

Quebec unions seek to smother opposition to austerity

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3 July 2015

The Common Front, an alliance of Quebec public sector unions, has officially asked for “mediation,” citing a “major blockage” in contract negotiations with Quebec’s Liberal government.

The Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), and *Secrétariat intersyndical des services publics* (Inter-union Secretariat of Public Services) represent more than 400,000 of the half-million hospital workers, nurses, civil servants, and public school and CEGEP (college) teachers from whom Philippe Couillard’s Liberal government is demanding sweeping contract concessions.

Under Quebec’s restrictive collective bargaining system, only after 60 days of mediation can workers obtain the legal right to strike. The unions are making use of this—as well as the lengthy legally-prescribed negotiations over the provision of “essential services”—to justify pushing back as far as possible any action against the Couillard government.

The government is thus being given a freehand to implement massive cuts in health care and education, including an ever-swelling number of job cuts.

CNTU Vice-President Francine Lévesque has had to concede that workers are primed for a fight. “Some of our unions have made it clear,” said Lévesque, “that they are already mobilized and ready to go into action the minute we tell them it is necessary.”

The concessions that the government is demanding are unprecedented. They include: a two-year wage freeze, to be followed by three years of 1 percent per annum wage increases; an increase in the retirement age, lower pensions, and sharply increased penalties for those who retire early; and increased workloads. The government is demanding, for example, that public school class-size caps be raised, even as it proposes to sharply reduce support for “special needs” pupils.

According to CNTU negotiators, the government recently proposed to increase to 200 kilometers (124 miles) the distance a displaced worker covered by a job-security guarantee could be asked to travel to his new job. The

government also wants to gut overtime. It is demanding the power to extend the work-day beyond the current 7- or 8-hour shifts without having to pay workers overtime. In the name of “flexibility,” it is also wants the right to spread the regular work-week over more than five days.

The Couillard government’s frontal assault on public sector workers is a key element in a broader austerity agenda that targets the entire working class. Little more than a year-old, the Liberal government has already slashed municipal workers’ pensions, hiked day-care fees and electricity rates, and cut billions from public and social services.

At a Liberal Party congress last month, Couillard and his principal ministers proclaimed that the government has only begun to implement its plans to “restructure” Quebec. It will need, they asserted, to raise the retirement age for all workers and to reduce the scope and cost of Quebec’s free, universal public health insurance system, Medicare.

Similar austerity policies are being pursued by the federal Conservative and provincial governments across Canada and in all the advanced capitalist countries. Big business everywhere is attempting to restructure class relations to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on the backs of working people.

Yet the pro-capitalist, Quebec nationalist unions are doing everything in their power to confine the Quebec public sector workers’ struggle within the straitjacket of collective bargaining. The unions are adamant that their aim is “negotiated agreements.” They are systematically opposing all calls for a working-class political challenge to the Couillard government’s austerity agenda and for making the Quebec public sector workers’ struggle the spearhead of a counter-offensive of the entire Canadian working class.

No attempt is made, for example, to unite the Quebec workers with teachers in Ontario who are facing government demands for a two-year wage freeze and increased workloads. The Ontario Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne already used an emergency law in May to outlaw local teacher strikes and it is clearly preparing to meet a possible province-wide walkout of teachers with back-to-

work legislation and the threat of imposed concessionary contracts.

For months, the Common Front and its affiliated unions have been pleading to the government for “negotiations in good faith,” while pledging that they will follow to the letter all the stipulations of the labor code that have been designed to impede and frustrate workers’ struggle.

Meanwhile, Couillard, Finance Minister Leitão and Treasury Board President Coiteux insist there is no turning back from their austerity plans and that any improvement to the government’s public-sector wage offer would have to be paid for by increased workloads and other concessions.

It is an open secret that the Liberals are preparing to illegalize a public sector worker strike and threaten workers with punitive fines, even mass firings, to force a return to work. In 1999, the then Parti Québécois (PQ) government threatened nurses with savage reprisals when they briefly defied a back-to-work order. In 2005, Jean Charest’s Liberal government, in which Couillard served as health minister, imposed seven-year long concessionary contracts on Quebec public sector workers by government-decree.

Already, at the express demand of the government, management at various Montreal health care institutions are attempting to intimidate workers by banning the distribution of flyers opposing austerity and the wearing of clothing with political slogans—practices that have been standard in every contract negotiation for decades.

The government also showed its readiness to use the full power of the state to crush opposition to its austerity agenda with its reaction to this Spring’s student strike. Student demonstrations were routinely declared illegal and students and their supporters attacked by the police. In a concerted drive to “change the rules of the game” by criminalizing a form of democratic protest widely practiced in Quebec since the 1960s, Education Minister François Blais urged universities and CEGEPs to expel strike leaders and repeatedly declared that there is no student “right to strike.”

Far from preparing workers for the coming confrontation with the government, the unions, as they have done numerous times in the past, are using the threat of strikebreaking legislation to argue against militant job action. In the event such legislation is adopted, they will use it as the pretext for suppressing any struggle whatsoever.

Strike action, declares the CNTU’s Lévesque, “is not our goal. We will exhaust every other means before calling a strike, because we know the magnitude of the impact that can have.” Earlier Lévesque described a public sector worker general strike as an “atomic bomb.”

QFL President Daniel Boyer, for his part, argues that workers must beware they not “provoke” the government by mobilizing for a fight. “We are concerned,” said Boyer last

month, “that if we call a strike, it might provide the government with an excuse to legislate.”

Should rank-and-file pressure cause the unions to organize a few work-stoppages in the Fall, they will be aimed at reinforcing the union bureaucracy’s control and authority and dissipating workers’ anger.

While claiming to oppose austerity, the unions have reaffirmed their support for the big business PQ following its choice of the notorious ultra-right press baron Pierre-Karl Péladeau as party leader.

And for all their rhetorical broadsides against Couillard and his government, the unions continue to collaborate with it behind the scenes, most recently in helping draft legislation (Bill 57) to “share” the burden of shoring up private sector pension plans between workers and management.

In the struggle against austerity, Quebec public sector workers confront a political struggle not only against the Couillard Liberal government, but against the entire ruling class in Quebec and Canada and their repressive state apparatus, including the police and the courts.

In order to mobilize their class strength, workers must prepare a political and organizational break with the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions. This means building committees of struggle of rank-and-file workers, independent of the union apparatuses, and with the aim of preparing a political general strike to bring down the Couillard government and mobilize Canadian and American workers in a common struggle against austerity and for workers’ governments.



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