

As social anger mounts, Quebec unions issue craven appeal to Premier Legault to forego austerity

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Quebec's three main trade union federations and other unions issued a joint open letter to the province's right-wing premier, François Legault, earlier this month in which they put forward a series of lies to confuse workers at a time when class tensions are reaching the boiling point.

Published in the Montreal daily *Le Devoir*, the letter is signed by the presidents of the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec* (CSQ), FIQ (which represents nurses and other health professionals) and half-a-dozen other public sector unions. The letter has a double purpose: to sow illusions in Legault's big business government, which is spearheading the ruling elite's reckless back-to-work drive amid the COVID-19 pandemic; and to hide the unions' complicity in the destruction of public services and the evisceration of the rights, jobs and working conditions of the workers who administer them.

The signatories begin their missive by presenting Legault and his Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) as potential defenders of working people. After underlining that "Quebec is currently experiencing an unprecedented crisis," they write: "We ask Mr. Legault and his ministers not to give in to the same austerity excesses as their predecessors."

Who do these well-heeled union bureaucrats think that they are kidding? Legault, the multi-millionaire former CEO of the airline company Air Transat, is one of the richest people in Quebec. Officially entering politics in 1998 at the request of then Parti Québécois Premier Lucien Bouchard, Legault served first as health and then education minister. In the name of achieving a "zero (budget) deficit," the Bouchard-Landry PQ government implemented the biggest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

Throughout his political career, Legault has stood out as an advocate of deregulation, the privatization of public services, and tax cuts for big business and the rich. He left the PQ in 2009 to build a new vehicle to push Quebec politics even further to the right. The CAQ, which he founded two years later, absorbed the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), a right-wing populist party that had whipped up anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism.

Since the CAQ's election in October 2018, Legault has demonstrated time and again that he is a bitter enemy of the working class. He denounced as "too high" the wages of manufacturing workers during the lockout at the ABI aluminum smelter that began the year he was elected. Although Quebec was recording record budget surpluses prior to the pandemic, Legault refused to reinvest in

public services, choosing instead to make accelerated debt payments. Inspired by the PQ and ADQ, the CAQ government has adopted two chauvinistic laws (Bills 9 and 21) that attack immigrants, religious minorities and democratic rights, with the aim of diverting mounting social anger away from a challenge to big business and capitalism and splitting the working class.

The unions are sweeping this record under the rug and urging workers to appeal to and place their trust in Legault!

In their letter, the union leaders are forced to acknowledge the deplorable state of public services and the gutting of workers' rights. "Over the past 20 years," they write, "our working conditions have deteriorated drastically and our purchasing power has deteriorated markedly since our wages have not kept pace with inflation."

Unsurprisingly, the union bureaucrats are silent on their own responsibility for this massive deterioration, including their support for the very governments and parties that have imposed capitalist austerity. They try to conceal this by claiming: "We have used every forum repeatedly to warn successive governments that service breakdowns are imminent."

What a shameless lie! For more than four decades, the unions have collaborated with governments of all stripes and the corporate bosses to impose the dictates of big business by negotiating concession-filled collective agreements time after time, both in the public sector and in private industry.

In the name of "social peace"—that is, upholding the class domination of big business—the unions have torpedoed all the major opposition movements that have erupted among the working class and youth over the past 25 years.

*In 1996, the unions participated in the "socio-economic summit" organized by Bouchard's PQ government, which politically prepared a massive assault on public services. Endorsing the government's goal of achieving a "zero deficit" so as to create "winning conditions" for a third referendum on Quebec sovereignty, the unions themselves proposed one of the chief instruments used to ravage the health care and education systems—a job-cutting early retirement scheme. Through this mechanism 40,000 nursing, hospital orderly, public school teacher, CEGEP (junior college) instructor and other public sector jobs were eliminated.

*In 1999, when nurses rebelled against the budget cuts and struck in defiance of anti-strike laws, the FIQ (Federation of Quebec nurses) and other public sector unions isolated them. Despite overwhelming public sympathy for the nurses, the Bouchard PQ government, which the unions had relentlessly promoted as "progressive," was able to

inflict a bitter defeat on the nurses, including major contract concessions and harsh penalties under draconian back-to-work legislation.

*The unions played the central role in suppressing the militant six-month 2012 Quebec student strike, which threatened to become the catalyst for a working class offensive against the entire austerity agenda of the ruling elite. In May 2012, when workers surged onto the streets to support the students and oppose the Charest Liberal government's bid to crush the strike through its repressive and anti-democratic Bill 78, the unions intervened forcefully to shut down this movement and divert the opposition to austerity and the Liberals behind the Parti Québécois. Their watchword became "after the street, to the ballot box!" Once in power, Pauline Marois' PQ government raised tuition fees, imposed austerity and introduced a "Charter of Quebec values" aimed at promoting anti-immigrant chauvinism.

*In 2015, the unions separated the contract struggle of the more than half-million Quebec public sector workers from the mass opposition to the Couillard Liberal government's sweeping public spending cuts. They then scuttled the movement for a province-wide public sector strike and conspired with Couillard to impose a new round of concession-filled contracts. After cancelling three days of strike action in December and restricting the struggle to the bogus collective bargaining framework set up by the government, the Common Front of public sector unions, along with the FIQ and the FAE (Autonomous Teachers' Federation), suddenly invoked the threat of strikebreaking legislation to force their members to accept real wage-cuts and an increase in the retirement age.

This record of siding with big business and the government against the workers they purport to represent has continued in an even more brazen form during the pandemic. From the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the unions stifled class struggle and called on workers to rally, in the name of "national unity," around the Legault government.

Yet this is a government that, with the full support of Justin Trudeau's federal Liberals, has systematically put the interests of the financial and corporate elite before workers' health and lives. It denied the dangers of the virus until March; refused to provide workers with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE); prematurely and unsafely reopened non-essential businesses and schools to restart the flow of profits into the banks and major corporations; and refused to make the massive investments in the public health care system needed to fight the coronavirus.

In their letter, the union leaders do not say a word about the CAQ's criminal neglect of the health care system and its underlying policy of "herd immunity," which has resulted in the infection of more than 13,500 health care workers, a hecatomb in nursing homes, and a drastic increase in infections in workplaces and schools. Continuing the efforts of the Quebec and Canadian elite to cover up the catastrophic outcome of their policies, the letter avoids mentioning that Quebec has one of the world's highest COVID-19 per capita mortality rates.

From the outset, the unions have worked with the Legault government in its back-to-work and back-to-school drive, while making sure to contain any organized opposition from workers. In the public sector, they have failed to denounce, let alone mobilize workers against, ministerial decrees that nullify collective agreements and arbitrarily impose new and even harsher working conditions. At the same time, they have been negotiating behind the scenes for months with the government over the next takeaways to be imposed on the

550,000 public sector workers whose collective agreements expired at the end of March.

The treacherous policies of the unions are not the result of "bad choices" or "bad leaders" but of their nationalist orientation and support for the capitalist profit system. Across Canada and internationally, the unions have responded to the social and economic crisis triggered by the pandemic in exactly the same way as their Quebec counterparts: by suppressing working class opposition and expanding their corporatist ties with big business and the state. Teachers unions in Ontario and British Columbia have played a critical role in imposing the reckless reopening of schools in the face of widespread worker opposition, while Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress have pledged to work with big business and the Trudeau Liberals to bolster corporate Canada's "global competitiveness."

For their struggles to be successful, workers must decisively reject the unions' pro-capitalist perspective that insists that jobs and public services must be subordinated to the profitability of big business and the super-rich. They must also oppose the unions' Quebec nationalism. For decades, it has served as ideological cement for the unions' subordination of the working class to big business and their political representatives, and to divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere in Canada and internationally.

To fight the spread of the pandemic, including ensuring all necessary health measures and full wages for all those out of work because of the pandemic, workers need their own organizations: Rank-and-file safety committees built independently of and in opposition to the trade union apparatuses. Such committees have already been set up in the education, transportation, logistics and auto sectors in the US, Germany, Britain and Australia.

Workers in Quebec and across Canada should join these efforts by forming such safety committees at their workplaces and in neighbourhoods. These committees must repudiate the unions' political support for Legault, as exemplified by their friendly open letter, as well as their traditional alliance with the big business PQ. This requires a turn to the working class across Canada and internationally to launch a joint counter-offensive against capitalist austerity and for socialism.



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