

Montreal: Labour board upholds draconian suspension of 2,000 city workers

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The Quebec Labour Relations Commission (CRT) has strongly endorsed the draconian sanctions the City of Montreal has imposed on 2,000 blue-collar workers for participating in an “illegal” meeting last month.

In its ruling, the CRT rejected out of hand a complaint filed by Local 301 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) that argued the week-long suspensions constituted an illegal lockout.

This is the second time in less than a month that the CRT has facilitated the attack Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre, a former federal Liberal cabinet minister and close ally of Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, is mounting on municipal workers.

On December 8, 2,400 city employees from all shifts defied Coderre’s threats and participated in a 90-minute special membership meeting called by the CUPE Local 301 leadership during working hours. The meeting discussed the drastic cuts to Quebec municipal workers’ pensions contained in Law 15, legislation the Couillard government adopted over mass opposition in December 2014. The meeting also reviewed the implications of the “fiscal pact” the Quebec Liberal government struck with the province’s municipalities last September. Under the pact, the municipalities agreed to forgo their opposition to hundreds of millions of dollars in further cuts to provincial government transfers in exchange for Couillard pledging to pass legislation empowering the municipalities to declare labour negotiations at an impasse and dictate their employees’ wages and other terms of employment.

On the eve of the Dec. 8 special meeting, the CRT had acceded to Coderre’s request that it ban the meeting on the grounds it constituted an “illegal” work stoppage.

Vowing to put an end to “lawlessness,” the Coderre administration subsequently announced it was

suspending 2,000 workers for five days without pay. Members of the Local 301 executive and union delegates, meanwhile, were punished with two- and one-month long suspensions, respectively.

In its ruling, the CRT made an emphatic statement in support of employer “rights,” saying that it is management’s prerogative to determine how workers should be penalized for “violating” a collective agreement. “To allow the union’s claim,” declared the CRT, “would ensure that employees who were deliberately guilty of acts contrary to the collective agreement ... could not be punished as desired by the employer on the grounds that it would cause a slowdown” in work or the provision of services to the public.

Despite the CRT’s repeated decisions in favor of the City of Montreal, the union announced that it will take no action in the face of the mass suspensions other than to lodge a legal appeal.

The capitalist elite and its media are strongly supportive of the hard line the Coderre administration has adopted against the blue-collar workers, and this for two reasons. They are determined to make working people pay for the economic crisis through the slashing of workers’ rights and public and social services; and, second, because they are terrified of the possibility of mass defiance of the battery of anti-worker laws.

An editorial in the *Montreal Gazette* denounced the municipal workers’ meeting as a “wildcat” strike and claimed those in attendance had been “incited to violence.”

The victimization of the Montreal blue-collar workers represents a serious warning to the entire working class, and especially the half-million Quebec public sector workers, who are opposing the Couillard government’s concession demands and more generally its assault on

education, health care and other vital public services.

As resistance to big business and the austerity agenda of its political hirelings mounts, the ruling class across Canada is turning more and more to state repression, criminalizing worker job action through laws, court injunctions and labour commission rulings, and deploying police to support strikebreaking and intimidate and attack protesters.

For the past year, it has been an open secret that the provincial Liberal government is preparing to illegalize public sector worker job action and impose concessionary contracts by decree.

Yet the unions systematically suppressed all discussion of this threat. To have pointed to the government's plans would have underscored the reactionary character of the unions' appeals for a "social dialogue" and "good faith negotiations" with the Couillard government and their implacable opposition to any genuine working class challenge to the Liberals and their austerity agenda.

Now the Common Front of public sector unions is using the threat of an emergency anti-worker law to try to press-gang workers into ratifying the sell-out, five-year tentative agreement they reached with the Quebec government last month.

This agreement includes two years' of wage freezes, would increase the retirement age and penalties for early retirement, enshrine the massive cuts Liberal and Parti Quebecois governments have made to public services over the past five years, and open the door for the Couillard government to press forward with the marketization and privatization of services.

With opposition to this agreement mounting, the union bureaucrats are serving as veritable mouthpieces for the Liberal government. At union meetings workers are being told that if they defy the union apparatus and reject the tentative agreement, the government will not only criminalize further walkouts, but seize the opportunity to impose still larger concessions.

Similarly, the blue-collar workers' union has opposed the suspensions, not as a violation of democratic rights, but on the grounds that it deprives "the public of services to which they are entitled," an argument that in the future could very well be invoked by the Coderre administration or Couillard government to justify further attacks on worker rights. Far from forthrightly opposing the sanctions, the union has characterized

them as "unfair, excessive and disproportionate"—criticism also made by the right-wing municipal opposition party, Project Montreal.

Since the 1980s, the pro-capitalist union leaders have worked to convince the ruling elite that the best way to impose austerity measures and stifle the opposition of the workers is to continue to use their services—the basis of their privileged social position.

In this spirit Chantal Raclette, president of the municipal workers' union, defended herself against the accusation that she looked like "someone who wants to fight," saying: "I told the administration we are ready to sit down at the negotiating table."



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