

Montreal: Witch-hunt against city workers opposed to pension cuts

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The City of Montreal, supported by the Quebec Liberal government and big-business media, has launched a legal witch-hunt against dozens of municipal workers for daring to protest against sweeping cuts to their pensions and take-home pay.

By mobilizing its repressive apparatus, the ruling class wants to show its determination to impose on Quebec municipal employees a draconian pension “reform” and press forward with the broader anti-working class austerity agenda of which it is part.

On August 18, hundreds of city employees and some local union leaders staged a protest against the Quebec Liberal government’s Bill 3, which imposes cuts to all municipal pensions in the province, including the removal of cost-of-living protection, and dramatically hikes workers’ pension contributions, effectively slashing their pay. The protesters entered Montreal City Hall during a City Council meeting and overturned glasses of water and papers on councillors’ desks. The protesters then plastered the Council Chambers with anti-Bill 3 stickers and signs and a banner that read, in a reference to the Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre, a strong advocate of the pension cuts, “Coderre voleur” (Coderre thief).

In response, the political establishment and media launched a virulent witch-hunt against municipal employees with the aim of presenting them as “violent” and discrediting their legitimate struggle against the pension cuts. Even before any investigation had been conducted, the vice president of the City of Montreal Executive Committee vowed that people would “lose their jobs” as a result of the August 18 protest. For his part, Mayor Denis Coderre denounced the municipal workers, declaring “intimidation and violence are not how it is done in a democratic society.”

Last month, the Montreal police announced that

criminal charges are being laid against 44 city employees, mostly firefighters, for unlawful assembly, mischief and assault in connection with the August 18 protest. The accused include the presidents of the Montreal firefighters’ and blue collar city workers’ union locals.

In addition, Mayor Coderre has announced that 63 other municipal employees are under disciplinary investigation. These workers could be subject to sanctions including dismissal. Already, 39 of the 63 employees have been suspended without pay “due to the severity of their actions.”

As well as the criminal charges and victimizations, the City of Montreal has gone before the *Commission des relations du travail* (the Quebec Labour Relations Board) to argue that 2,320 city workers deprived citizens of essential services during the 15 minutes they left their posts on June 17 to take part in an earlier anti-Bill 3 protest. The Labour Board could levy fines on the city workers’ unions or take other antidemocratic measures if it upholds the City’s complaint.

In describing the workers’ action as “undemocratic,” the ruling elite are turning reality on its head. It is not municipal employees who are circumventing the law, but the Liberal government. Bill 3 would unilaterally annul existing collective agreements and force through the restructuring of pension plans, a move that will have a devastating impact on the lives of tens of thousands of municipal workers and retirees.

By targeting municipal employees today—with attacks on those in the broader public sector surely just around the corner—the ruling class is intensifying its drive to make working people pay for the crisis of the world capitalist system.

The new provincial Liberal government has been adamant that there will be no retreat from Bill 3,

because it would undermine “public”—i.e. big business’s—confidence in the government’s determination to push through billions of dollars in social spending cuts in the name of eliminating the provincial budget deficit.

Premier Philippe Couillard has forthrightly stated that these cuts will involve the elimination of entire programs and compared Quebec’s current fiscal “crisis” to those of 1982 and 1997. In the first instance, Quebec’s government imposed wage-cutting contracts on hundreds of thousands of public sector workers by government fiat and in the second, eliminated tens of thousands of education and health care jobs.

For the past few weeks, government spokesmen and the corporate media have repeated almost word for word the slanders they used against students during the 2012 province-wide student strike. Municipal workers have been denounced as “privileged” for clinging to their “too generous” pensions in the same way, that students were labelled as “spoiled children” and “selfish” for opposing university tuition fee hikes and fighting for education to be recognized as a social right. And, just as in 2012, resistance to capitalist austerity is labelled as violence to justify a police crackdown and other acts of repression.

This witch-hunting is part of a broader criminalization of opposition to austerity and of worker struggles. The right to strike is under systematic attack. The federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper has intervened repeatedly to criminalize strikes, including by postal, railway and Air Canada workers. One of the first acts of Couillard’s government was to announce that it would introduce legislation to prohibit construction workers from resorting to strike action, if they threatened to do so at the expiry of the one-year contract imposed on them the previous summer by the then Parti Quebecois government under a strikebreaking law.

Since the events of August 18, the City of Montreal has announced that it will intensify security at City Hall as well as at neighbourhood councils, without indicating when this measure will end. At least six police officers are now present during the weekly meetings of the city’s Executive Committee.

As during the 2012 student strike, the ruling class is depending on the trade union bureaucracy to contain and smother workers’ opposition. The laying of

charges against union officials is aimed at pressuring them to work even more loyally and assiduously to block the development of a more militant and broader challenge to the pension cuts and the ruling-class assault on public services and worker rights.

Despite the repeated “antiunion” diatribes of the media and politicians, union leaders have repeatedly proclaimed their willingness to impose pension and wage cuts in exchange for a seat at the negotiating table. They have distanced themselves from the events on August 18, describing the actions as “unacceptable” and launching “a call for calm.” Michel Parent, president of Montreal’s blue collar city workers local, was booed by his own members when he denounced the “lapses” that occurred at City Hall.

All workers and young people must come to the defense of municipal workers, as part of the development of a working-class counteroffensive against the big-business assault on wages, public services, pensions and other social rights. Above all, workers must break politically and organizationally with the pro-capitalist unions that have systematically suppressed the class struggle and politically subordinated Quebec workers to the big-business Parti Quebecois, and join forces with workers across Canada so as to develop an independent political movement of the working class aimed at bringing to power a workers’ government that would resolve the capitalist crisis at the expense of big business, not working people.



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