

Quebec: New attack on crane operators provokes strong opposition

Louis Girard
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Quebec's right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government recently lowered the requirements for the training and licensing of crane operators. The 870-hour technical degree (DEP) has been replaced by 150 hours of on-the-job training. Additionally, a DEP is no longer necessary for someone to drive boom trucks. Instead, barely 80 hours of training is now required, and the instructor does not need to be a crane operator.

This regressive regulatory “reform” poses a serious threat to the safety of both the public and construction workers. Crane operators fear a return to the 4.5 person average annual death rate that prevailed before the mandatory DEP came into effect in 1989. In the three decades since then, the annual average has fallen by two-thirds, to 1.5 deaths per year.

On social media, crane operators are calling for action, including walkouts, against the changes to their training requirements.

In June 2018, some 2,000 crane operators mounted an eight-day wildcat strike against the elimination of the DEP requirement. They ignored the frantic calls for a return to work from the then Liberal provincial government, the media and their own union. Under threat of severe sanctions, they bravely defied a court-issued return-to-work order, paralyzing construction sites across the province.

Since then, the *Commission de la construction du Québec* (CCQ), the government body responsible for overseeing the industry, has transferred nearly 500 cases to prosecutors to initiate criminal proceedings against the strikers. Some crane operators are threatened with fines of up to \$10,000 and even imprisonment.

The crane operators' struggle occurred in the midst of a resurgence of working class struggle on an

international scale, including strikes launched in opposition to the union top brass by tens of thousands of teachers in the United States.

This trend continued in the remainder of 2018 and throughout 2019 with the “Yellow Vest” movement in France against social inequality; mass demonstrations in Algeria and Sudan against dictatorial regimes; and the strike of 70,000 auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico, which crippled much of North American auto production.

A key characteristic of these struggles is that they have emerged outside and frequently in explicit opposition to the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions, which are increasingly perceived by workers to be in bed with the employers and right-wing governments.

In 2018, Daniel Boyer, the president of the Quebec Federation of Labour, the province's main union federation, acknowledged that the crane operators' strike was an independent initiative of the workers—one they continued in defiance of the union apparatus as well as the government and courts. He revealed that at the urging of the government and the CCQ, the QFL's construction wing, FTQ-Construction, had initiated steps to place the crane operators' union under trusteeship as part of its efforts to end the strike. “We didn't have to go that far,” said Boyer, “since the (crane-operators' local) asked its members to return to work.”

If the government has now been able to implement its plans to axe the crane operators' training program, it is because after suppressing the 2018 wildcat, the QFL, FTQ-Construction, and the crane operators' own union, Local 791 G, did everything in their power to divert the crane operators behind the work of a bogus, government-created, “expert committee.”

When this union-management-CCQ committee finally produced a report, almost a year after the strike, acknowledging that the proposed new on-the-job training program was “insufficient,” the unions claimed that the workers had been “heard” and a “strong message” had been sent to the government.

However, predictably, what subsequently emerged were only minor, largely cosmetic changes to the original government-employer plan to gut the training and skill standards.

In early July, after several months of discussions between the government, construction companies and unions, including Local 791 G, the CAQ announced the addition of a 150-hour “practical and theoretical” on-the-job “training” program. This utterly inadequate change was essentially based on a recommendation of the “expert” report lauded by the QFL.

In response, Local 791 G feigned indignation. In a press release, it claimed that “all industry players” are opposed to the new measures. In fact, both the *Association de la construction du Québec* and the *Association des professionnels de la construction et de l’habitation du Québec*, two important construction contractor organizations, welcomed the change.

The union is trying to conceal the fact that the government, whether it is led by the CAQ, the Liberals or the Parti Québécois, always serves the profit interests of big business—interests that are invariably pursued at the expense of worker and public safety.

The calls for strikes by crane operators reflect the immense anger among construction workers. They have endured round after round of attacks on their working conditions. The last major attack came in May 2017 with the introduction of an “emergency law” by the then Liberal government that criminalized a militant province-wide strike of 175,000 construction workers. Under the threat of arbitration, unions representing some construction trades subsequently negotiated concessionary agreements. In other sectors, concessions have been imposed directly in contracts dictated by a government-appointed arbitrator.

Many other sections of workers, fighting to defend their jobs, wages, pensions and working conditions—including postal workers, Air Canada employees, Canadian Pacific railway workers, and Ontario teachers—have faced the same fate. Back-to-work legislation has become the norm in Canada.

Crane operators face a political struggle that raises the need for a new strategy that goes beyond the narrow and fraudulent framework of collective bargaining “negotiations” enforced by the unions. They must instead orient toward the mobilization of the social power of the working class.

Behind the CCQ are the big construction bosses and their huge profits, the government, the media, the police and the courts. The crane operators’ real ally is the entire working class. This includes construction workers across the country, the half-million public sector workers in Quebec who are facing new demands for concessions as their collective agreements expire, and autoworkers across North America who are resisting plant closures and further concessions in their ongoing contract fight with the Detroit Three automakers.

For crane operators to break their isolation and make a strong appeal to the working class, they must break from the pro-capitalist trade unions and form their own independent rank-and-file action committees. It is only on this basis that their struggle can expand and become the spearhead of a counter-offensive of all workers against capitalist austerity and anti-worker legislation.



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