

# Montreal suspends 2,400 workers for participating in an “illegal” meeting

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The City of Montreal has suspended 2,400 “blue collar” workers for a week without pay. The workers’ “offense” was to attend a special meeting of their Canadian Union of Public Employees’ (CUPE) local during working hours on December 8.

The day prior to that meeting, Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre obtained a ruling from the province’s Labour Relations Board (LRB) declaring the meeting an “illegal strike” and ordering the workers to “provide the labor services provided in their contract.” The workers defied the LRB order en masse and under heavy police surveillance attended the meeting, which lasted from 8 to 9:30 a.m.

The workers were determined to voice their opposition to Quebec’s Law 15, which imposes major cuts to the pensions of all Quebec’s municipal workers, while hiking their pension contributions. They also turned out at the meeting in force to oppose the recently concluded “fiscal pact” between Quebec’s Liberal government and the province’s municipalities. Under this pact, the municipalities gave up their opposition to the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in annual provincial transfers “in exchange” for a Quebec government pledge to adopt legislation giving them the right to declare an impasse in contract negotiations and unilaterally decree their employees’ wages and other terms of employment.

Coderre immediately declared the December 8 meeting “illegal” and warned he would impose harsh penalties. In doing so, he referred to a judgment of the provincial Supreme Court stating that participation in an illegal strike is grounds for dismissal.

The suspensions also target senior union officials (two months without pay) as well as union delegates or stewards (one month without pay).

The City of Montreal is imposing the sanctions in a

“non-continuous” way, meaning the suspensions will be spread out over several months so as not to “disrupt” services.

The penalties are only the latest in a long series of punitive actions. In September 2014, Coderre suspended dozens of workers who disrupted a meeting of the Montreal City Council to protest against the unilateral restructuring of their pension plans. At the city administration’s urging, police also filed criminal charges against dozens of workers.

Coderre is accusing the municipal employees of using “bullying” tactics, whereas it is his administration that is altering the terms of contracts and attacking wages, pensions and other benefits that have been won through generations of struggle.

There is no doubt that in sanctioning the blue collar workers, Coderre is acting with the full knowledge and approval of Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, with whom he has close political ties. The provincial Liberal government collaborated with Coderre and Quebec City Mayor Régis Labeaume in designing its pension-cutting legislation and in fashioning the “fiscal pact” that will give municipalities draconian powers to dictate their employees’ wages and working conditions.

The mass suspensions are part of an ever-widening criminalization of workers’ struggles. In the past five years, the federal, Quebec and Ontario governments have repeatedly illegalized strikes, including of railway, Air Canada and Canada Post workers, Quebec construction workers, and Ontario teachers.

The severe penalties imposed on the Montreal city workers are also meant to intimidate the half-million Quebec public sector workers—teachers and school board employees, nurses and hospital workers, and civil servants—who are resisting the Liberal provincial

government's concession demands.

The Couillard government is relying on the union bureaucracy to stifle the growing anger of the public sector workers. But it is an open secret that if the unions prove unable to suppress their opposition, the government stands ready to adopt an emergency law, imposing its concession demands by decree and illegalizing all worker job action. In 2014, the Couillard Liberals publicly declared they would not allow the province's construction workers to walk off the job for even a single day.

Mayor Coderre's punitive action against the Montreal blue collar workers must be taken as a serious warning to public sector workers and the entire working class.

In recent weeks, the unions that comprise the public sector Common Front have begun to talk about the threat of an emergency law—after maintaining radio silence on this crucial issue for months—because they want to use it to railroad their members into accepting a sham agreement.

The unions, including the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), which represents both the Montreal municipal workers and tens of thousands of Quebec public sector employees, are doing nothing to unite the various workers' struggles in an offensive against austerity. The union bureaucrats know that such a mobilization would require a political struggle that would endanger the profitability of Quebec and Canadian capitalism, from which they benefit directly—notably by their control of large investment funds, such as the FTQ Solidarity Fund.

All workers and youth must come to the defense of the municipal workers. The harsh actions taken against them are a taste of what is coming for the whole of the working class.

To seriously oppose the austerity policies of the ruling class and the repressive measures of the state, a change in strategy is needed. Workers must break politically with the pro-capitalist unions that help the ruling elite to impose austerity and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions.

One of the first tasks of these committees would be to unite the struggle of the city workers and that of the 500,000 Quebec public sector workers as part of a political offensive by the whole Quebec and Canadian working class against the generalized assault on wages,

jobs and public services.



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