

Quebec Liberals aim to level what remains of welfare state

Laurent Lafrance
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Quebec's 10-month-old Liberal government is mounting a sweeping assault on public and social services and on the wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them. Cuts and service-fee increases of more than \$3 billion per year have already been announced.

The official pretext for this brutal austerity program is the need to eliminate Quebec's annual budget deficit and keep the province's creditors at bay. The real aim is to dismantle what little remains of the welfare state and speed up the privatization of key sectors of the economy, including public works and the health care system.

With these anti-working class measures, Philippe Couillard's Liberals are following in the footsteps of Stephen Harper's federal Conservative government. Since 2011, the Conservatives have cut billions from federal programs and eliminated more than 25,000 federal public sector jobs, raised the retirement age to 67, slashed unemployment benefits, boosted the role of the private sector in the development of infrastructure, and repeatedly used "emergency" laws to break strikes, including at Air Canada and Canada Post.

In the same way, the Liberals under Couillard plan to gore public services and public sector workers' wages and benefits, so as to further slash taxes on big business and the economic elite and bolster big business's drive to lower workers' wages and benefits.

Premier Couillard has repeatedly vowed that his government will not back down in the face of opposition, adding that the steps his government is taking to "streamline" and "modernize" the Quebec state will "show investors how serious we are in what we are undertaking."

Couillard has boasted that one of his main sources of inspiration (he reportedly keeps it on his bedside table) is the *Fourth Revolution: The Global Race to Reinvent the State*. Co-authored by the editor and a leading columnist

at the *Economist*, the British weekly that speaks for the most powerful sections of world finance capital, the *Fourth Revolution* argues that the massive social spending and privatizations that were implemented by Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States in the 1980s and then emulated by capitalist governments the world over were only "half-measures." Governments, insist John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, must today finish this "half-revolution" by levelling all that remains of the welfare state.

This is precisely what the Couillard government has set out to do. Since coming to power in April 2014, the Liberals have:

*Adopted legislation (Bill 3) that takes the axe to municipal employees' pensions by eliminating inflation-indexing, making workers responsible for much of any pension-plan deficits, and dramatically raising workers' pension contributions, thereby slashing their take-home pay by thousands of dollars per year.

*Demanded sweeping contract concessions from Quebec's half-million public sector workers. This includes a two-year wage freeze starting this April and annual increases of just 1 percent per year in the subsequent three years; an increase in the retirement age; much greater penalties for workers who take early retirement; and reduced pensions.

*Announced cuts of \$1 billion in education that are to be realized by slashing university and college (CEGEP) budgets by a further \$200 million, raising student-teacher ratios in public schools, eliminating supports for students with "special needs," and lengthening public school teachers' work-week by 10 percent with no increase in pay.

* Adopted legislation (Bill 10) that eliminates and merges local health authorities, centralizing power in the hands of the Health Minister and his appointees, with a view to eliminating nearly 1,000 health management

positions and reducing health spending by more than \$200 million per year.

* Slashed funding for social assistance (welfare and disability payments) by \$211 million and eliminated 500 of the 1,200 “casual” jobs at the Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity.

* Raised public day care and auto insurance fees, electricity rates, and taxes on gasoline and tobacco products.

* Transferred management of large infrastructure projects to the *Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec*—a private investment fund set up by the provincial government to administer public pension plans—thereby tying such projects to investor returns and opening the door to their outright privatization.

The Liberal government knows full well that its austerity measures will provoke mass working-class opposition and is preparing to use emergency laws and the state repression to force them through. Couillard and his colleagues are fervent defenders of the police violence and draconian legislation the Liberal government of Jean Charest used against the 2012 Quebec student strike. One of the first actions taken by the Couillard Liberal government, in the face of a possible Quebec-wide construction strike, was to announce that it would tolerate no worker job action and illegalize any strike before even a single worker had walked off the job.

In implementing big business’s reactionary agenda, the Liberals, however, will above all rely on the trade unions to keep the working class in check. For decades, the union bureaucrats have suppressed the class struggle, torpedoing every major working class movement in the name of preserving “social peace.”

Significantly, the union bureaucrats have made a spate of statements in recent weeks expressing concern that they will not be able to control an explosion of working-class anger. “There is a groundswell in the population that we have not seen for many years,” admitted the secretary-general of the *Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec* (FTQ-Quebec Federation of Labour), Serge Cadieux. For his part, QFL president Daniel Boyer said, “I have been asked by members whether I’m prepared to go to prison; we have members who are ready to defy a government decree or emergency law.”

The corporate media has also expressed its fear of a return of the “Maple Spring,” a reference to the 2012 student strike, which shook the province for six months. But, as in 2012, the ruling class is banking on the unions to isolate and smother the opposition to austerity and to

channel it behind Quebec nationalism and the big business Parti Québécois (PQ).

In May 2012, when the student strike threatened to provoke a mass movement of the working class against the Charest Liberal government and its austerity program, the unions launched the slogan “After the street, the ballot box” in order to put an end to the strike and channel the opposition movement behind the election of a PQ government.

The alternate governing party of the Quebec elite, the PQ has imposed massive attacks on the working class in close collaboration with the trade unions, most infamously between 1996 and 1998, when the Bouchard-Landry PQ government implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

Elected to a minority government in September 2012 with support of the unions and the pseudo-left Quebec Solidaire, the PQ quickly defused the political crisis provoked by the student strike. Then, in a matter of weeks, it pivoted to the imposition of austerity measures, including university fee hikes—measures that went beyond those of Charest and foreshadowed those now being implemented by Couillard.

To prevent another, even bigger betrayal, workers in Quebec must break free of the political and organizational grip of the pro-capitalist unions and transform the struggle against the Couillard government into a Canada-wide mobilization of the working class against the destruction of jobs and the dismantling of public services. Such a mobilization must be based on the struggle for a workers’ government, which will resolve the capitalist crisis, not on the backs of the workers, but at the expense of big business and the profit system.



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