

Quebec construction strike: Defeat strikebreaking laws and concessions! Defend public services!

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
29 May 2017

Quebec's government is once again criminalizing a strike by construction workers. The Quebec National Assembly is convening this morning to adopt emergency legislation stripping the province's 175,000 unionized construction workers of the right to strike and threatening them with harsh sanctions if they do not immediately return to work.

In 2013, a Parti Quebecois (PQ) government outlawed a strike of 75,000 construction workers. This time, it is the PQ's federalist rivals, the Liberals of Premier Philippe Couillard, who are coming to the support of the construction bosses in their drive to impose major rollbacks, including "flexible" schedules and cuts to overtime pay.

Construction workers are the immediate target of the Liberals' antistrike law, but it is the entire working class that is under attack. In Quebec, across Canada and around the world, big business and the political establishment are pursuing a class war agenda of austerity and war. While big business makes never-ending demands for concessions and speedup, its political hirelings are dismantling vital public services such as health care and education while they slash pensions and unemployment benefits.

When workers resist, their strikes are outlawed. Or, as was the case with the striking Quebec students in 2012, riot police are unleashed against them. Federal and provincial governments of every political stripe have adopted a battery of strikebreaking laws—including against Canada Post and Air Canada workers, CP Rail workers, Toronto Transit workers, and Ontario and British Columbia teachers. For all intents and purposes, Canada's ruling elite has repudiated and abolished the most elemental of worker rights, the right to strike.

Workers face a political struggle

The Couillard Liberal government's intervention in support of the construction bosses underscores that construction workers face a political struggle. It is a struggle against not just the rapacious building contractors, but the entire big-business elite, its political parties and its state apparatus.

Construction workers, as with any other section of the working class, cannot defeat the joint big business-state assault on their basic rights simply through collective bargaining and strike action, no matter how militant and self-sacrificing.

The ruling class assault must be answered by the mobilization of the entire working class as a political force.

Construction workers should defy the Liberals' strikebreaking law and appeal to workers in Quebec, across Canada and internationally to join them in a working-class counteroffensive against capitalist austerity and in defence of decent-paying jobs, public services and worker rights.

A defiant stand against the employers' concessions demands and a Liberal government antistrike law would win powerful support from workers across Canada, in 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, the lowering of wages and the imposition of "flexibility," by which they mean straitjacketing workers' lives even more to produce still greater profits. Everywhere, workers are confronting governments that are trampling on democratic rights.

Defy Couillard's antistrike law

To implement this program of struggle, construction workers will need to seize the leadership of their struggle

from the *Alliance Syndical de la construction* [Construction Union Alliance], a coalition of five right-wing building union federations that have connived with the bosses for years.

The *Alliance Syndicale* and the larger Quebec, Canadian and US labour federations with which it is affiliated have time and again ordered workers to obey antiunion laws. They have made it crystal clear that they will do the same this time.

In 2013, the *Alliance Syndicale* leaders declared that nothing could be done when the PQ legislated construction workers back to work. The following year, with the Liberals threatening to pre-empt any job action by construction workers with their own antistrike law, the *Alliance Syndicale* prevailed on construction workers to accept concessions-filled contracts.

In 2017, the unions have again done everything to demobilize workers. It has been obvious since the very beginning of the negotiations that the employers are relying on the government's support in pushing through their concessions demands. Yet the unions kept a radio silence about the threat of a strikebreaking law until Couillard spelled out the government's intention to outlaw any strike on May 12. They then condemned the government...in words, while signalling that they would order workers to surrender before such an attack.

Due to their nationalist, pro-capitalist program, the unions in Canada, as around the world, have been transformed over the past three decades into appendages of big business. They systematically suppress worker resistance while harnessing workers politically to ostensibly "left" parties—the PQ in Quebec, the New Democratic Party in Canada, the Democrats in the US, the Socialist Party in France—that are entirely committed to the ruling elite's agenda of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and war.

More and more openly integrated into corporate management through various corporatist schemes, the unions have developed interests different from and opposed to those of the members they purport to represent.

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. On a daily basis, QFL leaders negotiate deals with the banks and corporate bosses, including the big engineering and construction firms, aimed at boosting investor profit and building "globally competitive" Quebec-based firms.

and a working-class offensive

If construction workers are to prevail in their anti-concessions struggle, they must establish rank-and-file action committees independent of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. Led by the most militant workers, these committees' first task would be to organize defiance of the Liberal back-to-work law and rally support from other sections of workers in Quebec and across Canada.

The Socialist Equality Party does not issue such a call lightly. The Liberal government and the Canadian ruling elite will respond with venom to such defiance. They will seek to use the police and courts to attack and intimidate the strikers.

But if Quebec construction workers have powerful forces arrayed against them, they have even more powerful allies—the working class in Quebec, Canada and around the world.

Over the past week, Couillard, the Conseil de Patronat (Quebec Business Council) and other big-business representatives have railed against the strikers for "costing" the Quebec economy \$45 million per day. In so doing, they are admitting, albeit backhandedly, that the workers produce vast wealth—wealth that is appropriated by the construction bosses, banks and other sections of big business in the form of huge profits.

The working class has immense social power. But this social power can be mobilized and its creative potential realized only if the working class constitutes itself as an independent political force.

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 to reorganize economic life and make social need the driving principle.

We urge all workers and young people who want to discuss the urgent issues raised in this statement to contact the Socialist Equality Party and read the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)

Build rank-and-file committees to spearhead the strike