

Quebec: Common Front unions promote sell-out agreement

Laurent Lafrance
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At a press conference held in Montreal last Sunday, leaders of the Common Front, an inter-union alliance that bargains on behalf of 400,000 of Quebec's more than half-million public sector workers, presented details of the five-year tentative agreement they had concluded with the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard on Thursday, Dec. 17.

The agreement represents a craven capitulation to the government's austerity agenda. It would further erode workers' real wages, increase the retirement age, enshrine the massive budget cuts the government has made to health care and education, and allow it to press forward with its plans to marketize and privatize public services.

At their press conference, Jacques Létourneau, president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) president Daniel Boyer, and Lucie Martineau of the Inter-union Secretariat of Public Services (SISP) tried to depict the deal as a great victory.

"For us it is clear that that we have achieved the objective of preventing the further impoverishment of working men and women," said Létourneau. For his part, Daniel Boyer said, "We succeeded in the course of these negotiations in forcing the employer to abandon most of its demands."

What a blatant lie! In reality, workers' real wages will fall and as a result of the government's draconian social spending cuts, their workload will continue to increase.

The president of the Treasury Board, Martin Coiteux, welcomed the agreement, noting that it "respects the budgetary constraints" of the government.

The union leaders were themselves forced to tacitly concede that the agreement leaves the government's austerity agenda intact. Having signed a sell-out deal that if ratified will make it illegal for workers to take any further job action, they vowed one after another that the unions' "fight" against austerity will continue. "This agreement in no way constitutes an approval of the Liberal government's austerity policies," declaimed Louise Chabot, the president of the CSQ, the largest of the SISP's three components.

The union leaders, who at the beginning of negotiations said workers needed a 13.5 percent wage increase over three years to make up for years of wage restraints and vowed never to accept an increase in the retirement age, capitulated right down

the line.

Under the agreement they have now endorsed, workers would receive no increase in base pay in the first year, just a one-time lump-sum payment of C\$500. In the following three years, they would receive small wage increases: 1.5 percent in 2016, 1.75 percent in 2017 and 2 percent in 2018. In 2019, all workers would receive a meager lump-sum payment of on average just C\$250. Under the government's "salary relativity" plan—a scheme purportedly aimed at eliminating pay inequities between workers whose jobs demand similar levels of education, expertise and effort—there will be widely varying increases, depending on occupation and seniority, for most, but not all workers. The average increase is said to be 2.4 percent.

In other words, the government obtained the wage freeze it had demanded for 2015 and 2019. As for "salary relativity," it has clearly been brought forward by the government as a means of splitting the public sector workers, dividing them on the basis of both occupation and seniority. Significantly, in explaining the details of the agreement, the union leaders have as of yet not ruled out the possibility, raised by the government in the negotiations, that under the new streamlined pay scales established under the "salary relativity" scheme, the wages of new hires in some public sector jobs could actually be cut.

In short, an employee who is not affected by the realignment of salary scales will get an increase of 5.25 percent over five years, which is well below the rate of inflation. Even the highest possible pay rise—in the order of 9 percent—represents, in real terms, a reduction in purchasing power. The trade unions have thus abandoned their goal of a wage "catch-up," although it has been widely documented that a significant wage gap exists between public sector workers and those employed in the private sector in equivalent jobs.

The Common Front also sounded the retreat over the issue of pensions. The retirement age will rise from 60 to 61 in 2019, while the actuarial penalty for a worker taking early retirement, which since 1998 has been 4 percent per year, will increase to 6 percent in 2020. Many details contained in the so-called sectoral agreements concerning working conditions have not been disclosed, but significant union concessions should also be expected.

The union leaders have said they are recommending the

agreement because, in the context of austerity, it was the best possible. They also emphasized that the “significant gains” contained in the agreement were the result of an “historic” worker mobilization.

In reality, the fiscal framework and parameters of the negotiation were fixed in advance by the government and accepted by the unions with no more than marginal modifications. The massive rank-and-file participation in various protests and the four days of rotating strikes certainly reflected workers’ anger at the Liberal government and their determination to defeat its austerity measures. But the unions never sought to mobilize this force, let alone make it the spearhead of an offensive against austerity and in defence of public and social services involving the entire working class in Quebec and throughout Canada.

On the contrary, they trapped the public sector workers within the narrow framework of “collective bargaining,” and this at a time when vast layers of workers and youth are eager to oppose the government’s austerity measures, including thousands of municipal employees currently fighting an assault by the government on their pensions and social rights.

For the union leaders, this fall’s protests only served to pressure the government for an agreement “negotiated in good faith,” that is to say, concessions and budget cuts implemented with the help of the union bureaucracy.

The tentative agreement is to be submitted by the Common Front unions to a vote of their members—including hospital workers, public school support staff and teachers, and CEGEP (pre-university and technical) college teachers, and civil servants—in January.

Discussions on social networks indicate skepticism and even open opposition to the agreement. Union leaders have expressed concern that several elements of the agreement if not “explained” could cause “the membership to balk.”

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Since the outset, the union officialdom has been determined to head off a collision between the working class and the big business Couillard government. They will now do everything to get the agreement ratified, including trying to intimidate the rank-and-file by invoking the threat that the government will adopt an “emergency” law imposing new contracts by decree should workers reject the tentative agreement.

It is precisely for this reason that the unions broke their radio silence on this vital issue only a few weeks ago. Before that, they studiously avoided any mention of the very real likelihood that the government would criminalize the public sector workers’ struggle.

The unions were determined to keep workers in the dark about this threat because it underscores the impossibility of their prevailing within the framework of a contract negotiation led by pro-capitalist unions that have time and again torpedoed worker resistance in the name of preserving “social peace.”

In opposing the government’s austerity agenda, the public sector workers face a political struggle, and not only against the Couillard Liberal government, but the entire big business elite and its apparatus of state repression—the various levels of government, the courts and the police.

If workers do reject the agreement, the government will quickly move to suppress their challenge through an emergency anti-strike law. If that is the case, the unions will undoubtedly use the special law as the pretext for declaring that nothing can be done except to submit, just as they did in 2005 when they bowed before the Charest Liberal government’s imposition of a seven-year concessionary contract by government fiat.

At the Common Front press conference, QFL president Boyer dishonestly stated that even if there is an agreement, “we will continue the battle [against austerity]; it will be as intense as it was before the start of negotiations.” He continued, “Will it take the form of demonstrations? Will it take the form of following ministers to certain events? I do not know.”

This is a fraud. The unions have never mounted a genuine struggle against austerity. The Couillard Liberals have cut billions in social spending since they came to power in April 2014, without the unions lifting a finger. With their public sector agreement, the Common Front leaders are effectively pledging to police five years of “labour peace” and doing so even as the government is implementing major new cuts in social assistance (welfare), day care, and hospital budgets, and has just passed legislation (Bill 20) that promotes the privatization of health care.

The unions’ real attitude to a popular challenge to austerity was demonstrated by their role in the 2012 province-wide student strike. They systematically isolated the striking students who faced mounting state repression, then diverted the mass opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the election of the big business Parti Québécois (PQ), the alternate government party of the Quebec elite.



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