

Quebec's phony education "reform" will facilitate further cuts and privatization

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Quebec's right-wing, national-autonomist ("Quebec First") Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government invoked closure last month to push through a key element in its education "reform." In the name of reducing "bureaucracy," Bill 40, "An Act to amend mainly the Education Act with regard to school organization and governance," concentrates power in the hands of the Minister of Education so as to facilitate further education spending cuts, as well as moves to privatize public education.

Among other measures, the new law eliminates elected school boards, replaces them with "service centers," increases the powers of school principals, and creates volunteer "boards of directors" for the new "service boards" whose principal task will be to rubber-stamp ministerial directives.

The new law also makes it easier for parents to enroll a child in a public school outside his or her neighbourhood. Since schools are financed on the basis of the number of enrolled students, this measure will increase competition among schools, draining funds from less attractive schools in impoverished working-class neighbourhoods, thereby further accentuating social inequality. Over time, at least some less advantaged schools will likely face closure, which would facilitate the government's plans to expand "vocational" schools.

Another measure in the CAQ's education "reform" law aims to foster collaboration between Quebec's public and private schools. The combination of generous provincial government subsidies for private schools and decades of social spending cuts have caused increasing numbers of better-off Quebecers to enroll their children in private schools.

Bill 40 has rightly been compared to the previous Liberal government's health services law, Bill 10, which was adopted in 2015 and came to be known as the "Barrette reform" after the health minister who authored

it, Gaetan Barrette. By restructuring and centralizing management of Quebec's health care system, the "Barrette reform" served as a bludgeon for implementing massive health care spending cuts and promoting privatization. Health services and programs have been adversely affected throughout the province, with disastrous consequences for the population. Health care workers, meanwhile, have faced increased workloads and stress, causing burnout and other psychological ailments to spike.

Like Bill 10, the CAQ's restructuring of the school system will come at the expense of students and education workers. Underscoring the big-business agenda animating it, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge urged "competent" businesspeople to lead the new "volunteer-run" service centers in a recent speech before the Montreal Chamber of Commerce.

The attack on Quebec education workers parallels what is taking place across Canada and internationally. In every country the capitalist elites are determined to gut public education, as part of their drive to dismantle all public services and eliminate the social rights of the working class so as to boost corporate profit. This agenda has been met with growing working-class resistance, including from teachers. Since 2018, a wave of teachers' strikes has swept five continents, from the United States to Argentina and India.

In Ontario, teachers and school support staff have staged rotating walkouts, including a provincewide one-day strike of 200,000 education workers on Feb. 21. They are opposing the provincial Conservative government's plans to hike student-teacher ratios, eliminate thousands of teaching jobs, cut hundreds of millions of dollars from student support services, impose mandatory online courses, and limit wage and benefit increases for the province's education workers to one percent per year for the next three years.

As it pursues austerity, Canada's ruling elite, like its counterparts internationally, is whipping up reaction, including anti-immigrant chauvinism, so as to disorient and divide the working class. To this end, the Legault government has slashed the number of new immigrants Quebec is receiving, imposed a new "Quebec values" test for would-be immigrants, and adopted a discriminatory law, Bill 21, that will bar many members of religious minorities from teaching in Quebec schools. Under the guise of affirming the "secularism of the state," Bill 21 prohibits the hiring of teachers who wear religious symbols (such as the Muslim hijab or Jewish kippah)—an antidemocratic measure specifically aimed at Muslim women. Underscoring the law's reactionary intent, the bill is written so as to ensure that teachers who wear a cross or other Roman Catholic symbol will not be impacted.

The CAQ's use of closure to force through Bill 40 was the fourth time in eight months it has run roughshod over normal parliamentary procedure to impose a controversial and unpopular law. As with the CAQ's invocation of the constitution's "notwithstanding clause" to shield Bill 21 from constitutional challenges, the Legault government's now almost routine resort to closure must be taken as a serious warning that it will use the repressive power of the state, including "emergency" antistrike laws, to quell opposition among teachers and the general population to its austerity agenda.

As a result of the draconian cuts implemented by the CAQ's Liberal and Parti Quebecois predecessors and a decade of economic growth, Quebec has enjoyed annual budget surpluses of \$5 billion or more in each of the past three years. But even though the province's public services are crumbling, the Legault government has served notice that these and any future surpluses will be used almost entirely to fund further tax cuts for big business and the better-off or to pay down the province's debt.

In December, the government tabled contract "offers" to the province's 125,000 teachers and 400,000 other public sector workers, all of whose contracts expire at the end of March. After years of falling real wages, the government is again offering public sector workers wage increases significantly below the projected inflation rate, as well as demanding significant other concessions.

The struggle that now confronts teachers and Quebec public sector workers as a whole is not a mere collective bargaining dispute. It is a political struggle that raises the fundamental question of who determines the allocation of

society's resources and toward what end. Must we, as demanded by the ruling class, accept further massive cuts to public services and the wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them in order to lower taxes on the wealthiest and enrich investors? Or should the vast resources created by the collective labour of working people be used to meet the crying need for improved health care and education and to raise the standard of living of working people?

A struggle based on the second option can only move forward in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. The latter have no intention of waging a real struggle to defend public services and the workers that they claim to represent. Rather, their role is to suppress the class struggle and to impose on their members the concessions demanded by the employers. Time and time again over the past four decades, they have sabotaged workers' struggles, including the many public sector workers' struggles that have erupted against the attacks of successive Parti Quebecois and Liberal governments.

The experience of the 2015-2016 public sector contract struggle should serve as a lesson. The unions deliberately separated the contract fight from the mass opposition to the Couillard Liberal government's savage social spending cuts. For months, the unions remained silent about the threat of a government back-to-work law, only to invoke it at the last minute when seeking to browbeat their members into accepting concession-laden contracts.

During the last Quebec election campaign in September 2018, the leaders of the major trade unions touted Legault—the multimillionaire former Transat CEO, former PQ minister and privatization enthusiast—as a potential ally of working people. After his election victory, Quebec Federation of Labour President Daniel Boyer even spoke of a "honeymoon" with the CAQ government and pleaded with Legault to intervene in the Alcoa-owned ABI aluminum smelter lockout, even as the premier was working hand-in-glove with the company to extort massive concessions from the ABI workers.



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