

Quebec nurses need independent organizations of rank-and-file workers' power, not another pro-capitalist trade union

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The *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ), the union that represents the majority of the province's nurses, nursing assistants, respiratory therapists and perfusionists, reached a deal on work rules and staffing with the right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government last month.

The agreement in principle would maintain the punishing working conditions caused by decades of social spending cuts and intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, including forced overtime and onerous workloads. It will also allow the government to continue to violate its contractual obligations and arbitrarily reassign personnel, cancel vacations, and override work rules, through ministerial decrees, for the duration of the health emergency.

During the now 10-month-long pandemic, the FIQ and Quebec's other major unions have failed to mount any struggle to secure the personal protective equipment (PPE) and other additional resources needed to protect frontline health care workers and enable them to provide effective and compassionate care. Nor have they demanded the other measures urgently needed to combat the coronavirus, including the immediate cessation of all non-essential economic activity with full compensation for all affected workers.

Instead, in keeping with their longstanding role in suppressing the class struggle, the unions have supported the ruling elite's ruinous back-to-work and back-to-school drive, which prioritizes corporate profits over human lives and has led to a "second wave" of the pandemic even greater and more deadly than the first.

The FIQ-government agreement has been met with hostility among nurses and other FIQ members, with many turning to social media to express their outrage. "Now the FIQ is working for the government," wrote one worker on Facebook. A group of nurses published a survey to find out whether their co-workers were in favor of creating a new union "that will represent us better than the FIQ." The vast majority of the 620 respondents answered in the affirmative.

These developments raise fundamental questions of political perspective.

Nurses and other public sector workers, who are rightly outraged by the FIQ's latest sellout, must recognize that this is not an isolated development. For decades, unions in all sectors of activity have imposed the dictates of big business, sabotaging working class resistance to capitalist austerity.

The direct role of the unions in the assault of big business and their political representatives on jobs, wages and public services is an international process—one that has resulted in an enormous decline in their size and influence. In France, Britain, the US and elsewhere, the percentage and even the number of unionized workers have declined precipitously. The same process has also occurred in Canada, albeit at a

slower pace.

The transformation of the unions into open agents of the employers is a universal process. It is not the outcome of the bad choices, personal aggrandizement and corruption of individual union leaders (although corruption is rife within the union apparatuses), but of these organizations' nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective. The unions accept the exploitative capital wage-labour relationship and the subordination of economic life to private profit.

In an earlier period, when production was still largely organized within national borders, it was possible for workers to extract certain economic concessions through militant trade union struggles.

But based on the technological advances of the late 1970s, particularly in transportation, telecommunications and computers, the ruling class developed transnational corporations that could move production around the globe in search of the cheapest labour, best infrastructure, and lowest taxes.

This process, globalization, has enormously intensified the competition for markets and profits. The ruling class of each country is seeking to attract investment and increase the competitiveness of its "own" large corporations through massive tax cuts for big business, privatization, deregulation and social cuts.

As a result, parties of all political stripes have implemented unrelenting capitalist austerity. This is as true of the parties historically supported and, in many cases, built by the trade unions, such as the British Labour Party, the French Socialist Party and in Canada the New Democratic Party (NDP), as it is of the traditional parties of the right. Over the past four decades, social-democratic parties have played a key role in gutting the limited welfare-state programs that they had hailed in an earlier period as proof that capitalism could be reformed.

The corporatist transformation of the unions

It is these objective changes in the process of production that have undermined all forms of protest politics and the entire national-reformist agenda of the trade unions.

As organizations rooted in the national state and the acceptance of production for profit and private ownership of the means of production, the trade unions are organically incapable of advancing the only viable strategy for working people under these transformed conditions: the forging of the international unity of the working class in struggle against the transnational corporations and the capitalist system as a whole.

Instead, the unions have pushed their nationalist orientation to its logical

conclusion: integrating themselves ever more deeply into corporate management and the capitalist state.

Union bureaucrats sit on a range of tripartite committees, bringing together representatives from the unions, the corporations and the government, where they collude in suppressing social opposition and increasing the “global competitiveness” of “our companies” by attacking jobs, wages, pensions and public services.

The unions have also sought to compensate for the decline in their dues income resulting from their continued betrayal of workers’ struggles by developing other sources of income. The FTQ (*Fédération des travailleurs du Québec*, Quebec Federation of Labour), for example, created and to this day largely controls the Solidarity Fund. This venture capital fund, with net assets of more than C\$13 billion, has invested in thousands of companies in Quebec, developing a direct financial incentive in making them profitable by intensifying the exploitation of their workers.

It is impossible to turn the wheel of history backwards. Yet pseudo-left organizations of the affluent middle class such as Fightback, Socialist Alternative and their counterparts in other countries claim that through rank-and-file pressure, the sclerotic and corrupt union apparatuses could regain the “militancy” of a previous era.

This ahistorical approach is aimed at preserving the dominance of the pro-capitalist unions and preventing the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class.

The militant union struggles of the 1960s and 1970s in Canada and Quebec were part of a massive international working-class offensive—an offensive that in the May–June 1968 general strike in France and elsewhere threatened the capitalist order itself. While large numbers of workers in Canada joined unions during this period, many of the most important struggles involved or were precipitated by wildcat job action, with workers repeatedly coming into conflict with the conservative union apparatuses.

In Quebec, the union bureaucracy sought to contain this militant working-class upsurge within the capitalist framework by isolating Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and the United States, and by politically subordinating them to the big business Parti Québécois (PQ) and its reactionary program of carving out a separate Quebec capitalist state.

The unions’ shift to the right has now led them to work hand in hand with the CAQ, led by Premier François Legault, a representative of the most rapacious sections of the ruling elite who denounces wages in the manufacturing sector as “too high,” demands the dismantling of remaining social programs, and fans the flames of Quebec chauvinism in order to divide the working class.

The history of the FIQ

The dead end to which any project to form a new union would lead is demonstrated by the history of the FIQ itself. The *Fédération des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec* (FIIQ) was created in 1987 following the merger of three nursing unions, largely comprised of locals that had left the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN, Confederation of National Trade Unions) in the late 1970s.

Promoted with the claim that a separate and supposedly more “militant” union would be better able to defend nurses’ interests, the creation of the FIIQ served to perpetuate the long-standing division of workers along sectoral and professional lines.

Time after time, the FIIQ, which became the FIQ in 2006, has negotiated concession-laden collective agreements. By systematically

isolating nurses from other public sector workers and the broader working class, the FIQ has weakened workers’ resistance and made it easier to impose cuts.

In 1996–1997, the FIQ collaborated with the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard and the other public sector unions in implementing an “early retirement” scheme that resulted in the elimination of tens of thousands of health care and education jobs, all in the name of achieving a “zero deficit” policy.

Two years later, nurses rebelled, mounting a militant 23-day strike that won widespread popular support. But the FIQ isolated and sabotaged their struggle. Its leader, Jennie Skene, refused to call on public sector workers for support, as part of a struggle against the Bouchard government’s austerity measures, on the basis that nurses could achieve a better deal if they presented their problems with staff shortages and long working hours as a “special case.”

The other unions deliberately isolated the nurses in the face of Bouchard’s repressive measures and invocation of Quebec’s draconian anti-strike legislation. This betrayal then paved the way for continued attacks by successive PQ and Liberal governments, and now the CAQ, on public services and the jobs, wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them.

For rank-and-file action committees and a new strategy of struggle

All unions are pursuing the same policy of sabotaging working-class struggles. During the 2012 student strike in Quebec, the union apparatus intervened to block workers, who were beginning to take to the streets *en masse* against the repressive measures of Jean Charest’s Liberal government, from joining the students in a broader challenge to the austerity agenda of the entire ruling elite. Under the slogan “After the street, the ballot box,” the FTQ led Quebec’s unions in isolating and forcing an end to the student strike and in diverting the rising social opposition behind the right-wing PQ.

In 2015, the “Common Front” unions dragged out the collective bargaining process in the face of mounting anger among public sector workers over a further deterioration in their working conditions and a new set of government concessions demands. They separated the public sector workers’ contract struggle from the mass opposition that was developing against the reactionary austerity measures of Philippe Couillard’s Liberal government. And as pressure mounted for a general strike, the unions quickly put an end to a series of limited partial strikes and imposed a contract full of concessions, invoking at the last minute the threat of back-to-work legislation. The same basic line of betrayal was followed by the supposedly “independent” and “militant” unions such as the FIQ and the Autonomous Federation of Education (FAE).

These experiences demonstrate the need for workers to reject the nationalist agenda of the unions and adopt a new strategy. This strategy must be based on the unity of the Canadian working class (French and English-speaking, immigrant and First Nation) in the common struggle, alongside their class brothers and sisters in the United States and overseas, against the capitalist system.

In order to move forward, such a struggle requires a political and organizational break with the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy and the formation of new organizations of struggle controlled by rank-and-file workers.

Nurses and public sector workers must form rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the unions. Putting human lives before profits, these committees will ensure the protection of health care workers and the general public, while defending jobs, working conditions

and public services.

Workers cannot defend their interests through a union collective bargaining struggle. In opposing austerity and demanding human lives be placed before capitalist profit, they are challenging not just the policy of the Legault government, but the class strategy of the entire Quebec and Canadian ruling elite, which stands ready to use anti-strike legislation and the repressive arsenal of the capitalist state to impose new attacks on working people.

Workers are thus faced with a political struggle. The building of a network of rank-and-file safety committees must be linked to the struggle for a workers' government committed to socialist policies, so socio-economic life can be reorganized to make the satisfaction of social needs, not the pursuit of private profit, its animating principle.



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