

Quebec workers on a collision course with Liberal government

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Workers are on a collision course with Philippe Couillard's Quebec Liberal government.

Since coming to power 11 months ago, it has dramatically intensified the austerity program pursued by all Quebec governments, whether Liberal or Parti Québécois (PQ), for decades.

Claiming that Quebec risks going the way of Greece if public finances are not fundamentally restructured, Couillard and the troika of former bankers and corporate executives he has named to the province's key economic ministries have imposed billions in social spending cuts, while hiking electricity rates and user fees for day care and other public services.

A key element in the government's austerity program is sweeping cuts to the wages, pensions and other terms of employment of the workers who administer public and social services.

With the collective agreements of the province's half-million public sector workers—nurses and other hospital workers, public school and CEGEP (college) teachers, civil servants, etc.—set to expire at the end of March, the government has tabled a provocative “offer” riddled with concessions. These include a two-year wage freeze followed by annual pay increases of just one percent (for a total of three percent over five years), an increase in the retirement age, cuts to pensions and regressive changes to work rules and staffing levels.

Teachers, for example, would have to contend with increased class-sizes and a reduction of support for “special needs” students, while having their workweek increased by 10 percent with no increase in pay.

The assault on public sector workers follows the National Assembly's adoption last December of Bill 3, which slashes municipal workers' pensions and, through increased pension-premiums, cuts their real take-home pay by thousands of dollars per year.

There is mounting mass popular opposition to the Couillard's big business agenda. Hundreds of thousands of workers and young people have participated in anti-government protests. While the public sector unions are pleading with the government for “good faith” negotiations, the palpable anger of the rank-and-file is forcing local unions to hold strike votes at a growing number of workplaces.

This week, the student union ASSE (Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante/Association for Student-Union Solidarity) announced that 30,000 students at Quebec universities and CEGEPs have voted to go on strike for at least two weeks starting March 23—the minimum support-level for it to launch an “anti-austerity strike.” More than 100,000 other students are to vote on whether to join the strike in the coming days.

For weeks there has been nervous commentary in the corporate media about the prospect of a second “Maple Spring,” a reference to the student strike which convulsed Quebec for six months in 2012.

The heightening of class tensions is palpable. The media is already trying to whip up animosity against the impending student strike with claims that the strike votes are not representative of the “silent majority” and calls for the state to enforce students' “democratic right” to attend classes.

No one should harbour any illusions. The ruling class is determined to restructure class relations at the expense of working people and will use all the repressive powers of the state to try to stamp out opposition. Its treatment of the municipal workers is a case in point. While the media ran an unrelenting vilification campaign depicting the workers as “selfish,” the City of Montreal suspended and fired dozens of workers who participated in a protest inside City Hall last August.

It is common knowledge that if the public sector unions are compelled by the rank-and-file to call a strike, Couillard will follow the federal Conservative government's playbook by declaring it illegal. One of the Liberals' first actions after returning to power was to announce that they would outlaw a possible province-wide construction workers' strike even before it began.

That said, the ruling class depends, above all, on the trade unions to contain and suppress working class opposition. In 2012, the unions isolated striking students in the face of mounting police violence and anti-strike court injunctions, then tried to force through an agreement that would have effectively implemented the government's university tuition-fee hikes.

Several weeks later, when the Charest Liberal government's anti-strike Bill 78 provoked mass working class opposition,

threatening to produce a situation akin to that in France in May-June 1968, the unions moved decisively to shut down the student strike and harness the opposition to Charest to the election of a PQ government, as exemplified by their slogan “After the streets, the ballot box.” As for the trade union-backed NDP, it refused to provide even nominal support to the striking students or to oppose Bill 78.

The unions’ suppression of the student strike was abetted by the pseudo-left Quebec Solidaire, which sought an electoral pact with the PQ, and by CLASSE (ASSE’s predecessor) which quickly bowed to the unions’ demand it shelve any call for worker job-action, and joined in the promotion of the big business PQ as a “progressive” alternative to the Liberals.

The union bureaucracy realizes that it sits atop a membership seething with anger and anxious for a working-class counter-offensive to Couillard.

“I’ve been asked by members if I’m ready to go to jail,” exclaims an anguished Daniel Boyer, president of the Quebec Federation of Labour. “They are ready to fight a decree or a special (anti-strike) law.”

Although the government has boasted to both domestic and international big business that its austerity program is “non-negotiable,” the unions are seeking to drag out the public sector contract negotiations and ensnare workers in a prolonged campaign of protests. What they call the “ultimate weapon”—a legal, collective bargaining strike restricted to public sector workers—does not even figure in their proposed “mobilization” agenda until next fall.

At the same time, the bureaucracy is aware that its treacherous policies have alienated large sections of the working class. In an attempt to boost its credibility, the union officialdom is using various community and pseudo-left groups, organized in such union-controlled coalitions as “Refusons l’austérité” (Refuse Austerity), to give themselves a “left” cover.

Particularly prominent are many former CLASSE leaders. In an interview with *Le Devoir*, Renaud Poirier St-Pierre, himself a former CLASSE activist who is now working for the CNTU (Confederation of National Trade Unions), explained, “There are numerous 2012 veterans now working for unions, notably many former members of CLASSE’s executive.”

A handful of bureaucrats including Marc Ranger—the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) official who headed the inter-union coalition that confined the municipal workers’ struggle to futile protests—are making use of CLASSE’s abortive “social strike” slogan, calling for a “24-hour social strike” on May 1. This would be little more than a protest limited to appeals to Couillard to change course, and aimed at boosting the unions’ authority so as to prevent the independent political mobilization of the working class.

For all their bluster, the unions are not opposed to the elite’s austerity agenda. “We are ready to negotiate in good faith,” declares the QFL’s Boyer, adding “We are not against a

balanced budget, but we find that the government goes too quickly.”

While big business around the globe is seeking to dismantle what remains of the social benefits and rights the working class won through mass struggles over the last century, the unions are presenting Couillard’s austerity program as an attack on “Quebec” and the “Quebec model.” What they really mean by this are the privileges of the union bureaucracy.

More than anywhere else in North America, the unions have been incorporated into the day-to-day management of class relations, though numerous tripartite committees and “national summits,” including those that approved previous PQ austerity programs, and through their control of multi-billion dollar investments such as the QFL’s Solidarity Fund and the CNTU’s *Fondation*.

While criticising the Liberals for their “ideologically-motivated” austerity program, the unions don’t say a word about the record of the pro-Quebec independence PQ, with which they have been allied for decades. During the 18-month interregnum between the Charest and Couillard Liberal governments, the union-supported PQ regime imposed social spending cuts steeper than those of Charest, including cuts to university and CEGEP budgets and annual university tuition fee hikes, while bringing forward a chauvinist, anti-immigrant “Charter of Quebec values” to divide the working class.

In their struggle against austerity, Quebec workers face a political struggle, not just against the Couillard Liberal government, but the entire Quebec and Canadian ruling elite and their apparatus of repression, including the police and the courts.

To mobilize their class strength, workers must break politically and organizationally from the nationalist, pro-capitalist unions and their pseudo-left allies. In the first instance, this means building rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the union apparatus, so as to prepare a political general strike to bring down the Couillard government and mobilize workers in the Canada and the US in a united struggle against austerity and for the bringing to power of workers’ governments.



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