

Quebec government adopts law to break construction workers' strike

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Quebec's National Assembly passed an "emergency" law in the early hours of Tuesday morning to force 175,000 construction workers to return to work today after a seven-day strike. The Liberal government of Premier Philippe Couillard, which recalled parliament one day early to rush the bill through, was joined in support of Bill 142 by the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ), while the separatist Parti Quebecois and Quebec Solidaire voted against.

The final vote totals were 76 in favour and 21 against.

The law criminalizing the job action marks a major intensification of the assault on workers' rights. It provides the negotiating parties, the Alliance Syndicale de la Construction and the construction bosses, with five months to reach a settlement on a new contract with the assistance of a mediator. If no result is reached, an arbitration process, which invariably enforces the demands of the corporate owners, will commence.

The Liberal government stipulated several measures in the law to ensure that the employers' concession demands, which include a below-inflation pay increase, increased "flexibility" in work scheduling and the slashing of overtime pay, will be met. The government reserved the right to appoint the arbitrator and Labour Minister Dominique Vien will be able to determine which issues are submitted to the arbitrator. The Liberal government can also select the method of arbitration and determine the criteria by which the arbitrator will reach their final decision.

Although it was clear even prior to the launching of the strike last Wednesday that the Liberals were ready to resort to such draconian methods to end the dispute, the trade union officials never warned workers about the Liberals' plans to break the strike and immediately capitulated to the government fiat.

Michel Trepanier, a spokesperson for the Alliance Syndicale, which made major concessions to employers in a bid to prevent the strike from breaking out, declared that the union was "in shock" over the National Assembly vote and would contest the bill in court, a strategy which has been used time and again by the union bureaucracy to demobilize working class opposition to concessions-laden contracts. The capitalist courts, contrary to the claims of Trepanier and his fellow union bureaucrats, are no less committed to the defence of corporate interests than the big business Liberal government.

The bill contains punitive measures to discourage worker defiance, including high fines and possible jail time. Workers are not even permitted to adopt work slowdowns or "any diminishing or alteration" of their "normal activities." Union officials must publicly call on workers to obey the law and confirm this to the labour ministry in an affidavit. Failure to do so could result in legal sanctions.

Leaders of the Alliance Syndicale were quick to order their members back to work. This was done out of fear, not so much of harsh fines, but over the possibility that rank-and-file workers, angered after years of concessions and government-backed attacks, might defy the strikebreaking order.

This found reflection in several social media comments. A construction worker who described himself as a fourth-generation roofer wrote on the Quebec Reddit forum that "on May 29, 2017, the government has sided with big business." He added, "What we were fighting for and will continue to fight for is simple, no to regression."

Another worker on the union's Facebook page denounced the Liberal government for stripping workers of their democratic rights and said it had to be thrown out of power immediately.

World Socialist Web Site reporters found similar sentiment on Monday morning, May 29, when talking to rank-and-file workers in Montreal that were leaving for a demonstration in front of the Quebec legislature to protest against the pending strike-breaking legislation.

A young worker, who finds it difficult to balance his work schedule with his family obligations, explained how angry he was at the demand for regular pay for overtime work on Saturdays. Another made a parallel to the revolutionary upheavals of 2011 in Egypt, which he had followed very closely, saying workers in Quebec should look to such events for inspiration.

There was nothing principled about the opposition of the PQ and QS to the special law. PQ leader Jean-Francois Lisee declared on Friday that the main problem with the Liberals' approach was that they had raised the threat of a back-to-work law too soon. He further criticized government ministers for failing to intervene more decisively in the talks.

Lisee continued in a similar vein during the National Assembly debate, accusing the Liberals merely of

“mismanaging” the talks.

As workers in Quebec know very well, the PQ is no less prepared to use the full force of the capitalist state to outlaw job action by workers. Four years ago, the PQ government of Pauline Marois adopted a special law to force an end to a strike of 75,000 construction workers. This is entirely in keeping with the party’s record when it has held power, enforcing major social spending cuts and attacks on public sector workers over the past three decades.

QS, notwithstanding its left posturing, is no ally of the construction workers. Just days before QS’ National Assembly vote, co-leader Mannon Masse was still appealing to Liberal Premier Couillard to “for once” stand on the side of workers—as if the question of the Liberals’ allegiance has not yet been determined!

The Quebec government’s ruthless suppression of the construction workers’ strike is part of an international phenomenon, which has seen governments of all political stripes in various countries move to abolish the right to strike by outlawing or imposing vast restrictions on job action. These attacks have been aided and abetted by the trade unions, which represent the interests of a privileged layer separated by a vast gulf from the working class, and have been collaborating with management and governments for decades to impose the dictates of big business and smother all popular opposition.

In Britain, a country which has had some of the harshest anti-strike legislation since the onslaught launched by the Thatcher government in the 1980s, the Trade Union Act 2016 came into force in March. It bans strikes in several key areas including transport by categorizing it as an essential service, while at the same time imposing onerous ballot requirements, which make it much harder for workers to strike even in sectors where it is legally possible to do so.

The newly-elected French president, Emmanuel Macron, has made clear his intention to wage an all-out onslaught on workers’ rights, including collective bargaining and job protection. This comes in the wake of the enforcement last year by the trade union-backed Socialist Party government of an anti-worker labour law in the face of deep popular opposition. The unions ran the movement into the sand by calling isolated single days of action and attempting to negotiate a deal with the Hollande government, which ended up enforcing the labour law without a parliamentary vote.

The ruling elite across Canada has acted against strikes with no less ruthlessness. Successive federal and provincial governments have enforced anti-strike legislation, including against postal workers and Air Canada employees, teachers and railway workers. Over the past three decades, federal governments have enforced 19 and provincial governments 71 pieces of back-to-work legislation.

Far from defending workers against these attacks, the trade unions have focused on building alliances with the very parties leading the assault. In Ontario, the unions formed an alliance

with the Liberals in the early 2000s, stumping for their reelection every four years as a means to keep out the Progressive Conservatives. It was this same Liberal government which in 2012 forced teachers back to work by means of a special law.

At the federal level, the unions championed an “Anybody but Conservative” campaign in 2015, which facilitated the rise of Justin Trudeau’s Liberals to office. Over the past 18 months, the Liberal government has expanded Canada’s involvement in military operations abroad, outlined plans for the privatization of public infrastructure, and threatened 50,000 postal workers with back-to-work legislation if they took strike action during a contract dispute last summer.

The unions across Canada have done everything to block a unified counter-offensive by workers. On Monday, the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference reached a verbal “agreement in principle” for a new labour contract with Canadian National Railway, blocking a strike by more than 3,000 conductors, train and yard workers who had voted 98 percent in favour of a walkout.

Having forced construction workers back to work with the complicity of the unions, the Quebec Liberal government is preparing to take the offensive. According to Le Devoir, Couillard declared Tuesday that he desired to reform the negotiation process in the construction sector, indicating that if the unions and employers were not prepared to negotiate voluntarily, the government may have to consider compulsory measures in the future.

Any labour reform implemented by the big business Liberal government would be aimed at upholding the interests of Quebec’s corporate elite at the expense of the workers. This is a government which, since its election in 2014, has implemented a massive assault on the pensions of public sector workers, slashed public spending and used the full power of the state to outlaw job action not only by construction workers, but also government lawyers and notaries earlier this year.

Construction workers should have no confidence in the rigged arbitration system outlined in the special law. If they are to obtain their demands for pay increases and defend their right to a decent-paying, secure job, they must form action committees independent of and in opposition to the construction unions to take the struggle forward, and reach out for support to other sections of workers in Quebec, across Canada and internationally who confront similar attacks on their livelihoods.



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