

Quebec tries to extort concessions from health care and other public sector workers

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As the coronavirus pandemic surges across Canada, Quebec's CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government is seeking to impose still further concessions on the province's 550,000 nurses, hospital orderlies, teachers, civil servants, and other public sector workers.

Over the course of the past week, the leaders of Quebec's principal trade union federations and public sector unions held closed-door negotiations with the CAQ government in an effort to reach "accelerated" contract settlements for workers whose collective agreements expired March 31.

According to the unions, the government is no longer even offering, as it indicated it would several weeks ago, wage increases tied to the inflation rate. Instead, it has reverted to its original concessionary wage-offer, while proposing no new investments in public services and no changes to work rules and work-regimes that are so onerous they have led large numbers of nurses and teachers to quit their respective professions.

Under the government's offer, the province's 550,000 public sector workers would receive wage increases of 1.75 percent for the first two years and 1.5 percent in the third year of three-year contracts, for a total increase of 5 percent. This would mean the further impoverishment of workers, who have already been the target of years of "wage restraint." The government itself predicts that inflation will rise 6.4 percent between now and 2023.

The unions have unanimously rejected the government's contract offers, knowing full well that they could not get their members to accept them. But if the CAQ government can be so intransigent and arrogant toward public sector workers, including workers in the health care sector who are risking their lives every day as the pandemic intensifies, it is precisely because of the unions' subservience.

Quebec Premier Francois Legault took the unions' measure when they responded to his March 13 proposal that contract negotiations be indefinitely suspended due to the coronavirus emergency, by offering the government their full collaboration. The union leaders thus signaled that they would do everything in their power to block a working class rebellion against years of austerity that would threaten the big business CAQ government and the class war agenda of the entire ruling elite

in the midst of an unprecedented health and economic crisis that has exposed the manifest failure of capitalism.

When, a few days later, the Treasury Board reversed its position and instead invited the unions to a "bargaining blitz" to quickly reach "interim agreements," all the unions rushed to give their assent. The president of the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ) went so far as to say that "everything is on the table," while the president of the Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ—Quebec Federation of Labour), Daniel Boyer, barely concealed his readiness to impose concessions on workers. "We are ready to hear the government's concerns," he wrote in a press release.

Now the unions are feigning astonishment and indignation, as if this new attempt to extort concessions, coming from a party that for years has advocated social spending cuts, privatization, and lavish tax cuts for the rich and corporations, was unexpected. Apparently, the discussions are still ongoing and the government hopes to conclude agreements in the coming days.

However, most unions are now demanding a postponement of negotiations, although some, including the CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec) and the CNTU (Confederation of National Trade Unions), have submitted counter-offers that fully conform with the government's austerity framework.

The CNTU has proposed 24-month contracts with a meagre 4.4 percent in wage increases, plus C\$3-per-hour bonuses for all health sector workers and other workers drafted into assisting the fight against the coronavirus. Its offer accepts that none of workers' long-standing demands for a reduction in workload and massive reinvestment in services will be addressed. The CSQ has tabled a similar offer.

The union leaders' hollow criticisms of the government's proposals notwithstanding, they are determined, as during the 2015-2016 public sector struggle, to prevent any working-class challenge to the austerity agenda of the bourgeoisie and the battery of anti-strike laws through which it has been imposed.

If most unions now appear to favour scrapping the attempt to reach interim agreements and instead want to revert at some future date to negotiating on the basis of the government's original five-year contract offers, it is because they fear losing control over any increasingly restless rank-and-file. By walking

away from the bargaining table, they hope to be able to drag out negotiations, as they have frequently done in the past, with the aim of demobilizing and dividing workers and then using the government's threat of anti-strike legislation and contracts imposed by decree to bully workers into accepting "negotiated" concessionary agreements.

The unions' subservience has already encouraged the government to issue, under the pretext of the health emergency, two ministerial decrees that give it the power to set aside at will the terms of the current contracts covering health care and education sector workers. In justifying these decrees, government officials have specifically mentioned needing the power to impose 12-hour shifts, assign employees to any task and location, and to suspend vacations and holidays. According to the unions, these measures will undoubtedly result in wage losses for workers.

Like governments around the world, Justin Trudeau's federal government, Legault's CAQ, Ontario's Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government and their counterparts across Canada have come to the rescue of the banks and big business with unlimited bailouts, while offering workers who have lost their jobs ration-style relief. As after the financial crash of 2008, the ruling elite will subsequently seek to extract from working people through even more savage austerity, the hundreds of billions of dollars funneled to the banks and corporations. Such a program is incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

Without the independent political intervention of the working class in the current crisis, the ruling elite will attempt to make "temporary" anti-democratic measures such as the suspension of workers' contractual rights, the increasing deployment of police—and even the military—in the streets, tougher border controls, etc., "permanent." In fact, for years the federal and provincial governments have been trampling on workers' rights such as the right to strike.

The unions' treacherous maneuvers with the CAQ government are part of their long-standing corporatist collaboration with the employers and their growing integration into the capitalist state. For decades, the union apparatuses have suppressed the class struggle, sabotaging one workers' struggle after another in order to enable Québec big business to satisfy investor demands for ever bigger profits.

These organizations continue to reach out to Legault and sow the lie that the CAQ can be pressured to meet workers' needs at a time when it is becoming increasingly clear that the Québec government, like governments around the world, was criminally negligent in the face of the looming coronavirus threat. Nothing was done to mobilize society's resources to obtain ventilators, masks, and other essential medical equipment, or to take other preventive measures, so as not to impinge on the profits of the financial elite. This failure is all the more striking now that the pandemic is surging, with Québec the province hardest hit by the coronavirus with more

than 4,160 confirmed cases and 31 deaths. More than 80 health care workers have contracted COVID-19.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the entire establishment, including the ostensibly left-wing Québec Solidaire, has sided with Legault, whom the media has portrayed as a quasi-"national hero," because he ordered shutdowns a day or at most two days before other governments across the country. Yet he long resisted the pressing demands from workers in non-essential sectors such as construction to close workplaces. Even now, the CAQ premier is insisting that mining companies like Rio Tinto and ArcelorMittal maintain production, even if this places workers at grave risk of catching and transmitting the disease.

Meanwhile, reports continue to emerge daily about the lack of essential equipment in the province's hospitals, such as N95 protective masks.

The growing working class counter-offensive against austerity and social inequality that swept the globe in 2018 and 2019 is now finding expression in a wave of strikes—including by US autoworkers and Amazon and other logistics workers, Italian textile workers, and French transport workers—against being forced to work in unsafe conditions.

More than ever, it is urgent for workers to take matters into their own hands. In the face of the attempt by the elite, with the complicity of the trade unions and the official left, to use the pandemic to turn politics even further to the right, workers must form independent committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods in order to develop their own solution to the crisis; one that must be based on human needs and not on what the wealthy financial elite claims we can afford, and that counterposes to capitalism the international struggle of the working class for the socialist reorganization of society.

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