# Quebec prosecuting nearly 100 crane operators for “illegal” 2018 strike

**Louis Girard**
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Nearly 100 crane operators in Quebec are facing criminal prosecution for having participated in an “illegal” wildcat strike in June 2018.

The crane operators face fines ranging from $100 to more than $1,000, depending on the number of illegal strike-days for which they are charged and convicted. At least half are facing fines of more than $1,000. The targeted crane operators are members of three unions: Heavy Machine Operators Local 791-G; International Union of Operating Engineers Local 905, and *the Syndicat québécois de la construction*.

In June 2018, 2,000 crane operators walked off the job across Quebec, paralyzing the province’s major construction sites for eight days. The strike, which was organized in defiance of the province’s reactionary labour laws, was in opposition to the provincial government’s plan to drastically reduce the training required to be a crane operator. This regulatory change posed deadly dangers to them, their colleagues, and the general public.

Almost as soon as the strike began, the *Commission de la Construction du Quebec* (CCQ)—the government agency that regulates the province’s construction industry—got a court injunction ordering the crane operators to return to work and threatening them with fines of up to $10,000 and prison terms. For days, the crane operators courageously defied the frantic calls of the media, the CCQ, the courts and the province’s then Liberal government that they immediately return to work.

They also rejected repeated back-to-work demands from the unions that claim to represent them, above all the *Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec* (FTQ—Quebec Federation of Labour) and the FTQ-Construction. At the prompting of the government, the FTQ and FTQ-Construction went so far as to threaten to place Local 791-G under trusteeship if it didn’t put a stop to strike.

All the unions conceded that it was the crane operators themselves who initiated and led the strike.

From the get-go, the crane operators’ strike met with venomous hostility from the establishment, because it represented a challenge to the 2017-21 “collective agreements” in Quebec’s building industry. Far from being negotiated, these “agreements were” forced through via a “special” or emergency provincial law that illegalized a May 2017 strike of the province’s 175,000 construction workers.

Quebec’s unions, led by the FTQ, the FTQ-Construction, the Provincial Building Trades Council and the construction federation of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), ordered compliance with the 2017 back-to-work law, opening the door to the subsequent attack on crane-operators’ health and safety and new attacks against all construction workers. The Quebec government has signaled that next year it will announce similar changes in training requirements and regulations across the building trades.

In the months following the crane operators’ strike, the CCQ requested the province’s Director of Criminal and Penal Prosecutions act on some 500 cases it had initiated against workers.

In addition to these reprisals, the province’s government, now formed by the right-wing populist CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec), approved in July a drastic lowering of the training requirements to become a crane operator. The new requirements are only slightly modified from those announced by the Liberal government in 2018

The prosecution of the Quebec crane operators is part of an ever widening state assault on workers’ social and democratic rights. For decades, but with accelerating frequency since the 2008 global financial, the ruling class has resorted to state repression to impose its class war programme. More and more, working class struggles are being criminalized, with governments of every political stripe—Liberal, Conservative, Parti Québécois (PQ) and NDP—using anti-strike laws to force through job and wage cuts and the dismantling of public services.

Along with Quebec’s construction workers, numerous groups of workers, including railway workers, postal workers and teachers, have been targeted by emergency strike-breaking legislation in recent years. Ontario’s

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Conservative government has vowed to criminalize job action by the province's teachers should they or any section of them challenge its attempts to drastically increase class sizes and impose a cut in real wages.

The CAQ, following in the footsteps of its Liberal and PQ predecessors, is no doubt also preparing to brandish the threat of a strikebreaking law against the more than half a million Quebec public sector workers whose collective agreements expire in March 2020. Preparing the ground for a major confrontation, Quebec Premier Francois Legault has already rejected out of hand the workers' call for a substantial wage increase after years of austerity.

While the ruling elite is vindictively prosecuting almost 100 crane operators so as to intimidate workers from defying anti-strike laws to fight concessions, deregulation and austerity, the unions have remained deafeningly silent. The FTQ has mounted no campaign to publicize and denounce the injustice being done to the crane operators, let alone sought to mobilize its 600,000 members in their defence. The same is true of Local 791 and the other crane-operator unions.

This complicit silence is the continuation of their virulent opposition to the June 2018 crane operators' strike. It also expresses the trade union apparatuses' acceptance and fundamental agreement with the battery of anti-strike laws the ruling elite has put in place to muzzle the working class.

For decades, the trade unions have suppressed the class struggle, imposing rollbacks and job cuts in the name of "saving jobs" and boosting corporate "competiveness." When struggles do break out, as in the case of the postal workers and the ABI (*Aluminerie de Bécancour*) workers, the unions systematically isolate them and effectively enforce the anti-strike laws adopted by big business' political hirelings Rooted in a nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective, the unions long ago abandoned the defence of even the immediate interests of workers against the capitalist bosses, and have integrated themselves ever more completely with management and the state.

In Quebec the unions have pursued tripartite state-employer-union collaboration for decades, created multi-billion dollar investment funds like the FTQ Solidarity Fund that work hand-in-glove with big business, and worked to politically harness the working class to the big business PQ, a chauvinist, pro-war and pro-austerity party. In the rest of Canada, the unions have formed a close partnership with Justin Trudeau's Liberal government and fully support his agenda of massive tax breaks for big business and the rich, the rationing of public services, rearmament and Canadian collaboration in US aggression around the world.

These bureaucratic apparatuses prostrate themselves before the special laws because they know that a real struggle against them would require the mobilization of the entire working class in an industrial and political struggle against the government, the courts and the rest of the state's repressive apparatus. Such a struggle would threaten the bloated salaries and other privileges accorded them for "regulating industrial relations" to the benefit of big business.

To conduct a genuine fight against anti-strike laws, workers will have to break with the pro-capitalist trade unions and build new organizations of struggle—rank-and-file action committees at every workplace, led by the most militant workers, and oriented towards the systematic mobilization of workers' social power against the bosses, their political parties and state, and the entire capitalist system.

The conditions are maturing for such a break. There is a growing upsurge of the working class around the world. An upsurge that, from the recent wildcat strikes in Mexico's maquiladora region to the Yellow Vest protests in France and the wave of teachers strikes in the US, is characterized by workers acting independently of, and increasingly in explicit opposition, to the pro-employer trade unions. Among the 49,000 GM workers in the United States, now in the third week of their first national strike in thirty years, anger towards the UAW—which has imposed round after round of concession and is now embroiled in a corruption scandal—is palpable.

Workers across Canada must come to the defence of the crane operators, who are being prosecuted and persecuted for exercising their basic right to strike and for fighting regulatory changes that put the lives of their fellow workers and the public at risk. Such a mobilization must prepare and initiate systematic defiance of the anti-strike laws as part of the fight to develop a cross-Canada and international working-class counter-offensive against austerity, job cuts and war.

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