

Quebec Common Front seeks limited rotating-strike mandate

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The “Common Front” of Quebec public sector unions is currently polling more than 400,000 hospital workers, nurses, health-care technicians, teachers, school board employees and civil servants for authorization to call six days of rotating strikes on a “regional or national (i.e. Quebec-wide)” basis.

In calling for such limited job action, the unions are seeking to contain and derail the mass opposition to the austerity policies and concession demands of the Quebec Liberal government. To date, the only Quebec-wide action that has been announced is a demonstration to be held in downtown Montreal on Saturday, October 3.

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, meanwhile, is adamant his government will not retreat from its plans to slash social spending and further reduce taxes for big business and the most privileged sections of Quebec society.

Not only in Quebec, but across Canada, in the United States and around the globe, the ruling classes are determined to dismantle what remains of the public services and social rights workers wrested from them through the mass and revolutionary struggles of the 20th century.

Egged on by the Quebec and Canadian ruling elite, the Couillard government is intent on imposing massive concessions on the more than half-million Quebec public sector workers. These concessions include: a two-year wage freeze, followed by three more years of 1 percent pay hikes; increased work-loads; and the raising of the retirement age and pension cuts. The government’s goal is not just to lower taxes on the wealthy and on corporations, but to pave the way for the privatization of public services and an all-out assault on the living conditions of the entire working class.

The union bureaucrats have no intention of mobilizing the workers they purport to represent in a counter-offensive in defence of public services, wages and jobs.

They are working might and main to shackle workers within the straitjacket of a sham “negotiation” and a collective bargaining regime that has been designed by successive big business governments to frustrate worker struggle and keep workers under the constant threat of emergency strike-breaking legislation.

The unions are well aware that an all-out strike of public sector workers—which they themselves describe as an “atomic bomb”—could quickly escape their control and trigger a broad popular upsurge against austerity, threatening the competitive position of Quebec and Canadian big business and the capitalist profit system as a whole. That’s why the unions—the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) and the *Secretariat intersyndical des service publics* (SISP)—are calling only for rotating strikes, and in doing so, have stressed that their aim is not to challenge the government, but to avoid a confrontation with it and secure “good faith” negotiations.

It is an open secret that the government is preparing to use an emergency anti-strike law to criminalize a public sector workers’ strike and impose concession-laden contracts by government decree. Instead of preparing workers for this eventuality, by seeking to warn and mobilize the entire working class in Quebec and across Canada, the unions are invoking the threat of a head-on clash with the government as the pretext for demobilizing and dividing workers, including through their bankrupt rotating strike strategy. Thus, FTQ President Daniel Boyer recently stated: “We are not totally crazy! We know if we strike it could give ammunition to the government.”

It should be recalled that in 2005, the Quebec public sector unions, including those that now comprise the Common Front, used the Charest Liberal government’s emergency strikebreaking legislation to justify their termination of all job action and submission to

government imposed, seven year-long concession contracts.

Far from seeking to use the public sector workers' struggle as the catalyst for a movement of the entire working class against capitalist austerity, the unions are trying to divert workers' opposition behind the big business, pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ). Common Front union bureaucrats recently begged the PQ and its new leader—the notorious strikebreaker and media and telecommunications tycoon Pierre-Karl Péladeau—to support public sector workers' contract demands.

In a frankly obscene statement, CNTU President Jacques Létourneau tried to sweep Péladeau's anti-worker track record under the rug. "The CNTU has already had a turbulent and difficult experience with Monsieur Péladeau," acknowledged Létourneau. "At the same time, he is no longer a business leader" and "we hope that he has moved on."

These statements would be laughable were there implications not so dangerous. The PQ, which has alternated with the Liberals as Quebec's governing party for the past four decades, has repeatedly come into headlong conflict with the working class. When it last formed the government, it imposed the steepest social spending cuts in Quebec history. Péladeau, who the unions once dubbed the "King of the lockout," speaks for the most right-wing sections of the Quebec elite. While he has hypocritically mouthed some criticisms of Couillard's austerity measures, Péladeau has made clear his real attitude to the public sector workers with repeated statements saying that he won't support their demands.

For over forty years, the unions have painted the PQ and the Quebec *indépendantiste* movement it leads as an ally of the working class, or at least as a "progressive" alternative to the federalist Liberals. This has been a central part of their continuous efforts to politically suppress the working class and subordinate it to the ruling big business elite. A graphic demonstration of this was the role the unions played during the 2012 Quebec student strike, which at its height threatened to provoke a mass movement of the working class. The unions systematically isolated the students in the face of state repression and police violence and played the pivotal role in channeling the mass opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the election of a Parti Québécois government. Once in power, the PQ imposed even larger social cuts than Charest, criminalized the 2013 construction workers' strike, and fueled anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism with its anti-democratic

"Quebec Charter of Values".

For over thirty years, the unions have isolated and betrayed one worker struggle after another, while collaborating with the ruling class in imposing round after round of concessions and job cuts. Through its increasing integration with big business and the capitalist state, via tripartite union-management-government committees, and its control of massive union-sponsored investment funds (like the FTQ's Solidarity Fund), the union bureaucracy has developed material interests that are different and opposed to those of the workers it legally represents.

Quebec public sector workers face a political struggle, one that goes far beyond the limits of a trade union struggle, no matter how militant. Austerity is not an "ideological" choice of the Liberals, but the class strategy of the Canadian and international capitalist elite. In seeking to impose it, the Quebec Liberal government will employ the full powers of the state, including the police and courts.

Public sector workers must seek the support of the entire working class in Quebec and across Canada, in a common struggle to force the repeal of the anti-strike laws, defend and expand health care, education and all public services, and secure a substantial increase in wages and pensions for all workers.

To prosecute this struggle, workers should form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses and launch an urgent campaign—at schools and hospitals, at factories and other work places, and in working class neighborhoods—to organize a counter-offensive against capitalist austerity. This campaign must prepare the working class for mass defiance of the emergency strike-breaking legislation held in reserve by the Couillard government. Above all, it must be guided by a socialist perspective: the political mobilization of workers throughout Canada—French, English, and immigrant—in the fight for a workers' government.



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