

# Quebec: Wave of walkouts against Liberals' austerity agenda

Laurent Lafrance  
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The vast majority of Quebec's half-million public sector workers joined a province-wide strike Wednesday to oppose the Quebec Liberal government's concessionary contract demands and savage social spending cuts.

34,000 public school teachers, members of the *Fédération autonome de l'enseignement* (FAE—the Autonomous Teachers' Federation), remained off the job Thursday and Friday, as part of a three-day walkout that was organized in parallel with the one-day strike held Wednesday by the inter-union Common Front.

The strong participation in Wednesday's strike—more than 50,000 workers demonstrated in downtown Montreal and large rallies were held across Quebec—is indicative of mounting opposition to Philippe Couillard's year-and-a-half old Liberal government and the austerity agenda it is pursuing on behalf of big business.

Also on December 9, the City of Montreal's 8,000 “white-collar” workers, who have been without a contract since 2012, staged a one-day walkout.

The day before, thousands of Montreal blue-collar workers attended a meeting held during work hours in defiance of a “no strike” order from the provincial Labour Relations Commission and threats of reprisals from Mayor Denis Coderre.

The municipal workers wanted to express their outrage at the Couillard Liberals' Bill 15, which slashes pensions while dramatically hiking pension contributions, as well as the fiscal pact the Quebec government recently concluded with the province's municipalities. Under that pact, the provincial government has pledged to give Montreal, Quebec City and the province's other municipalities the power to unilaterally impose workers' contracts and criminalize worker job action.

Nearly 3,000 students employed by the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) as teaching and research assistants have been on strike since Monday, Dec. 7. With much of UQAM's full- and part-time faculty honoring the assistants' picket lines, the university administration obtained a court injunction to severely restrict picketing.

Meanwhile, opinion polls show growing opposition to the government's austerity measures and strong support for the public sector workers, who are one of the main targets of the government's austerity drive.

The pro-capitalist unions are determined, however, to contain and suppress this opposition, not mobilize it.

The leaders of the Common Front have sought to straitjacket the public sector workers within long drawn out contract negotiations that are premised on the government's reactionary fiscal framework.

These negotiations have now dragged on for a year. In the interim, the government has pushed through a further round of massive spending cuts. As a result, hospitals, school boards, universities and numerous other public and para-public institutions have implemented job and service cuts.

And this continues even as the Common Front leaders claim that the Liberals have “been forced to listen,” citing the fact that the government has withdrawn some of its most egregious concession demands, such as the elimination of night premiums for nurses and other health care workers.

Just in the past month, the government has adopted legislation (Bill 20) that facilitates healthcare privatization, tabled a bill under which the welfare recipients will have their meager benefits slashed if they refuse an offer of employment anywhere in the province, and announced a dramatic cut in funding for the province's public daycare system.

The handful of rotating walkouts that the Common Front and other nonaffiliated unions like the FAE have called have nothing to do with developing the militant, independent political mobilization of the working class that is needed to defend public services and the wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them. Although it is an open secret that the Liberals stand ready to impose concessionary contracts by government decree, just as they unilaterally slashed the municipal workers' pensions, the unions have insisted at every occasion that their aim is not to mount a strike, let alone a working class political challenge to the government. Rather their aim is a “negotiated

agreement”—that is, a pact under which the unions will collaborate with the government in imposing its austerity agenda.

Last month, at the same time as they presented a “counter-offer” to the government that drastically scaled back the workers’ demand, the Common Front leaders canceled the three-day province-wide strike scheduled for December 1-3. Since then, the unions have reached some two dozen sectoral agreements with the government, covering, among others, school board support staff, CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) teachers and hospital workers.

At the central negotiating table, the government is insisting, as it has from the outset, on a five-year contract, an increase in the retirement age and the penalties for early retirement, and a wage “increase” of just 3 percent over the life of the agreement, which due to inflation would mean a substantial cut in public sector workers’ real wages.

For months, the union leaders maintained a radio silence about the threat of an emergency law criminalizing public sector worker job action and imposing concessionary contracts. Now some of them have begun to refer to this threat. If they are doing so, it is because they are hoping to reach a sellout agreement with the government and then invoke the threat of an emergency law to cajole workers into ratifying it.

The unions are promoting a nationalist perspective, making no appeal to workers beyond Quebec for support and presenting the class war mounted by the Quebec and Canadian ruling elite as an attack on the so-called “Quebec model.” This model is based on tri-partite collaboration between the government, big business and the unions. For decades, it has served to suppress the class struggle in the interests of the financial aristocracy, resulting in the unrelenting growth of economic insecurity and social inequality.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) interviewed striking public sector workers and distributed hundreds of copies of a statement that urged workers to seize the leadership of their struggle from the union apparatuses and make it the spearhead of a cross-Canada working-class political offensive. The statement noted that the unions’ attitude toward a genuine challenge to the elite’s austerity agenda was demonstrated during the 2012 Québec student strike. The unions isolated the striking students and diverted the mass opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the election of the big business Parti Québécois (PQ). The unions’ close political ally for decades, the PQ once returned to power expanded the austerity program of the Charest Liberals and whipped up anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism.

“Our conditions are worsening year after year,” two

Montreal teachers who asked to remain anonymous, told the WSWS. “The government wants to impose bigger class sizes, integrating children with behavioral and learning difficulties but without injecting more money for services. Moreover, it’s been years since we received any pay increase, which is outrageous in a society where the cost of living is ever increasing.”

They then pointed to the drive to privatize public services: “The government wants to reduce services for special needs students. It’s like with health care, if you have money, you have access to services.”

David and a co-worker, both elementary school teachers, also voiced their anger about the austerity measures: “The government wants to cut kids’ future. Its main goal is to privatize public services. It wants to impoverish the working class and favor the well-to-do.”

Nicolas, a recently-hired part-time history teacher, also spoke with the WSWS: “The cuts will impact not only on public sector workers, but on the whole population. They will increase job insecurity, which is already high. It’s been two years that I work part-time for \$222 dollars in take-home pay per week, and like many other ‘precarious’ teachers I have a second job and a seven-day work week.”

Asked about the implications of defying an “emergency” anti-strike law, Nicolas said: “I think the struggle should be broadened to involve all citizens.”

Julie, Catherine and Nawal, all elementary school teachers, gave their opinions on what is going on. Julie said, “The government’s argument is that there’s no money. But as we saw with [the US \$1 billion bailout of] Bombardier, there is money. It’s a question of priorities”.

Catherine observed that the austerity measures were not limited to the province of Quebec: “We shouldn’t stick our heads in the sand. We aren’t the only ones around the globe facing such austerity.” Asked about the possibility of a government decree, Nawal said it is highly probable considering past experiences. “In 1982, the Lévesque PQ government imposed back-to-work legislation on teachers and a contract with a 20 percent wage cut.”



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