

Quebec public sector unions cancel three-day strike

Richard Dufour
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The Common Front, an alliance of unions that is bargaining on behalf of more than 400,000 Quebec hospital workers, teachers, civil servants and other public sector workers, has cancelled a three-day province-wide strike that was to begin today and continue through Thursday December 4.

The cancellation was announced at the same time that the unions presented a new “counteroffer” that goes a long way toward meeting the provincial Liberal government’s concession demands.

Common Front leaders justified the decision to cancel the three-day strike with the claim this would “leave the maximum room for advancing negotiations.”

In reality, it will demobilize the rank-and-file and embolden the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard, which, since coming to power in April 2014, has implemented a brutal austerity program, including sweeping cuts to health care, education and other public services and hikes in electricity rates, daycare fees and other charges.

The three-day strike would have been the first, after cycles of strongly-supported one- and two-day rotating regional walkouts, to have involved all public sector workers simultaneously.

The decision to cancel this week’s job action was taken without any consultation with rank-and-file workers, who voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action and who have been without a contract since March 31.

The statement issued by the Common Front studiously avoided mentioning the real reason for the cancelling of the strike: the union bureaucrats’ determination to prevent a head-on clash between the working class and the big business Liberal government.

But at a meeting called at the last minute by the influential Syndicat de Champlain—an affiliate of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) that represents 10,000 teachers and school board employees on the South

Shore of Montreal—its president, Eric Gingras, openly touted the strike’s cancellation as a means of averting the imposition of an emergency anti-strike law.

For months the unions have remained conspicuously silent about the government’s plans to criminalize public sector worker job action and impose concessionary contracts by decree. Liberal and Parti Québécois (PQ) governments have repeatedly resorted to such “emergency” laws over the past four decades. And the Couillard government has already given ample proof of its hostility to democratic and worker rights, including by unleashing a wave of police violence against last spring’s student strike, threatening to illegalize a construction workers’ strike before it even began, and announcing that it will soon grant municipalities the right to impose contracts by decree when negotiations with their workers reach an “impasse.”

If the union leaders have kept silent about the omnipresent threat of an emergency law, it is because this threat underscores that public sector workers are engaged in a political struggle.

In resisting the government’s austerity program, the public sector workers are rejecting the class strategy of the entire Quebec and Canadian ruling elite, which is determined to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis through the dismantling of what remains of the public services and social rights working people won in the last century through immense social struggles.

To prevail in the face of the government’s plans to mobilize the repressive power of the state apparatus, including the courts and police against them, public sector workers must make their struggle the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive in Quebec and across Canada in defence of public services, jobs, and worker and democratic rights.

But that is the last thing the union bureaucrats—those hardened and handsomely rewarded advocates of “social

peace”—that is to say, conscious defenders of the capitalist order, want.

The leaders of the Common Front claimed that “the postponement of our strike days could prove short-lived if no significant movement takes place at the negotiating table.”

This is a lie. As their silence over the Liberals’ plans to use a strikebreaking law indicate, they are preparing not a struggle against the Couillard government, but a total capitulation to it.

The counteroffer made by the Common Front makes significant concessions to the government on all the key issues in dispute—wages, the restructuring of pay scales, and the government’s demand for an increase in the retirement age.

Since the beginning of negotiations the government has been insisting on a five-year contract, containing two years of no wage increase whatsoever and three years of meager 1 percent per annum increases. Although public sector workers’ real wages have been eroded by years of “wage restraint,” the Common Front has now slashed its demand for 4.5 percent per year increases to just 2.5 to 3 percent per year, depending on the rate of inflation and Quebec’s economic growth. The partial tying of workers’ wage increases to economic growth is a further indication of the Common Front leaders’ acceptance of the government’s reactionary fiscal framework.

As for the government’s restructuring of pay scales, the Common Front admitted that it would result in an actual pay cut for 18,000 workers, but promised that “we will continue the work on the wage structure with the government.” This measure, introduced supposedly to make the pay scales better reflect workers’ skill and training, in reality is aimed at dividing them on the basis of seniority and type of work.

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Finally, in respect to the government’s demand that the retirement age be raised from 60 to 62 years, the Common Front does not object to it in principle, asking only that it be done through offering “incentives for people who wish to work longer,” in exchange for an increase in the amount eventually paid in the pension. The President of the Treasury Board, Martin Coiteux, was pleased to note that the Common Front “does not close the door completely on the plan to revise pensions.”

In an open attempt to lower workers’ expectations and prepare even greater retreats, the Common Front submitted its counteroffer in a spirit of “cordiality” and

“openness” toward the government.

Buoyed by the efforts of the trade union bureaucracy to bury the struggle of public sector workers and prevent it becoming a rallying point for a broad popular movement against capitalist austerity, the government responded to the unions’ counteroffer by hardening its positions.

Within 30 minutes of the union’s offer being submitted, the government had rejected it. “We are light years apart,” said Coiteux.

In a thinly veiled threat that an anti-strike law is in preparation, Coiteux noted that “the government has always said that its patience is limited.” He recalled the statements of Premier Couillard that “we cannot go very far into 2016 before coming to an agreement.” Couillard, for his part, reiterated that negotiations must take place “within the government’s financial framework. That framework is not negotiable.”

While the government uncompromisingly enforces the draconian measures demanded by the ruling class—plundering the pensions of municipal employees, cutting billions in social spending, privatizing the health system further with new supplementary fees introduced in Law 20, and slashing welfare benefits—the union leaders have continued to maintain the fiction that it is possible to change the government’s policies through polite discussion and impotent protests.

“Representatives of the Common Front at the negotiating table,” it said in its statement, “have demonstrated that the government had ample fiscal space to respond to this request and to reverse the announced cuts in public services.”

Workers must answer the class war waged by the ruling elite through the mobilization of their class strength in industrial and independent political struggle. This requires that they build new organizations of struggle independent of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist union apparatuses.



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