

Quebec repackages concessionary public-sector contract offer

A WSWS reporting team
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The Quebec Liberal government yesterday presented new contract offers for half a million public sector employees, including the province's nurses, hospital workers and technicians, civil servants, teachers and school support staff.

Treasury Board President Martin Coiteux was quick to claim that the offers represent "very significant" movement by the government.

In fact, the new offers are little more than a repackaging of the government's original proposals for sweeping contract concessions. Then as now, the Liberals are seeking to impose a significant cut in workers' real wages, an increase in the retirement age, a cut in pension benefits, and increased workloads.

Coiteux, Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, and Finance Minister Carlos Leitao have been adamant since the government tabled its first "global" wage offer last December: public sector worker wage increases must be limited to just 3 percent over 5 years, so as to meet their pledge of balanced budgets and a "competitive" tax system.

Yesterday's "new" offer scrupulously adheres to a 3 percent limit. The only difference is that rather than workers being forced to endure a two-year wage freeze followed by three years of 1 percent per annum wage increases, they would get a 1 percent wage hike in the contract's second year and no increase whatsoever in the fifth year.

To the extent that the government has placed additional money on the table, it is as part of a divisive pay-scale "simplification" scheme. In the name of eliminating "incoherencies" and better reflecting workers' education, skill-levels and responsibilities, Coiteux is proposing to give some groups of workers small additional pay raises, while cutting the wages of others.

According to union sources, the simplification scheme, constitutes "the biggest restructuring" of Quebec government pay scales since the 1960s.

The government's transparent aim in bringing this scheme forward, after contract negotiations have been underway for over a year, is to divide workers on the basis of seniority and occupation.

The government has let it be known that nurses, especially those in the higher pay grades will be rewarded under the new pay-scale system. It is precisely because they hope to strike a separate deal with the government, that the leadership of the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé* (FIQ) has kept nurses outside of the Common Front, the 400,000-member inter-union alliance formed by Quebec's principal labor federations.

The leaders of the Common Front have repeatedly warned the Couillard government of the groundswell of worker opposition to its concessionary contract offers and the broader program of savage social spending cuts of which they are part.

Within hours of the government presenting its new offers, they felt compelled to reject them. "This is four quarters instead of a dollar," said Quebec Federation of Labour President Daniel Boyer. "We'll have to take a tougher stand."

Boyer said the unions will now proceed with plans for a second wave of regional rotating strikes next week.

Coiteux, for his part, declared that "the ball is now in the unions' court," while reiterating that the government is determined to have new contracts in place by Christmas. As the Montreal daily *La Presse* noted in reporting Coiteux's remarks, "While not explicitly using the words special (anti-strike) law, Coiteux again said that the next few weeks will be

decisive.”

It is an open secret that the government is preparing to criminalize all public sector worker job-action and impose contracts by government-fiat as Liberal and Parti Quebecois governments have done repeatedly over the past three decades.

The unions, however, have kept radio silence about this threat. Not only have they failed to advance any plan for defiance of an anti-strike law, they have systematically worked to keep workers in ignorance of what the government views as its trump card.

This silence underscores that the pro-capitalist unions are hostile to any genuine working-class struggle against the Couillard government and its austerity agenda.

Rather than make the public sector workers’ struggle the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive against the dismantling of public and social services and in defence of worker rights, the unions have done everything to isolate them from the rest of the working class in Quebec and across Canada and to straitjacket their opposition to the government within the confines of a collective-bargaining dispute.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with hospital workers, teachers and school support staff who joined one-day rotating walkouts on the South Shore of Montreal and in Montreal/Laval on October 28 and 29 respectively. They discussed the political issues raised by the public sector workers’ challenge to the government’s austerity agenda and the urgency of their taking control of their struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses.

“We are on strike to improve our working conditions, but also to improve the services for the children,” Linda, an education worker told the WSWS. “There are many pupils with (learning and behavioral) difficulties, but there aren’t always adequate resources for them. The government cuts are preventing us from meeting essential and urgent needs.”

Geneviève, a pre-school teacher, spoke about the impact of the government’s cuts: “There are many students per class and the special needs students are integrated yet there is no additional support. We are only in October and already I see colleagues who are exhausted, simply wiped out.”

Asked about the threat of a government anti-strike law, Linda said, “Its rubbish. Even with such a law, I

am certain the majority of teachers won’t return to work.”

When the WSWS reporters noted the government already sought to legally bar some school support staff from joining the rotating strikes, Mélanie, a teacher’s aide, said, “I think the special law is already written. The government is just waiting for the right moment to implement it.”

Asked about what strategy workers should adopt to counter a strikebreaking law and whether they thought the unions would organize defiance of it, Geneviève said, “A Common Front of all workers is need so as to disrupt the entire province. The unions have rules to follow. We are more radical.”

Élise, a Montreal hospital laboratory technician, told the WSWS, “We are having problems, because we are short-staffed and management is always asking us to do more with less.” She explained that as the result of the opening of CHUM, the new downtown Montreal mega-hospital, lab work from three hospitals is being centralized at one existing lab, but without any additional personnel.

Nancy, a hospital administration worker, told the WSWS, “I’m one of the victims of the cuts. My workweek has been reduced to four days. Nonetheless, my workload has stayed the same. The administration is making cuts to meet its budget, but the work never diminishes.”

Nancy was angered by the Quebec government’s recent decision to provide the airline manufacturer Bombardier with US \$1 billion: “There’s money, but it isn’t being invested in the right places. The government provides funding to private schools while cutting public school budgets. Where’s the logic in that?”

Asked about what she thought about the government’s plans to legalize public sector worker job action, Nancy said, “I haven’t heard about that. You’re the first to inform me, but we won’t let ourselves be had.”



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