

Talks stall on third day of Quebec construction strike

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Talks between employers and unions representing around 175,000 striking construction workers in Quebec made little progress yesterday, increasing the likelihood that the provincial Liberal government of Philippe Couillard will introduce an “emergency” back-to-work bill on Monday.

Despite the best efforts of the Alliance Syndicale de la construction (Construction Union Alliance), whose spokesman Michel Trepanier admitted Wednesday that substantial concessions had been made in a bid to avert the strike, employer representatives described the first round of talks early Friday morning as a waste of time, according to *La Presse*.

The unions have indicated their readiness to capitulate to the employers’ demands to prevent the issuing of a back-to-work order. Trepanier said Friday he was confident of reaching a “negotiated agreement,” before adding, “If it takes the whole weekend, it will take the whole weekend.”

If a deal is reached, the unions plan to force workers to return to their jobs without informing them of its contents, let alone permitting them to vote on it. Should Couillard impose legislation, the unions will dutifully fall into line and order workers to return to work as they have done time and again in similar circumstances in recent years.

Although it has been obvious since the beginning of the negotiations that the employers were relying on the government’s support in pushing through their concession demand, the unions kept a radio silence about the threat of a savage strikebreaking law. Only after Couillard himself raised the issue last week did the unions condemn a back-to-work law, while signaling they will obey it.

On Thursday Couillard amplified his threat to criminalize worker job action when he stated during a trade mission to Israel, “We can’t let the economy bleed \$45 million each day. I have asked the government to be

ready to act Monday.”

Liberal parliamentary leader Jean-Marc Fournier confirmed Friday that Couillard will recall the National Assembly on Monday, a day early, so it can adopt a back-to-work law as speedily as possible. Fournier said legislators would receive letters confirming the early recall of the National Assembly as early as noon on Saturday. The strike, which is an expression of the mounting militancy among workers across North America and internationally in opposition to capitalist austerity, was triggered by major concession demands from management. The bosses have proposed a five-year contract with annual pay increases of just 0.7 percent, which amounts to a substantial pay cut when the current inflation rate of 1.6 percent is factored in, not to mention the weakness of the Canadian dollar, which will fuel further price rises.

The employers are also demanding more “flexibility” in the building sector, enabling them to order workers to start their shifts any time between 5 AM and 11 AM, rather than the current arrangement of between 6 and 9 AM. Finally, management is seeking to slash labour costs by reducing overtime pay. This includes a plan to force workers to work Saturdays at the base rate of pay, instead of double time, if they have not already worked 40 hours during the normal five-day workweek.

These concession demands are all the more scandalous considering the demanding and often dangerous work construction workers perform. Just over a month ago, a contract labourer at Montreal’s Old Port fell six metres to his death.

According to the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), while the construction sector makes up between 5 and 6 percent of total employment in the province, it accounts for 20 percent of workplace injuries. The construction sector is not covered by Quebec’s law on workplace safety.

The construction unions continue to do all in their power to keep building workers isolated from the rest of the working class. In line with a protest march in Montreal's east end Thursday that was organized in a distant suburb on the pretext that the headquarters of the construction companies were located there, the unions organized a demonstration by a few hundred workers at a golf tournament Friday in which construction bosses were participating.

No appeal has been made by the construction unions for workers throughout the province and across Canada to back the strike, even though workers everywhere confront the same problems. Predictably, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the top union body in the country, has done nothing to mobilize support for the strikers.

The use of back-to-work legislation by federal and provincial governments to impose concession-laden contracts has become all but routine. Knowing full well that the trade unions will not lift a finger to resist such a blatant violation of workers' rights, successive federal Conservative and Liberal governments have used back-to-work legislation or the threat of it to impose givebacks on Canada Post, rail, and Air Canada workers. At the provincial level, the Ontario Liberals compelled teachers to accept a rotten concessions deal by outlawing job action in 2012.

In Quebec, the Liberals and pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ), the corporate elite's alternate governing party, have done likewise. The union-backed PQ government of Pauline Marois criminalized a strike of 75,000 building workers in 2013, while Couillard prevailed on the construction unions to accept a concessions contract in 2014 by threatening to outlaw any job action before it began. Earlier this year, his government forced striking government lawyers and notaries back to work under a special law.

PQ leader Jean-Francois Lisée made clear that he has no principled objection to the use of legislation to halt the job action. In comments yesterday, Lisée merely criticized Couillard for having raised the threat of an emergency back-to-work law "too soon" to be effective in bringing the strike to a quick conclusion. He blamed Couillard and Labour Minister Dominique Vien for being absent and inactive during negotiations. Such hypocritical posturing against the government legislating workers back to work is deeply cynical given the PQ's own record in resorting to strikebreaking legislation when it has held power, such as in 2013, and its ruthless enforcement of austerity measures.

According to the Canadian Foundation for Labour Rights, Canada's federal government has adopted 19 pieces of back-to-work legislation over the past three decades, while provincial governments have implemented 71. This sharp rise in the use of legislation to enforce the dictates of the corporate elite has been accompanied by a vast battery of antistrike laws that has stripped the right to strike from many sections of workers.

While the workers are being portrayed in the corporate media as greedy and overpaid, their modest demands are more than justified. They have called for a 2.6 percent pay increase and retention of the current rules for shift starts and overtime work. These are demands which would meet with broad popular sympathy if the construction workers' struggle was made the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against the decades-long wage cuts and attacks on workers' rights enforced by provincial and federal governments, in close collaboration with the trade unions. It is precisely the threat of such a movement breaking out that is driving the union bureaucracy's efforts to isolate the construction workers and wind up the strike as soon as possible.

The pseudo-left Quebec Solidaire (QS), which has feigned support for the strikers, in reality has nothing to offer them. QS co-leader Manon Massé declared pathetically, "I ask the Premier to side, for once, with the workers instead of big business," as if the question of the side on which the pro-business Liberal government stands remains in doubt!

If construction workers are to prevail in their fight against the bosses' concession demands, they must take control of the strike out of the hands of the trade unions. Action committees must be established independent of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist union apparatuses to organize defiance of any back-to-work law and to rally support from other sections of workers in Quebec and across Canada.



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