

Quebec unions plotting with government to impose concessions on health care workers

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The contracts for more than half-a-million health care, education and other Quebec public sector workers expired at the end of March, leaving them to work without a contract throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Negotiations for new contracts have been going on for months, with the unions doing everything to keep workers in the dark as to what is happening and accepting, more or less from the outset, the fiscal framework set by the provincial government—that is, continuing capitalist austerity. Now, as 2020 comes to a close, the unions and Quebec’s right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ, Coalition for Quebec’s Future) government are scheming to ram through sellout agreements.

The *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé* (FIQ), which represents most of the province’s nurses and other health care professionals, reached an agreement in principle last week with the CAQ government that enshrines the existing oppressive working conditions, including short-staffing and forced overtime, and divides nurses from other public sector workers. This sellout deal comes just two weeks after a similar agreement was rejected by union delegates who feared that its ratification would trigger a rank-and-file rebellion. Over the past year, nurses have repeatedly staged sit-ins and other protests independently of the FIQ leadership.

Once again, so-called “collective bargaining” has been exposed as a conspiracy between the government and the pro-capitalist union apparatuses to impose further cuts to vital public services and attacks on the workers who provide them.

The unions, which have suppressed working class resistance to capitalist austerity for decades, have done nothing to ensure that medical personnel are properly protected during the pandemic. Nor have they fought the ministerial decrees that Premier François Legault and his CAQ government have used, under the pretext of the health crisis, to override existing collective agreements and arbitrarily reassign personnel, modify work schedules and cancel vacations.

More broadly, unions across Canada are collaborating in the ruling elite’s disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its relentless efforts to keep the “economy open” so as to keep profits flowing to the financial markets and big business, regardless of the cost in human lives. The ongoing back-to-work campaign and the reopening of schools, despite the virus raging out of control, is being carried out with full union support.

Now that any serious effort to stop the pandemic has been pushed aside, a deadly danger is threatening the population, especially health care workers fighting on the front lines. In Quebec alone, the National Institute of Public Health has reported 17,000 COVID-19 infections, 400 hospitalizations and 13 deaths among medical personnel.

The FIQ’s sellout deal

A striking example of union treachery is provided by the FIQ’s repeated attempts to impose a new agreement on working conditions that tramples on nurses’ long-standing demands.

On November 23, FIQ president Nancy Bédard announced that a tentative agreement reached with the Treasury Board would “significantly improve the working conditions of nurses, nursing assistants, respiratory therapists and perfusionists in Quebec.”

So rotten was this agreement that union delegates rejected it the next day out of fear that they would otherwise be totally discredited in the eyes of the membership. Workers are seething with anger at chronic staff shortages, endless hours of overtime and declining real wages. Due to burnout or work-related family stress, many nurses have abandoned the profession or chosen to work for private agencies that are profiteering off the shortage of nurses in public health care facilities.

In line with the antidemocratic traditions of the union bureaucracy, FIQ has refused to provide the membership with the details of the rejected first tentative agreement or of the debate it provoked among union delegates.

But the information that did leak out showed that Bédard’s comments were lies. The agreement was designed to keep health care workers without adequate protection in the midst of a second wave of COVID-19 and maintained the punishing working conditions that are the result of decades of austerity and budget cuts imposed by Parti Québécois (PQ) and Liberal provincial, and Conservative and Liberal federal governments.

In line with the CAQ government’s own austerity agenda, the tentative agreement called for few to no staffing increases and no significant reinvestments in health care, and would compel existing workers, already stressed and exhausted, to work still harder for a few pennies more in overtime, nightshift and other premiums.

Two measures in particular were touted by the government and its lackeys in the FIQ leadership:

- 1) an increase in full-time positions, particularly in retirement homes. Faced with the health emergency and the lack of personnel, the “solution” of the Legault government is to force the current workforce to work still harder. Although some part-time workers may want more guaranteed hours of employment, the government’s objective is not to ensure “stability” of employment, as claimed by the FIQ leadership, nor to meet the needs of the health care system, but to cut costs.

- 2) higher premiums to encourage nurses to work two out of every

three weekends, or three out of four weekends, instead of one out of two as is currently the case. The premiums are modest lump sums that are not counted when calculating pensions.

For years, a growing number of nurses and orderlies have denounced the unsustainable caregiver-to-patient ratios. It is not uncommon for nurses, depending on location and shift, to have more than 100 patients to care for. The agreement contained a vague promise to reduce these ratios, but not before 2022, and only at nursing homes.

Workers turned to social media to express their disgust, not only with this first agreement in principle, but also with the FIQ. Summarizing the general state of mind of the workers, one of them wrote on Facebook, “They take us for slaves.”

Showing the contempt of the highly paid union bureaucrats for their members, FIQ Vice-President Linda Lapointe said after the agreement had been rejected by the union delegates, “We can’t tell them [nurses], ‘Yes, in 2021, wow, you’re going to stop doing compulsory overtime.’”

After the November 24 “no” vote, Lapointe made clear that the union would persist in seeking a deal with the government and suppressing rank-and-file calls for jobs action. “We’re not starting from scratch,” she declared. “It’s just a question of making full-time positions more attractive.”

On December 8, the FIQ announced a second agreement-in-principle, which this time was endorsed by the union delegates.

The union is refusing to reveal the full contents of this agreement until a ratification vote, which will only be organized once there is a tentative agreement on monetary issues, i.e., wages and pensions.

But the second working-conditions agreement is known to be only a slightly amended version of the first.

It contains only minor changes, such as a slight increase in premiums for weekend work. It was accompanied by a “letter of understanding” in which the government agreed to an “objective” of reducing “overtime” and its use of private employment agencies. This is a typical example of the empty government promises that the FIQ bureaucrats try to pass off as “major gains.”

A program of struggle

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on nurses to reject the FIQ’s sellout agreement and to put forward their own demands:

- Full protection for health care personnel. Every health care worker must be provided with personal protective equipment, including N-95 masks, and have the right to withdraw with full pay when required.

- Abolish the ministerial decrees. This flagrant violation of collective agreements and basic democratic rights must be actively opposed and ended.

- Substantial wage increases. Taking inflation into account, wages in health care and the entire public sector have been declining for decades. A wage catch-up of at least 20 percent per year is needed in all job categories.

- A massive increase in health care personnel. The health care system has been bled dry by decades of budget and job cuts. Tens of thousands of workers must be hired to provide quality care and relieve the current medical staff.

These demands are both necessary and realistic. Contrary to the refrain of the ruling class that “there is no money,” there are in fact ample resources to halt the COVID-19 pandemic, expand the health care system, and provide a decent standard of living for all. But they are being hijacked by the capitalist class and the super-rich.

A new political strategy is needed

The struggle around these demands must be based on a new strategy: the independent political mobilization of the working class against the profit system.

In fighting the pandemic and opposing austerity, nurses and all public sector employees confront not only the Legault government, but the entire ruling class and its institutions: the financial markets, the police, the courts, and the Trudeau Liberal government.

As part of a working-class counteroffensive against the entire austerity program of the Quebec and Canadian ruling class, a political general strike must be prepared against the ministerial decrees and the battery of antistrike laws.

As the recent wildcat strikes by health care workers in Alberta and the strikes by nurses and teachers on all continents have shown, workers everywhere are facing the same issues. It is to this social force that public sector workers in Quebec must turn.

Nurses and public sector workers must form rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist unions. By putting human lives before profits, these committees will be able to ensure the protection of health care personnel and the general public, while defending jobs, working conditions and public services.

The construction of a network of rank-and-file committees must be linked to the struggle for a workers’ government dedicated to the socialist reorganization of economic life, so that society’s resources can be used to fulfill the needs of all, not produce profits for a tiny minority.



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