

Quebec premier amplifies threat to outlaw 175,000-strong construction strike

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On the second day of a strike by 175,000 Quebec construction workers that has shut down hundreds of building sites across Canada's second most populous province, thousands of workers took to the streets to highlight their opposition to the construction bosses' sweeping concession demands.

While the workers were marching Thursday morning, Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard announced his Liberal government will illegalize the strike if workers are not back on the job by Monday morning.

"We can't let the economy bleed \$45 million each day," declared Couillard from Israel, where he is on a trade mission to promote Bombardier and other Quebec-based businesses. "I have asked the government to be ready to act Monday."

Already last week Couillard signaled he would move rapidly to outlaw a building workers' strike, saying his government would not "remain arms folded" while a "vital part" of Quebec's economy was paralyzed.

Among the largest worker job-actions in North America in years, the Quebec construction strike has angered and unnerved the Canadian ruling elite.

Quebec's largest employer group, the Conseil du Patronat (CPQ), has denounced the workers for taking the province "hostage." It is urging Couillard not only to pass an "emergency" back-to-work law, but to consider permanently stripping construction workers of the right to strike.

What has piqued the ire of big business and their political hirelings is that the strike has pointed to the enormous social power of the working class. When Couillard and the CPQ rage about the \$45 million a day the strike is "costing" Quebec they are admitting, albeit backhandedly, that the workers produce vast wealth. This wealth is appropriated by the construction bosses, banks, and other sections of big business in the form of immense profits.

And they want more. The employers are demanding major cuts to overtime pay. This includes the right to force workers to work Saturdays at the base wage-rate, if, because of bad weather, they didn't work 40 hours during the regular, five-

day workweek.

In the name of "flexibility," they are also demanding that the period during which a worker's starting time can be scheduled be extended from three to six hours. This would mean that a worker could be ordered to start work at 11 am one day and at 5 in the morning the next.

The construction bosses also want to impose a substantial cut in workers' real wages. They are proposing a five-year contract with annual wage increases of just 0.7 percent, less than half the current inflation rate and nearly two-thirds less than the Bank of Canada's inflation target of 2 percent.

At yesterday's 10,000-strong construction workers' demonstration in east end Montreal, workers, young and old, immigrant and native Quebecois, male and female, voiced their determination to beat back the employers' concession demands.

"Four years ago, we made contract concessions," a pipefitter, Robert, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Now they want more. Always they want more—flexible schedules, the elimination of double time, lower wages."

Vincent Lecompte, an apprentice lineman, drew the connection between the bosses' concession demands and the austerity program of the Couillard Liberal government. A close ally of Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government, Couillard has implemented savage social spending cuts and slashed pensions for municipal workers, while hiking their pension contributions. "It's austerity and more austerity, that's all we hear from the politicians and the employers," said Vincent.

Vincent participated in the six-month 2012 Quebec student strike, which the unions, led by the Quebec Federation of Labour, isolated in the face of savage state repression, while diverting the broader anti-austerity movement that it sparked behind the big business pro-austerity Parti Quebecois. "The government could ignore the student strike, because we had no power," said Vincent. "This is different. We build Quebec."

The workers' militancy is in striking contrast with the actions of the right-wing, pro-capitalist unions that comprise

the *Alliance Syndicale de la Construction* (Construction Union Alliance).

On Wednesday, Alliance spokesman Michel Trépanier admitted the unions have repeatedly made concessions in the hope of reaching a deal that would avert a strike.

To give themselves maximum latitude to maneuver, the unions are keeping workers in the dark about the progress of negotiations. If a deal is reached, they are planning to immediately order workers back on the job without informing them of the details, let alone allowing them to vote on it.

Yesterday's demonstration in Montreal was designed to keep the striking construction workers as isolated and far removed from the city's working class population as possible. The workers were told to parade up a barren road, bordered by a highway in suburban Montreal on the pretext that the headquarters of several of the building contractors' associations are located there.

Most tellingly of all, the unions have kept mum about the threat of a government back-to-work law although it has been obvious since the negotiations began that the construction bosses were counting on the government's support in ramming through their concession demands. In 2013, a union-backed Parti Québécois government criminalized a strike by 75,000 workers in the institutional, commercial, and industrial building sectors. And in 2014, the unions prevailed on workers to accept a concession-filled agreement, after the Couillard Liberals said they would preempt any strike by outlawing it in advance.

If the unions studiously avoided mentioning that in fighting concessions workers would find the Liberal government in their path this isn't just because they have no intention of mobilizing workers to defy a back-to-work law. Like the government, they fear the construction workers' struggle, and intend to use the threat of an emergency law to intimidate workers, to either justify their reaching a last-minute sellout deal with the construction bosses or to declare that the workers are powerless when such a law is passed.

The actions of the construction unions are supplemented by the silence of the Canadian Labour Congress.

Many of the striking Quebec workers belong to unions affiliated with the US-based AFL-CIO Building and Trades Department. The American construction union leaders, who were among the first to embrace Trump and his reactionary America First and Buy American policies, are doing nothing to even inform their members of the struggle in Quebec.

In Canada, as around the world, the unions have systematically suppressed the class struggle, while politically harnessing workers to parties—the Democratic Party in the US, the Labour Party in Britain, the Socialist Party in France—that are entirely committed to the ruling

elite's agenda of austerity, sweeping attacks on democratic rights, and war.

Due to their nationalist, pro-capitalist program, the unions have been transformed over the past three decades into appendages of big business that connive in wage and job cuts and whose officials are handsomely rewarded through various corporatist schemes.

The largest of the five Quebec construction union federations, the Quebec Federation of Labour, manages the Solidarity Fund, which with more than \$10 billion in assets is Quebec's largest venture capital fund.

Couillard's threat to criminalize the construction workers' strike underscores that workers face a political struggle. To defend their jobs and livelihoods workers confront not just their individual employers, but big business as a whole, its parties and its state apparatus.

Quebec construction workers have powerful forces aligned against them. But they also have powerful allies.

A defiant stand against the employers' concessions demands and the Liberal government's threats would win powerful support from workers across Canada, the US, and around the world.

The demands of the construction bosses echo those of employers in every sector of the economy—the ripping up of established rights, lower wages, and “flexibility,” by which they mean straitjacketing workers' lives even more to produce still greater profits.

The Quebec construction workers' strike must become the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against capitalist austerity and in defence of decent-paying jobs, public services and worker rights.

But this requires that workers seize control of the strike from the trade union apparatuses. An organizational break with the unions must be coupled with the adoption of a new political perspective—rejection of the subordination of workers' livelihoods to capitalist profit and the struggle for workers' political power and the reorganization of socioeconomic life to make human need the animating principle.



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