

Quebec construction strike rattles Canada's ruling elite

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Quebec's 175,000 unionized construction workers launched an "unlimited general strike" Wednesday morning, shutting down industrial, commercial, institutional, highway/bridge, and residential construction sites across the province.

Although the strike is being led by a coalition of rightwing unions, who are no less determined than the employers and government to bring it to a quick end, the mobilization of the industrial power of an important section of the working class has rattled the establishment.

The media, government and employer spokesmen are angrily complaining about the strike's disruptive impact on the economy. According to them, each day the strike continues will "cost" Quebec \$45 million.

Last week Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard all but announced that his Liberal government would illegalize any construction worker strike, as the previous Parti Quebecois government did in 2013. He told a press conference if a "vital part" of Quebec's economy were paralyzed, he wouldn't "remain arms folded."

Yesterday, the premier was even more explicit. From Israel, where he is on an official tour, Couillard said his government would table back-to-work legislation in the Quebec legislature if the strike does not end soon. "I must send this signal very early," said Couillard, "because Quebec's economy is at stake, and because Quebec's best interests are at stake."

The construction workers are resisting sweeping employer concession demands.

These include:

- Stripping workers of overtime pay for Saturday work, if, because of bad weather, they did not complete 40 of hours work during the regular, five-day working week;
- Slashing the pay rate for the first four hours of

other overtime work, from double-time to time-and-a-half;

- Extending the hours during which workers can be scheduled to begin work by three hours, from between 6 and 9 am to from 5 to 11 am;

- A five-year contract providing wage increases of just 0.7 percent per year. This would amount to a substantial cut in workers' real wages over the life of the contract, since prices are currently rising by almost 2 percent per year.

Yesterday Quebec Labour Minister Dominique Vien met jointly with representatives of the employer bargaining group and the *Alliance Syndicale de la Construction* (Construction Union Alliance). At the end of the meeting, Vien said the two sides had agreed to resume negotiations, but she went on to repeat Premier Couillard's threat of an "emergency" back-to-work law. "We are not at the point of tabling an emergency law, said Vien, "but I am ready to if the premier asks me."

Clearly, the government's hope is that the unions will take responsibility for shutting down the strike, thereby avoiding the government having to conspicuously side with the employers.

In 2014, with the newly elected Liberal government publicly declaring it would not allow construction workers to strike, the unions quietly negotiated concessionary agreements.

According to Alliance spokesman Michel Trépanier, the unions ceded ground to the employers in a bargaining blitz earlier this week, at the urging of a government-appointed mediator. "We decided to accept the recommendations of the mediator," Trépanier told Radio-Canada, "not because they pleased us, but to avoid a conflict. We hoped for a 'Yes' from the employer side. It was a categorical 'No.'"

“The mediator,” continued Trépanier, “came back with a second settlement proposal, and we agreed to new concessions, but the employers just played with us” until just before the strike deadline.

Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) President Daniel Boyer and other union officials have complained that the employers are relying on the Liberal government to put an end to the strike.

The reality is that Boyer and the rest of the union officialdom knew full well from the outset that state intervention would be central to the construction bosses’ bargaining strategy. But they chose to remain completely mum about this threat, just as they have kept workers in the dark about every other aspect of the negotiations.

For decades, governments in Quebec and across Canada have used so-called emergency back-to-work laws to criminalize worker resistance and impose concessionary contracts, whether directly by government decree or by government-appointed arbitrators.

The unions have effectively policed these laws. Whether it was the 2011 Canada Post, 2013 Quebec construction or 2015 Quebec public sector negotiations, to name just a few examples, the unions kept radio silence about the government’s preparations to illegalize worker job action. Then they invoked the passage or imminent threat of such legislation to torpedo the struggle, to say that workers had no choice but to return to work and/or accept sellout agreements.

The Quebec construction strike is part of a growing wave of worker struggles in Canada and internationally. After years of austerity and contract concessions, there is growing militancy and opposition to big business and to capitalism among workers and young people.

If this counteroffensive is going to develop, workers must politically and organizationally break from the pro-capitalist trade unions. Over the past three decades in Canada, as around the world, the unions have been transformed into appendages of big business, whose highly paid functionaries work hand in hand with the corporate bosses and their governments to suppress the class struggle.

Five years ago this month hundreds of thousands of workers in Quebec poured into the streets to support the province’s striking students and oppose Bill 78, legislation aimed at breaking the strike and suppressing

demonstrations over any issue. For weeks, the unions had been pressing the students to end their militant strike against university tuition fee hikes. Fearing the development of a mass movement against austerity, which would threaten the “competitive” position of Quebec and Canadian capitalism, they put the knife in.

The QFL declared the student strike over, as epitomized by their motto “From the streets to the ballot box,” and redoubled their efforts to divert the opposition to the rightwing austerity policies of the Charest Liberal government behind the big-business Parti Quebecois (PQ). In addition, QFL President Michel Arseneault sent a secret letter to unions in English Canada ordering them to give no support to the striking students. Meanwhile, the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) refused even nominal support for the striking students and refused to denounce Bill 78 on the grounds that it was a provincial matter.

The unions’ isolation and suppression of the student strike and harnessing of it to the PQ enabled the ruling elite to quickly restabilize the situation and over the past five years, first under a PQ and now the Couillard government in Quebec, and Harper and Trudeau in Ottawa, greatly intensify the assault on the working class.

To defeat the construction bosses’ concession demands and the Couillard government’s antistrike law, construction workers must seize the leadership of their struggle from the trade union apparatuses and fight to rally the support of workers across Canada and internationally. While the unions will claim that the workers are isolated and powerless to fight the government, they could and would win mass support if they make their anti-concessions strike the spearhead of a working-class industrial and political offensive against capitalist austerity and in defense of decent-paying jobs, public services and worker rights.



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