

Mass protests against Quebec government's austerity drive

To defend public services and pensions: Workers need a socialist strategy

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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More than a hundred thousand workers, students, retirees, and unemployed took to the streets of Montreal and Quebec City last Saturday to denounce the Quebec Liberal government's frontal assault on public services and the wages and pensions of the workers who administer them.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) distributed the following statement to the demonstrators.

Workers and youth have come in great numbers to today's demonstrations in Montreal and Quebec City to express their justified opposition to the draconian austerity measures being implemented by Philippe Couillard's Liberal government.

But the demonstration's organizers—various student associations and community groups organized under the leadership of the trade union federations in their “Refuse Austerity” coalition—are seeking to dissipate and politically misdirect the popular anger. They seek to channel it in a nationalist direction so as to prevent the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class that would offer a real alternative to the existing social order.

“Refuse Austerity” writes in its statement announcing today's demonstrations, “The current government is attacking the fundamental mission of the Quebec state, a mission that makes Quebec a unique society in North America, fairer and more egalitarian.”

This nationalist rhetoric is designed to throw dust in people's eyes. Far from being “unique,” Quebec is riven by class conflict and ever-widening social inequality just like the rest of North America, Europe, and the entire world.

It is one thing for the union bureaucrats—with their six-figure salaries, their numerous privileges and their control of investment funds worth billions of dollars—to fantasize about a “fair and egalitarian” Quebec. It is quite another for ordinary workers, confronted every day with the loss of jobs, declining living standards, and the dismantling of health care and other public services.

As for the “fundamental mission” of the Quebec state, it

consists in assuring the maximum profits for big business and the banks by drastically reducing taxes on the wealthy, taking the axe to social spending and attacking the jobs, wages and pensions of the workers who provide essential public services—in a word, everything the Couillard government has done since coming to power last April.

In this, Quebec also is no different from anywhere else. Across Canada, the United States and throughout the western world, no matter what political party is in power, every ruling class uses the national state to increase corporate “competitiveness” (i.e., profitability), and its access to resources and markets.

This is done on the backs of the workers by means of austerity measures that plunge the masses into unemployment, poverty, and destitution; and on the backs of the youth, routinely sent thousands of kilometers away to kill and be killed in neo-colonial wars like that in Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Iraq and Syria today.

When the organizers of today's demonstration assert in their promotional material that “austerity is a choice, not an inevitability” they are attempting to conceal the essential link between the austerity measures being carried out by Couillard, federal Prime Minister Stephen Harper, US President Barack Obama, French President Francois Hollande and the systemic crisis of world capitalism.

By denying the objective basis of the anti-working class attacks carried out by the Couillard government, the unions seek to justify their total opposition to every attempt to mobilize workers in Canada—French, English and immigrant—in a unified counter-offensive to defend jobs, wages and public services.

In this way, the unions are continuing a decades-old policy that has led to innumerable defeats and greatly undermined the social position of the working class. On the one hand, the unions politically subordinate the working class to the big business Parti Québécois, and systematically promote the lie that Quebec workers have more in common with the likes of

Quebecor boss Pierre-Karl Peladeau than with workers in English Canada. On the other hand, they seek to smother all working class resistance and systematically isolate and suppress any social struggles that break out despite their efforts—such as the 1999 nurses strike, the mass upsurge against the Charest Liberal government in 2003, and more recently the 2012 Quebec student strike.

This last experience is particularly instructive. While the students were fighting to defend public education, the unions for months left them to confront the organized violence of the Quebec state alone. The adoption of Bill 78, which to all intents and purposes criminalized the strike and indeed all demonstrations on any issue throughout Quebec, provoked a strong popular reaction, raising the possibility of a broader, working-class challenge to austerity.

At this point the unions intervened to shut the strike down. Using the slogan “After the street, the ballot box,” they channeled the opposition to Charest and his government’s austerity program, behind the election of a Parti Québécois government. Once returned to power with the unions’ support, the PQ rapidly imposed budget cuts even greater than those of Charest, while stoking anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic chauvinism with its reactionary “Charter of Quebec Values.”

Workers must be warned. The current situation in Quebec is just as socially explosive—if not more so—than in 2012, with the Couillard Liberals adopting a raft of anti-working class measures in the name of eliminating the annual budget deficit and ensuring that Quebec’s credit-rating is maintained. These measures include: budget cuts of \$3.2 billion for 2015-16; the ravaging of the pensions of municipal workers under Bill 3; the elimination of more than 1,000 jobs in the public service between now and 2016; a wage freeze or worse for the half million public sector workers whose contracts expire next April 1; and a substantial increase in day care fees and in electricity rates.

The unions will do everything to contain and suppress the palpable anger which these draconian measures have already provoked in the working class. They are once again playing the card of nationalism by characterizing the measures of the Couillard government, not as a frontal attack on the most basic interests of workers, but as an attack on the “Quebec model.”

This line is taken up by their political allies on the so-called “left”, in particular, Québec Solidaire. Like the unions, QS endorses the principle of a zero deficit, asking only that its implementation be delayed a year, and like the municipal unions, it accepts “negotiated” cuts in municipal workers’ pensions and increased retirement premiums (a cut in real take-home pay) for the current municipal workers.

Faithful to their longstanding alliance with the Parti

Québécois, the other governing party of the Quebec ruling class, the unions concentrate all their usual demagoguery on denouncing the Liberals, without saying a word about the similar austerity measures adopted by a whole series of PQ governments—from Lévesque in 1982-83 to Marois in 2012-14, and including the Bouchard-Landry PQ government that, between 1996 and 1998, joined with the Chretien Liberal government and the Ontario Conservative government in carrying out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history.

The starting point for a real struggle by workers against the Couillard government is a political and organizational break with the pro-capitalist unions on the basis of a new socialist internationalist political orientation.

In the face of the lie that there is “no money,” a unified response is necessary from all workers in North America, involving strikes, occupations and other militant actions and with the aim of developing an independent political movement of the working class to resolve the crisis of capitalism at the expense of big business, rather than working people. The full social power of the working class must be mobilized in the struggle for workers governments’ that will radically reorganize the economy, placing basic industries and the banks under public control, so that production can be organized to meet the social needs of all, not protect the profits of a tiny minority.

We call on all workers and young people who agree with this perspective to become regular readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and to contact the Socialist Equality Party so as to join us in the fight to build a new revolutionary working class leadership.



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