

# Quebec unions silent about plans to illegalize workers' job action

Laurent Lafrance  
14 November 2015

*Quebec Treasury Board President Martin Coiteux angrily denounced Quebec's public sector workers Thursday for their campaign of regional rotating strikes.*

*"It is completely unacceptable to take the Quebec population hostage by denying them services, as we've seen in recent days," Coiteux said.*

*Terming the situation "intolerable," Coiteux demanded that the unions present a counter proposal to the provincial Liberal government's latest contract proposals. On November 6, Coiteux tabled what he touted as a "new offer" to the half million provincial public sector workers—nurses, hospital workers and technicians, public school and CEGEP teachers and support staff, and civil servants.*

*This "new offer" was in fact little more than are packaging of the government's previous demands for sweeping contract concessions. These include two years of wage freezes and three years of 1 percent per annum increases in a five -year contract, a two-year hike in the retirement age, and increased workloads.*

*Coiteux's vitriolic attack on public sector workers presented an upside-down picture of the true situation. It is the Liberal government that is depriving Quebecers of vital services. Its attack on public sector workers is part of a brutal austerity program that has cut billions from health care, education, and social services.*

*Coiteux's remarks are intended to lay the political ground work for legislation criminalizing all public sector worker job-actions and imposing concessionary contracts by government decree.*

*That the Liberals are preparing to introduce such legislation has been an open secret since negotiations began last year. Yet as the article below—which first appeared on the French section of the WSWWS on October 31—explains, the unions have worked might and main to keep workers ignorant of this threat and to prevent any discussion of what workers should do to meet it.*

\*\*\*

Hundreds of thousands of Quebec public sector workers mounted one-day rotating strikes this week to protest against the provincial Liberal government's savage cuts to public services and the attack on their working conditions.

Despite the scale of the mobilization and the massive votes in favor of strike action, Premier Philippe Couillard and his Liberals are determined to impose the contract concessions demanded by big business on the half-million provincial public sector workers.

If workers continue to resist, Couillard will not hesitate to introduce legislation illegalizing all public sector worker job action and impose concessionary contracts by decree. In fact, all indications are that government is only waiting for the appropriate moment to bring forward legislation criminalizing public sector workers' resistance.

Last week, even before the rotating strikes began, the government introduced a motion in the National Assembly to legally bar school monitors from walking off the job.

Although this measure was not ultimately adopted, it must be taken as a serious warning. If the government is willing from the very start to illegalize job action by one group of public sector workers, it will not hesitate to criminalize the public sector workers' struggle if it threatens its austerity agenda.

The union leaders know full well that an "emergency" strikebreaking law is a key weapon in the government's arsenal. In recent years, successive Liberal and Parti Québécois governments have criminalized almost every popular opposition movement, including the 2012 student strike (Law 78) and the 2013 province-wide construction strike. Only a few weeks ago, the Couillard government announced that it plans to give municipalities the power to

ban strikes and unilaterally impose collective agreements on their employees when contract negotiations reach a “dead end.” These anti-democratic measures are also taking place at the federal level. For postal workers, railway employees and Air Canada workers the legal right to strike has effectively been abolished.

However, the Quebec public sector unions are doing nothing to prepare workers to meet the threat of an anti-strike law. In fact, they are deliberately keeping workers in the dark about the government’s preparations.

This is because they fear the rank-and-file will respond to the threat of an emergency law by pressing for the full mobilization of public sector workers and the entire working class—the last thing the union leaders want.

Rather, they intend to present workers with a fait accompli. Terrified of the consequences of a genuine working-class challenge to the government and its austerity agenda, in the event of a strikebreaking law the unions will tell workers that there is nothing to do but return to work and make futile appeals to the courts or other capitalist institutions like the Parti Québécois. In short, the union leaders are planning to use a special law to justify a total and immediate capitulation, as they did in 2005 when the Liberal government of Jean Charest imposed a seven-year concessionary contract on Quebec public sector workers.

Under pressure from the membership, the public sector unions have been compelled to call rotating strikes. But they have repeatedly indicated that their goal is not to challenge the government but merely to secure a “negotiated agreement.” In this labor dispute as in so many others, the unions are ready to impose the employer-demanded rollbacks, provided this is done through “good faith” negotiations—that is, through the union apparatus and its highly paid officials.

The unions long ago ceased to serve, even in a limited way, as genuine organizations of working class defense against the employers. Over the past three decades, they have been transformed into a virtual industrial police force that suppresses worker resistance to wage and job cuts and the employers’ endless demands for increased productivity and competitiveness, i.e. investor profits. Through their participation in tripartite management committees with the government and employers, and their control of large investment funds (such as the Quebec Federation of Labour’s Solidarity Fund), the union bureaucrats have developed material interests different from, and directly opposed to, those of the workers they purport to represent.

If the union leaders have repeatedly voiced their eagerness to avoid a strike, it is because they are aware of the huge popular anger against austerity and the well of popular support for the public sector workers. They fear that the mobilization of public sector workers against the hated Couillard government would become the catalyst for mass opposition against austerity and endanger the profitability of capitalism in Quebec and throughout Canada.

The public sector workers face a political struggle. In opposing the Liberals’ austerity measures, workers are challenging not just the Couillard government. The entire Quebec and Canadian ruling elite is determined to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis through the destruction of what remains of the social rights workers won through the mass struggles of the last century. Toward that end, the Couillard and his ruling class backers stand ready to mobilize the repressive apparatus of the state—the police, the courts and anti-labor laws—against public sector workers.

Public sector workers, however, have potentially even more powerful allies: the millions of workers in Quebec, in Canada and around the world who share their opposition to austerity and are determined to defend public services and democratic rights and secure genuine social equality. Quebec public sector workers must immediately start preparing to defy a Liberal anti-strike law as part of a cross-Canada industrial and political counteroffensive of the working class in defense of public services, jobs and worker rights.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**