

On what program should workers oppose the sellout agreement in Quebec's public sector?

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There is strong opposition among hospital workers, teachers, and other public sector workers to the agreement in principle that the 410,000 member inter-union Common Front reached with the Quebec Liberal government last December 17.

This agreement is not just an assault on Quebec government employees—who have been without collective agreements since last March and have faced nothing but intransigence from the Couillard Liberal government ever since—but on all workers. The only fitting reply is a decisive “No,” as the first step in mobilizing a counter-offensive of the entire working class against capitalist austerity and in defense of jobs, wages, pensions, and all public and social services.

The leaders of the Common Front, including the leaders of the three major union federations—the CNTU (Confederation of National Trade Unions), the CSQ (*Centrale des syndicats du Québec*) and the QFL (Quebec Federation of Labour)—are recommending acceptance of what they are terming a “good deal” that includes “sufficiently important gains.” They are vowing to continue their supposed “fight against austerity, privatization and cuts.” Who do they think they are fooling with these lies and false promises?

The agreement provides for wage increases of between 5.25 and 7.75 percent over five years—well below the inflation rate. The retirement age is to be increased from 60 to 61 years. The penalties for early retirement will increase from a reduction in benefits of 4 percent per year to 6 percent, meaning a worker who retires three years early would have their pension cut by almost one-fifth in perpetuity. In other words, the agreement is yet another concessionary contract, which slashes public sector workers' real wages and pensions.

Just as importantly, it leaves untouched the massive budget cuts implemented by successive Liberal and Parti Québécois governments. And it gives the green light to Premier Philippe Couillard to press forward with big business's plans to dismantle public and social services.

As a columnist from the Montreal daily *Le Devoir* noted, “those in the Premier's entourage” are smugly satisfied that “the great union upheaval, the great popular mobilization against the government's measures never really materialized.”

The tentative agreement has rightly aroused strong opposition. Many workers have denounced it on social networks. A large majority of the 600 delegates of the FSSS (Federation of Health and Social Services), with 110,000 members the single largest union within the Common Front, are urging workers to vote against it. The pivotal question is: what is the political perspective that should animate the rejection of the sellout agreement?

To begin to answer this, one must consider how the Couillard government would reply to a rank-and-file rebellion against the agreement it reached with the unions. Doubtless it would respond by rushing to adopt an “emergency” law, criminalizing worker job action and imposing concession contracts by decree, and by employing the repressive apparatus of the state—the police, the courts, and draconian sanctions—to enforce this. In case of defiance, the same type of police violence that was used against the Quebec student strikes of 2012 and 2015 would be employed against the public sector workers. The corporate media, meanwhile, would launch a sustained campaign to portray public sector workers as “privileged” and “selfish” people who want to take the population “hostage.” The Canadian establishment would back the Couillard government to the hilt, underlining the fact that the destruction of public and social services in Quebec is central to the drive of the ruling elite throughout the country to make the working class pay for the global capitalist crisis.

The fact that the public sector workers' fight to defend their wages and working conditions has placed them on a collision with the Couillard Liberal government, the entire capitalist elite and their state demonstrates that what is at stake is not just the collective agreements of Quebec government employees, but fundamental societal choices. How should the abundant resources available to society—Couillard's false claims that there is “no money,” notwithstanding—be used? To inflate the profits of big business and the incomes of rich by squeezing social expenditure and further reducing taxes on business, capital gains, and the one percent? Or to meet the social needs of the majority for well-paid jobs, adequate working conditions, quality public services, and access to culture?

Quebec public sector workers, in other words, face a political struggle. In rejecting the concessions-filled agreement in principle, they would be challenging the class program of the ruling elite. That is why they would quickly face the whip of an “emergency strikebreaking law, court injunctions, police batons, the invectives of the mainstream press and the ire of all levels of government. However they would have even more powerful allies, namely workers across Quebec and Canada, who collectively constitute the most powerful force in society and are equally impacted by the capitalist austerity drive.

Quebec public sector workers who oppose the sellout agreement must turn to this mighty social force. Rejection of the agreement must be combined with a campaign to galvanize the anti-austerity sentiment of working people in Quebec and across Canada into a working-class political offensive in defense of jobs, wages and public services. Such a mobilization—involving strikes, demonstrations, occupations and other militant actions—should be based on the perspective of social equality and the struggle for a workers' government.

Workers face a political struggle

The unions enforce “social peace” at workers' expense

Only this program of class struggle can counter the dismantling of public services being relentlessly implemented by the Couillard government on behalf of the ruling elite. It is diametrically opposed to the Common Front's pursuit of tripartite "social dialogue" with the establishment and its vehement opposition to any confrontation with the Couillard government.

Public sector workers have been determined to oppose austerity and defend their social rights, but the union bureaucracy straightjacketed their opposition, confining it to futile gestures of protest. For months they have directed workers' attention to the bogus "negotiations"—negotiations that have been predicated on acceptance of the government's austerity budgetary framework.

At the same time, the Quebec unions worked with the counterparts in the rest of Canada to divert the popular opposition to austerity and social inequality behind the election of a new, supposedly "progressive," federal government. This resulted in the return to power under Justin Trudeau's leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada, the preferred party of government of the Canadian ruling class for much of the past century. This is the same party that when last in office imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history and presided over the militaristic turn in Canada's foreign policy with its deployment of Canadian troops to fight in US-led wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

Throughout the months of their "negotiations" with the Couillard government, the union leaders maintained a complicit silence on the threat of a government anti-strike law. Now they are quick to mention it, but only to press-gang workers into voting for the sellout agreement. If it is nevertheless rejected and the government adopts back-to-work legislation, the union leaders will not lift a finger to oppose it. Nor will they come to the aid of workers who defy the government's diktats.

On the contrary, in the face of growing rank-and-file opposition, the unions are acting more and more openly as mouthpieces for Couillard and his Liberals. At union meetings, workers are told that if they defy the union apparatus and reject the tentative agreement, the government will not just criminalize any further job action, it will take the opportunity to impose even more drastic concessions.

This campaign of intimidation has found its way into the pages of the *Journal de Montréal*, the right-wing populist newspaper owned by Pierre-Karl Péladeau, the media and telecommunications magnate who now leads the Parti Québécois (PQ). "The negotiations in the public sector are over and there remains room for only minor adjustments," wrote the former president of the CSQ, Réjean Parent. He castigated the refusal of the Autonomous Federation of Teachers (FAE)—which emerged from a split with the CSQ and did not join the Common Front—to sign the agreement in principle. "If they fail to make an agreement with the government," said Parent in a threatening tone, "these refractory unions run the risk of having their collective agreement imposed."

Since the early 1980s, the pro-capitalist unions have been transformed into direct agents of big business, working might and main to impose plant closures, mass layoffs and budget cuts. The social basis of these betrayals lies in the material privileges that the union apparatus receive (including participation in tripartite committees and control of huge investment funds like the FTQ Solidarity Fund) for the services that they render to the ruling class.

The political basis is the unions' virulent Quebec nationalism. For decades the unions have systematically quarantined the struggles of Quebec workers and promoted the lie that Quebec workers have more in common with Québécois corporate bosses like Péladeau and Desmarais than their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada. This has served to strengthen the entire Canadian ruling class (federalist as much as sovereignist) and to subordinate workers to the Parti Québécois, a champion of capitalist austerity no less than the federalist Liberals.

The reactionary character of the unions' close alliance with the PQ was

demonstrated once again during the 2012 Quebec student strike: the unions isolated the striking students as they faced an unprecedented campaign of police repression then channeled the mass opposition to austerity that erupted after the Liberals imposed their Bill 78 behind the election of a PQ government. No sooner did the PQ, then led by Pauline Marois, return to power, than they imposed their own harsh austerity measures while fanning anti-Muslim chauvinism.

Austerity is applied by the ruling elite around the world to force the working class to bear the brunt of the world capitalist crisis. Yet the union bureaucracy presents it as a bad "ideological" choice that undermines the "Quebec model"—that is, its own incestuous relations with the Quebec bourgeoisie and capitalist state—and otherwise casts the opposition to austerity in nationalist terms. Thus the unions oppose any appeal to workers in English Canada and present the austerity measures as an attack on Quebec and "Quebec society."

An international socialist program to fight austerity

The consequences of such nationalist politics were tragically demonstrated in Greece last year. Brought to power on the basis of its promises to end austerity, Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left) declared itself the defender of all Greeks and refused to appeal to European workers for a joint struggle against Greek and European capitalism. Instead, it placed its hopes for a slight relaxation of the EU Troika's austerity measures in an appeal to the leaders of the European Union and US President Obama, who personifies the ferocity and decay of American capitalism. Syriza—the party of the Greek pseudo-left, which speaks for privileged sections of the middle class—ended up imposing even more devastating social cuts than the previous avowedly right-wing government.

To avoid defeat, public employees must wrench control of their struggle from the hands of the union apparatuses and make it the spearhead of a mobilization of the entire working class against austerity and the criminalization of social and workers struggles.

This is not at all the objective of the leaders of the FSSS and FAE who criticize the Common Front from a purely tactical point of view. As noted by *La Presse* in a year-end report: "Despite the gulf between the views of Mr. Létourneau (the CNTU president) and the delegates of the FSSS-CSN on the agreement in principle," FSSS President Jeff Begley insists they are not challenging the union leadership. "There is no crisis of confidence inside the central trade union," Begley said.

Neither the FSSS nor the FAE is campaigning for all public sector workers to reject the agreement in principle, let alone advocating and preparing defiance of the anti-union laws and fighting to mobilize the entire working class against austerity. Their refusal to directly challenge the union heads is tantamount to a public declaration that they will isolate the workers who rebel against the Common Front endorsed agreement, leaving them to fight the government and the repressive arsenal of the capitalist state alone. The bankruptcy of this policy is deliberately concealed by the proponents of "fighting trade unionism," such as the Lutte Commune/Common Struggle website and the leaders of Québec Solidaire, who model themselves on Syriza.

The pseudo-left elements who are now promoting the FSSS and FAE bureaucrats play a key role in keeping workers attached to the moribund trade union apparatus. They are the proponents of a nationalist protest politics aimed at pressuring the establishment and giving a progressive veneer to the call for a capitalist *République du Québec*, not the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force against the profit system.

The global capitalist crisis, which has gained in intensity since the financial collapse of 2008, has led to a revival of the class struggle. On an international scale, this is taking the form more and more of a rebellion by rank-and-file workers against the union apparatuses. That was the significance of US auto workers' repeated rejection last fall of the concessions contracts advocated by their union, the UAW.

But the central issue remains the need for a break with the nationalist, pro-capitalist program of the union bureaucracy and the adoption of a new strategy that focuses on the independent political mobilization of workers on a socialist program of social equality and the struggle for a workers' government.

Workers who want to fight for this perspective and discuss how to oppose the pro-capitalist labor bureaucracy should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and seriously consider joining the Socialist Equality Party (Canada).



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