of cost-of-living increases, the raising of the retirement age, and outright pension cuts.

Municipal workers from across Quebec, including municipal transit, blue-collar and office-workers, and firefighters were out in force at Saturday's demonstration. There were also significant delegations of Quebec and federal public sector workers—both of whom will be facing major concession demands when their contracts expire next year—and a few private-sector contingents, including from the aircraft-manufacturer Bombardier.

While there were large numbers of young workers, relatively few students joined Saturday's protest.

In 2012, Quebec was convulsed by a six-month long strike against the then Charest Liberal government's plans to hike university tuition fees. The government, with strong support from the corporate media, denounced the students as "selfish" and "spoiled." Today, it is mounting a similar slander campaign against the municipal workers. This includes a cynical call for "intergenerational equality"—that is, slashing municipal workers' pensions to make them commensurate with the meager or non-existent pensions

being offered those now entering the labor force.

Called by the *Coalition syndicale pour la libre négociation* (the Union Coalition for Free Negotiation), Saturday's demonstration was a sign of growing working class opposition to the Liberal government, which returned to power in April after 18 months in opposition. Many workers voiced their readiness to take strike action, even if it means defying repressive labor laws that make it illegal for workers to walk off the job when collective agreements are in force. Many were also well aware that the attack on their pensions is part of a much wider big business assault on public services.

But the unions have no intention of mounting a genuine struggle in defence of municipal workers' wages and pensions.

From the outset, their response to the ruling elite's drive to slash municipal workers' pensions—a campaign spearheaded by the previous union-supported Parti Québécois (PQ) government—has been to insist that they are ready to accept rollbacks, including increases to the retirement age, increased worker pension contributions, and even more dramatic cuts to plans with major actuarial deficits.

This is exemplified by the name the municipal unions have chosen for their coalition—the Union Coalition for Free Negotiation. At the rally held outside the Quebec premier's Montreal office at the end of Saturday's demonstration, Canadian Union of Public Employees President Paul Moist led the crowd in chanting "Negotiate, don't legislate."

The main speaker at the rally, Coalition spokesman Marc Ranger, emphasized the unions' wish for a "dialogue" with the big business Liberal government. "Our slogan has been negotiation not confrontation."

Ranger revealed that in recent days the unions had been in talks with the government about amendments to Bill 3—legislation whose *raison d'être* is to slash workers' pensions. Ranger claimed that government negotiators had suggested several interesting avenues for an accommodation with the unions, but these were abruptly "pulled off the table" at the insistence of Couillard.

Ranger said that if the government doesn't heed the unions' call in the weeks immediately ahead their next step will be to organize a "major disruption."

But, questioned by reporters shortly thereafter, Ranger immediately sought to distance himself from this remark, insisting that the unions would organize "civil disobedience" only as a last resort. He said that if the government went ahead with Bill 3 the unions would recommend challenging its legality in the courts.

Confederation of National Trade Unions President Jacques Létourneau said the Liberals seemed to have forgotten the mass protests that erupted in 2003 when Charest tabled legislation increasing public daycare fees and making it easier for employers to contract out jobs, and the 2012 student strike. He vowed that the unions would "make this government retreat" if Couillard's memory didn't soon come back.

Workers should take this statement as a warning that the unions are once again conspiring to suppress mass opposition to the austerity agenda of the ruling elite. In 2003, the unions called a Christmas truce "torpedoing" the opposition to the Charest government. Soon after, his government's package of right-wing measures were forced through. In 2012, the unions systematically isolated the student strike in the face of escalating state repression, and harnessed the mass anti-government movement it had precipitated behind the election of a PQ government that continued and broadened Charest's austerity drive.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party intervened at Saturday's demonstration distributing hundreds of copies of a statement calling for municipal workers and their supporters to make their struggle the spearhead of a Canada-wide working class offensive against the austerity program of the ruling elite. It explained, "This will require not only militant action—strikes, occupations and general strikes—but above all the independent political mobilization of the working class to impose its own solution to the capitalist crisis."

WSWS reporters spoke with several of the participants in the municipal workers' protest.

Sylvain, a Montreal city worker, told the WSWS, "The Couillard government is using us to lower the living standards of all instead of saying everyone should have good pensions."

He denounced the government-media claims that Montreal city workers have "luxurious" pensions and working conditions as a blatant lie. Much of the workforce, he noted, is made up of "non-permanent" employees. As for Bill 3, it would cut his take-home pay by about \$2,000 per year and result in his having a much-reduced pension.

His co-worker, Myriam, said, "I've been at the City of

Montreal for 10 years now and I'm still an auxiliary [casual] employee. I make \$15 per hour and since we haven't had a new contract for three or four years, there is no indexation of my wage." Myriam noted that previously the provincial government had allowed Quebec's municipalities to have a "holiday" on their pension contributions for eight years when the pension plans were in a surplus. "Now that there are deficits, they want to place them on our backs."

Firefighter Stéfane Deny told the WSWS, Bill 3 "is a disguised wage cut. It will cost me about \$150 a week or \$600 per month."

He accused the government of using "divide and rule tactics." "They want to level everyone downwards. Instead, we should be raising up those without pensions and good benefits."

Bill 3, continued Stéfane, "is just the beginning. They want to extend this to other workers, beginning with provincial government workers.

"The only way to fight this is by uniting. I supported the students in their struggle. The students are our children, the adults of tomorrow."

CEGEP students Clarence, Pascale, and Mylène explained to the WSWS why they had joined Saturday's demonstration.

"We're in solidarity with the municipal workers," said Clarence. "We consider Bill 3 completely unacceptable. It's an austerity bill and we're against austerity."

Pascale said that Bill 3 "was linked to what the student strike was fighting against in 2012. The government wants to slash social programs, whether its education or retirees' pensions. It doesn't matter whether it affects us directly today or not—it's unacceptable."

Mylène noted that a major reason for the current pension deficits is the 2008 financial crisis. "We know the government support the banks and when they go under it gives them masses of money and saves them. But when it comes time to help out workers, the government does nothing. Only the banks merit government help."



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