Quebec public sector workers outraged by Liberal concession demands

A WSWS reporting team
5 October 2015

Quebec public sector workers and their supporters took to the streets of Montreal *en masse* Saturday to oppose the provincial Liberal government's sweeping concession demands.

Called by an inter-union alliance known as the Common Front, the march was joined by 150,000 workers and youth from all parts of Quebec. Hospital workers, medical technicians, civil servants, public school and CEGEP teachers and administrative personnel were joined by family members, students, and retirees.

The massive turnout was yet another indication of the strength of working-class opposition to the Couillard Liberal government's austerity agenda.

Since returning to power in April 2014, the Liberals have cut billions from public and social services, slashed municipal workers' pensions, and imposed major hikes in day care, electricity and other tariffs.

Now Premier Philippe Couillard and the troika of former bankers he has ensconced in the province's major economic ministries are intent on imposing historic rollbacks on Quebec's more than half-million public and para-public employees. These include: a two-year wage-freeze, an increase in the retirement age, reduced pension benefits, and bigger workloads.

It is an open secret that the government is preparing to meet any serious job action by public sector workers with an emergency law, criminalizing all strikes and walkouts and imposing concession contracts by government decree.

In 2014, the new-elected Liberal government announced that it would illegalize in advance any job action by the province's construction workers. Last month it announced that it will change the province's labor laws to allow municipalities to unilaterally impose contracts on their employees if collective bargaining reaches an "impasse."

While the government, egged on by the Quebec and Canadian corporate elite, prepares for all-out war, the unions are doing everything to contain and constrain the anger among the rank-and-file and to politically derail the mounting working-class challenge to the Liberals' austerity agenda. This includes appealing to the big business Parti Quebecois (PQ) and its new leader, the notorious anti-worker proprietor of the Quebcor media and telecommunications empire, Pierre-Karl Péladeau, for support.

The Common Front unions have asked for and received an overwhelming strike mandate, but only for 6 days of rotating walkouts organized on either a regional or Quebec-wide basis.

At the same time, the union bureaucrats are desperately seeking to avoid any discussion of the government's preparations to illegalize job action and what workers should do in that event.

At the conclusion of Saturday's demonstration, union leaders again urged the government to bargain in good faith, emphasizing that their objective is to arrive at a negotiated agreement.

"We believe in negotiation," declared CNTU President Jacques Létourneau. "We believe we can reach a negotiated agreement. But it's clear that if the government remains immobile, as it has for the past year, the mobilization will intensify. It's clear the anger of the workers will be more and more felt."

The muted, demagogic threats of the union leaders to organize "socio-economic disruption" *(perturbations socioéconomiques)* were invariably met with boisterous applause from workers anxious to hit back against the government.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) distributed 2,000 copies of a statement entitled

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“Prepare mass defiance of the anti-union laws: the political issues in the fight against austerity.”

The statement explained that in opposing the Couillard government’s austerity drive, workers are challenging the program of the entire capitalist elite and will come into headlong conflict with the government, its anti-worker laws, and the entire repressive machinery of the state. It urged workers to take the leadership of the struggle against austerity and concessions out of the hands of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses, and make it the catalyst for a counter-offensive of the entire working class in Quebec and across Canada in defence of public and social services and for the development of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at bringing to power a workers’ government.

Many of the participants in Saturday’s march who were interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* were critical of the unions’ rotating strike strategy. Several voiced deep concern when WSWS reporters warned that the unions are preparing to use the imposition of an emergency-law to short-circuit the mass opposition to the Couillard government, just as they did in 2005. At that time the Charest Liberal government imposed seven-year concessionary contracts on public sector workers by government-decree.

“It’s important that we voice our anger,” said Jean-Francois, a construction worker. “There are cuts everywhere. But we’re directly affected because my wife is a teacher in a class for special-needs students.”

Annick, his wife, added, “We are impacted in education, especially as regards students in difficulty. Just at our school board in Val des Soeurs, they’ve cut 15 special classes. They’re maxing-out the teacher-pupil ratios in every class.

“Austerity isn’t just being imposed in Quebec. We’ve seen it in the extreme in Greece.

“And it’s not only the Liberals. The Conservatives and NDP are on the same austerity wave-length. We’ve got to get beyond that so that the workers are heard and changes made in the managing and repartition of wealth.”

Samuel, a radiology technician at Montreal’s Verdun Hospital, said he realized given the government’s repression of the 2012 Quebec student strike that an emergency strike-breaking law is “definitely a real possibility.”

He also spoke about the impact of successive rounds of budget cuts: “Every time the higher-ups take decisions we live them directly, physically, whether it’s job cuts or reduced budgets. The cuts take the form of increased work, machines in disrepair or simply lacking.

Camille, a university student, said the budget cuts at Quebec City’s Laval University had resulted in less support for students. “Austerity,” she continued, “is an ideological measure. The ultimate objective is privatization.

“The government is ready to implement an emergency law, as they did against the students in 2012.

“A much broader appeal must be made—an appeal to the whole population, because austerity means cuts in services that everyone benefits from. The entire population, not just public sector workers, should be mobilized because everyone is affected.

“Six days of strike is insufficient. If everyone stopped work at the same time, it would have an incredible impact.”

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