

# Quebec premier denounces workers’ “high wages,” supports employer drive to extort concessions

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Quebec Premier François Legault and his right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government are on a collision course with the working class. Since coming to power last October, the CAQ has slashed taxes for big business, continued the austerity drive of its Liberal and Parti Québécois predecessors, and introduced chauvinist legislation targeting immigrants and religious minorities.

In recent weeks, Legault has repeatedly voiced his support for big business’ drive to increase corporate “competitiveness,” by extorting wage cuts and other concessions from their workforces, and by contracting out and offshoring work. A multi-millionaire former Air Transat boss, Quebec’s premier has denounced workers’ wages as “too high” and attacked workers for making “excessive” demands.

This anti-worker offensive began in late March, when Legault, abandoning the traditional pose of government “neutrality” in private sector labour disputes, openly sided with the Aluminerie de Bécancour (ABI) in its demands for sweeping contract concessions. A joint venture between the transnational aluminum and mining giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto-Alcan, ABI has locked out 1,030 production and office workers for the past 18 months, in a bid to slash pensions, gut seniority rights, and impose speed-up.

In tweets and in interactions with the press, Legault repeatedly attacked the ABI workers for their “high wages”—although wages are not an issue in the dispute—and demanded that the workers “compromise”—although it is the company that has repeatedly escalated its concession demands.

On April 17, Legault’s Labour Minister submitted the government’s proposal to settle the dispute. Not only did it incorporate ABI’s chief demands; it went further than the company’s own last offer in giving management a free hand to outsource work.

Two weeks later, Legault used May Day as the occasion to lash out against the “high wages” paid Quebec’s industrial workforce as a whole. The premier complained that workers in Quebec receive higher wages than their US counterparts and claimed that investors were being scared away by the rights and wages Quebec workers enjoy. “When a union asks too much,”

said Legault, “there is a risk of losing jobs.”

Last week, Legault endorsed the decision by Quebec-based industrial valve maker Velan to close one of its two Montreal factories, eliminate 200 jobs, and transfer their work to India. Underscoring that the CAQ’s electoral promise to create good-paying jobs for working people was an utter fraud, the premier declared, “It is maybe a good thing that certain lesser-paying jobs be in foreign factories.” He then went on to deplore the recent financial losses suffered by Velan’s owners.

Legault’s provocative comments should serve as a warning to all Quebec workers. His government is preparing a major assault on workers’ social rights, including by overturning the few remaining restraints on the contracting out of work and by implementing the CAQ’s longstanding plans to privatize public services, including health care. Coming in the run-up to next year’s negotiations to renew the contracts of more than half a million Quebec public and para-public workers, Legault’s remarks signal that the government will be seeking major concessions, including further pension cuts.

Legault and the CAQ have been emboldened by the complicity of the unions, which for decades have suppressed the class struggle, imposing concessions and job cuts. The unions had spent the preceding eight years warning of the dangers of a CAQ government and Legault’s privatization plans. But no sooner had the CAQ topped the polls in last October’s election than the unions declared that the new government should be given a “chance.” Subsequently, the unions spoke of a “honeymoon” with the CAQ government, which they praised for consulting with them about the implementation of its right-wing agenda.

Since Alcoa and Rio Tinto locked out the ABI workers in January 2018, the Steelworkers (USW) and Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) have systematically isolated their struggle, while signaling their readiness to make major concessions on pensions and work-rules and to accept job cuts. Vehemently opposed to making the ABI workers’ struggle the catalyst for a broader working-class offensive against concessions and capitalist austerity, the USW and QFL have sought to dissipate the workers’ energies in futile and reactionary appeals to the

Alcoa shareholders and the Quebec government, who they said could be prevailed on to convince ABI's owners that the lockout is a bad business decision.

For months the unions worked hand-in-glove with the Labour Ministry, while claiming Legault could be pressured to intervene on the ABI workers' behalf. Ultimately, Legault and his government did intervene and intervene demonstratively. However, as was entirely predictable, indeed inevitable, they did so in support of management.

Having taken the measure of the union bureaucrats, Legault used the annual May Day meeting between Quebec's premier and the heads of the province's principal labour federations to pressure them to be even more pliant in enforcing the dictates of Quebec big business. "I think we're going to have to make an appeal to the unions, this includes the Steelworkers, to be more reasonable," said Legault as he went into the meeting.

For their part, the union leaders were anxious not to ruffle any feathers. In response to Legault's provocative denunciation of "excessive" worker wages, QFL President Daniel Boyer bleated, "It is of course a little sad that the premier is saying these things on this Workers' Day." Parroting Legault's claims that his principal concern is growing Quebec's economy, the head of the Centrale des syndicats démocratiques (CSD), Luc Vachon, declared, "It is great news that a premier sees himself as the driving force behind economic development and wealth creation."

To divert attention from its big business policies and divide the working class, the "Quebec First" CAQ is seeking to scapegoat immigrants and minorities. It has vowed to pass into law two chauvinist bills before the National Assembly rises for its summer break later this month. Bill 9 will slash the number of immigrants Quebec receives and establish new "cultural" selection criteria, opening the door wide to discrimination. Bill 21 targets religious minorities, especially Muslim women, by banning many state employees, including teachers, from wearing religious symbols and by barring women who wear the niqab or burka from receiving health care, education and other public services.

As in every country, Canada's ruling elite is responding to capitalist breakdown—anemic economic growth, trade war and the coincident surge in imperialist and great power rivalry—by turning to austerity, authoritarian methods of rule, rearmament and war.

The purportedly "progressive" Trudeau Liberal government has continued down the path blazed by the Harper Conservative government, slashing taxes for big business, criminalising strikes, and involving Canada ever more deeply in Washington's military-strategic offensives against Russia and China, and its regime-change operation against Venezuela's elected president.

By bringing to power governments led by right-wing populists in three of the country's four most populous provinces—Legault in Quebec, Doug Ford in Ontario and Jason

Kenney in Alberta—the ruling elite is seeking to push politics sharply further right.

That Legault, Ford and Kenney could win office by making a demagogic appeal to popular anger over economic stress and insecurity is entirely bound up with the role the unions and union-supported NDP, Parti Québécois (PQ), and Liberal governments have played in implementing the ruling class' agenda of austerity and war.

In Quebec there has been one significant social struggle after another, including the 2012 Quebec student strike, the 2015 public sector worker challenge to the Couillard Liberal government's austerity program, and the 2017 Quebec construction strike. But these struggles were all strangled by the unions, which for decades were in a close political alliance with the big business PQ.

With the PQ popularly discredited because of its role in implementing austerity and its chauvinist "Quebec Charter of Values," the unions are now increasingly turning to the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire (QS) to provide them with political cover while they collaborate with Legault and big business.

Thus the Steelworkers invited QS legislator Alexandre Leduc to address the May 25 demonstration they sponsored in support of the locked-out ABI workers. Québec Solidaire, which helped the unions derail the 2012 Quebec student strike and divert the opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the PQ, is more than willing to come to the aid of the pro-capitalist unions.

Fightback, Gauche Socialiste and other pseudo-Marxist groups promote the pro-Quebec independence QS, now the third largest party in the Quebec National Assembly, as the "real opposition" to the CAQ. In fact, QS is a party of the privileged middle classes that seeks to contain social opposition within the framework of electoral and protest politics and to divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of North America and around the world.

Workers in Quebec now coming into struggle against the Legault-led CAQ government and companies like ABI and Velan must join forces with workers across Canada and internationally. A counter-offensive against austerity, concessions, anti-strike laws, and war must be animated by a socialist perspective—the fight for working-class political power and the reorganization of socio-economic life so social needs, not further enriching the capitalist oligarchs, becomes its guiding principle.



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