

Quebec's CAQ government launches fresh assault on public sector workers

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Quebec's right-wing nationalist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has presented its contract proposals for the more than half million provincial public sector workers whose contracts expire next March 31. The proposals include wage increases well below the inflation rate and other concessions that will further impoverish state employees and make their working conditions still more onerous.

The government is offering total wage increases of 7 percent in five-year contracts. This breaks down to a 1.75 percent increase in each of the first two years, 1.5 percent for the third year, and 1 percent per annum for the last two years. With an estimated inflation rate of 2.2 percent for 2019 and 2020 and around 2 percent in the subsequent years, these pay "increases" would actually translate into real-terms pay cuts in each and every year through March 2025.

The CAQ government has also announced the creation of two separate "forums," or bargaining tables, for teachers and hospital orderlies where the possibility of slightly higher salary increases will be discussed. Its hope is that by offering these workers a tiny bit more it can improve retention rates in these two occupations, which have high worker-turnover rates because of difficult working conditions and low pay. The government is also dangling a small carrot before high-seniority employees, offering a taxable lump-sum signing bonus of \$1,000 for those at the highest salary levels. All these maneuvers are aimed at dividing workers in order to better impose concessions and rollbacks across the board.

In yet another attack on workers' benefits and rights, the government will also create a third "forum" to discuss measures to reduce "absenteeism at work." This will serve as a mechanism to apply further pressure on overworked and stressed-out health care, education and other public sector workers to work even harder. If a growing number of workers feel compelled to take "sick

days," it is above all because of the high levels of stress and harsh conditions that have resulted from the savage cuts imposed by successive Parti Québécois (PQ) and Liberal provincial governments since the early 1980s.

The public sector unions have all feigned indignation at the CAQ's proposals and denounced them as "another broken promise." But these bureaucratic apparatuses have no intention of mobilizing workers against the CAQ government and its austerity measures. On the contrary, they will conspire with the government to impose them. Until recently, the unions were praising Quebec Premier François Legault as someone who "listens to Quebecers," ignoring the fact that this millionaire and former CEO has for years advocated the privatization of public services and has whipped up chauvinism against immigrants and religious minorities, especially Muslims, with the aim of dividing the working class.

The trade unions have a long record of collaborating with the ruling elite to impose sweeping social cuts, enforce "emergency" strikebreaking laws, and stifle popular opposition to austerity—all in the name of maintaining "social peace," that is, the capitalist social order.

In 2012, when a powerful province-wide student strike was becoming the catalyst for a broader working-class challenge to austerity, the unions hurriedly intervened to shut the strike down and corral the opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the election of their traditional Parti Québécois allies.

Then in 2015, both the so-called "Common Front" of public sector unions and the supposedly more "militant" FAE and FSSS signed concessions-filled agreements that enshrined the massive cuts imposed by the Couillard Liberal government, thereby accelerating the dismantling of public services. In the months leading up to this shameful betrayal, the unions maintained a complicit silence on the threat of government back-to-work

legislation, only to invoke this threat at the last minute in order to pressure workers into ratifying the concession contracts they had negotiated.

There is great anger among public sector workers and the working class as a whole over the austerity measures demanded by big business and implemented by their lackeys in government.

But if workers are to prevail in the coming struggle, they must form rank-and-file action committees independent of, and in opposition, to the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. As in 2015, public sector workers face a political struggle that cannot be won in so far as it remains within the state-designed and regulated collective-bargaining framework. In opposing the dismantling of public services and defending their working conditions and benefits, Quebec public sector workers are challenging not only the Legault-led CAQ government, but the entire class agenda of the Quebec and Canadian ruling elite.

The first task of the rank-and-file action committees must be to mobilize the full power of the working class in defence of public services and opposition to all concessions, and to prepare defiance of any back-to-work law, and the court injunctions and police attacks that will be used to try to enforce it.

The Legault government's assault on public services and the workers who administer them is part of a social counterrevolution being implemented by the capitalist ruling elite across Canada and around the world. The Conservative governments of Doug Ford in Ontario and Jason Kenney in Alberta have announced massive cuts to public services and deep wage cuts. They are leading the charge against public employees and the rest of the working population, while promoting xenophobia and regionalism to split the working class and divert attention from their big business policies.

Decades of capitalist austerity have starved public services of resources to the detriment of students, patients and public sector workers alike. In Quebec, as across Canada, as many as one out of every four teachers drops out of the profession in their first five years, largely because of the difficult working conditions.

In the health sector, terrible working conditions, including excessive workloads and mandatory overtime, are leading to burnout and workers leaving their professions.

Principal responsibility for the dismal state of public infrastructure and services falls on the current federal government of Justin Trudeau and his

predecessors—notably the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government of the mid-1990s—which have slashed public transfers to the provinces for health and education.

Quebec Treasury Board President Christian Dubé told a press conference earlier this month that the government's public sector contract offers are “reasonable” and respect “the population's capacity to pay.” This came just weeks after the CAQ government announced that the province's more than \$8 billion budget surplus for the current fiscal year will be used to pay down the provincial debt and reduce various taxes—primarily to the benefit of big business and the wealthy middle class—not to improve public services.

For years, provincial and federal governments of all political stripes have justified social spending cuts with the claim there is “no money.” In fact, abundant resources exist, but they are monopolized by the banks, corporations and the rich. According to a report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, in 2018 the 87 richest Canadian families owned as much as the 12 million poorest Canadians, or one-third of the country's population. At the same time as they are attacking working people's social rights, Canada's ruling elite is pumping billions of dollars into expanding the Canadian Armed Forces' deadly arsenal, so as to provide Canadian imperialism with the means to advance its predatory interests on the world stage through aggression and war.

No workers' struggle can be victorious if it remains confined to a provincial or national framework. Quebec public sector workers must build strike committees independent of the unions to mobilize the social power of the working class and unite with their brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the United States and internationally in a common offensive against global capital.



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