

Quebec criminalizing working-class struggle

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25 May 2015

Quebec's Liberal government is intensifying its assault on workers' rights and its drive to criminalize popular resistance to its austerity program.

Municipal Affairs Minister Pierre Moreau pledged Friday that Quebec will give the province's municipal governments new powers to impose cuts in real wages and other concessions on municipal workers.

"You've asked for new tools," Moreau told the annual meeting of the Union of Quebec Municipalities (UQM), "and we're going to give them to you." Changes to the "labour relations framework at the municipal level" would be discussed, he said, when the province and municipalities begin negotiations on a new fiscal pact this August.

Quebec City Mayor Régis Labeaume has long been urging the provincial government to give municipalities the power to lock out their employees. But he and Montreal Mayor Dennis Coderre have recently gone further, calling for the effective end to collective bargaining at the municipal level. The mayors of Quebec's two largest cities are demanding municipal governments be empowered to impose contracts on their employees by decree, when "negotiations" reach an impasse.

According to Labeaume and Coderre, it is "unfair" that the provincial government can adopt "emergency" legislation to impose contracts on provincial public sector workers, and indeed all workers in the provincially-regulated sector of the economy, but the municipalities can't and must instead appeal to the Quebec government to intervene. Municipalities shouldn't be "at the mercy of another government," complained Coderre Friday.

The provincial Liberal government, Moreau told Quebec's mayors, is willing to consider granting municipalities the power to impose contracts by fiat and lock out their workers. However, he added, there are other alternatives, including binding arbitration. "There are several possibilities," said Moreau, "many more than just lockouts. ... Labour relations will be part of the discussions, but I won't tell you today where we'll land because then there would be no discussion."

Labeaume, Coderre, and UQM President Suzanne Roy all welcomed Moreau's announcement. "We'll begin," said Roy, "by really sitting down to work on this dossier and see exactly how we can have good tools to enable us to intervene in respect to (worker) remuneration."

Last December, the Liberal government rammed through a

municipal pension "reform" (Bill 3) that forces municipal workers, including firefighters and municipal transit workers, to pay thousands more dollars annually in pension contributions, while slashing pension benefits. In addition to suspending inflation-indexing for current retirees, Bill 3 puts in place a mechanism for permanent pension cuts.

The municipal pension cuts were only a first volley in a frontal assault on public and social services and the jobs, wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them.

Claiming that Quebec must fundamentally restructure public services to avoid a Greece-type situation, the Liberals are implementing billions in social spending cuts, while raising electricity rates, daycare fees and various regressive taxes and user-charges.

Faced with widespread and mounting popular opposition, the government, with the full support of big business and the corporate media, is resorting to repression and police violence.

It is an open secret that Premier Philippe Couillard and his Liberals are preparing to criminalize any major job action on the part of 550,000 provincial public sector workers—hospital workers, nurses, civil servants, teachers, CEGEP instructors and school board employees—from whom they are demanding massive concessions. These include a two-year wage freeze, an increase in the retirement age, a reduction in pension benefits, and work-load increases. For public school teachers, this will mean a hike in class-sizes and a reduction in support for "special needs students."

While the union bureaucrats plead with Couillard "for good faith negotiations," the government is not letting any opportunity slip to demonstrate that it intends to suppress worker opposition.

The government obtained a ruling from the provincial labour board that an "anti-austerity" walkout by 10,000 CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) instructors on May Day would constitute an "illegal strike." It is now prevailing on the administrations of the ten CEGEPs where the one-day walkout went ahead, contrary to the instructions of the leaders of the Confederation of National Trade Unions and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), to take disciplinary action.

CEGEP Rosemont in east-end Montreal has, for example, suspended six teachers.

At the government's urging, hospitals and health care facilities are seeking to stamp out workplace agitation. They are

forbidding things like leafleting and wearing union-supplied t-shirts with a political message that have been standard practice in every contract negotiation for half-a-century.

According to a recent article in *La Presse* at one Montreal health care facility, CIUSSS de l'Est-de-l'Île, ten workers have been disciplined for wearing anti-austerity t-shirts, with one even being suspended.

"Since the election of the Liberal government, we're facing unprecedented repression," Marc Cuconati, the president of the union local that represents orderlies at Montreal's Maisonneuve-Rosemont Hospital, told *La Presse*. "Every protest action is smothered and gagged."

As the WWSWS has previously explained, the government was determined to stamp out this spring's "anti-austerity" student strike, taking a hardline stance that from the outset matched the repression it unleashed against striking students in 2012. Education Minister François Blais repeatedly asserted that there is no democratic right of students to strike and said his goal was to end the decades-long "acceptability" of this practice in Quebec. For weeks police were declaring protests illegal on virtually a daily basis. When students at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) staged an occupation to protest the aggressive deployment of security guards and police on their campus, Premier Couillard personally instructed the university's rector to have the occupation violently broken up.

Motivating this turn toward state repression and violence is the fear of the government and big business of mass popular opposition, above all the mobilization of the working class.

But while it uses the police and courts to intimidate workers and youth, the ruling elite relies on the unions to contain and politically suppress working class opposition, reprising the role that the pro-capitalist unions have played for decades.

In May 2012, when hundreds of thousands of workers came into the streets to oppose Bill 78, the draconian anti-student strike law, the unions quickly intervened to prevent the emergence of a broader challenge to the then Charest Liberal government's austerity agenda. The unions announced that they would obey Bill 78, which stipulated that they had to instruct their members who worked at universities and CEGEPs to help break the strike, and redoubled their efforts to channel the opposition movement behind the election of the big business Parti Québécois (PQ). With the unions' support, the PQ came to power in September 2012 and promptly implemented austerity measures that went far beyond those of Charest.

When students launched their anti-austerity strike this spring, the unions rushed to announce they would have no part of it.

The unions are seeking to straitjacket the public sector workers, whose contract expired March 31, in a collective bargaining system designed to enforce the dictates of big business and its government. The union leaders are adamant that the public sector workers can take no significant action till a lengthy mediation process is completed and "essential

services" are negotiated. Moreover, if a strike is ever called it must follow to the letter the anti-worker laws passed by various Liberal and PQ governments.

A walkout in defiance of these laws or a future back-to-work bill would be an "atomic bomb," exclaimed CNTU Vice-President Francine Lévesque last month.

Underscoring their real attitude to the fight against big business's austerity drive, the union bureaucrats have responded to the PQ's selection of the multi-millionaire press and telecommunications baron Pierre-Karl Péladeau—a notorious rightwinger—as its new leader by reaffirming their support for the PQ. Quebec Federation of Labour President Daniel Boyer had claimed to oppose Péladeau, but no sooner was he crowned PQ leader than Boyer declared he is ready to give him a "chance." When Péladeau called for a "national" economic summit in his maiden speech in the National Assembly as PQ leader, Boyer rushed to endorse the proposal.

In their struggle against austerity, Quebec workers face a political struggle and 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.

However, they have even more powerful allies—workers across Canada, the US, and around the world.

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



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