

Quebec teachers' union rules "out of order" motion condemning government's reopening of schools amid pandemic

Our reporters
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A special-needs educator at a school board south of Montreal turned to the *World Socialist Web Site* to expose and publicize the anti-democratic actions of local union leaders, who refused to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic at a general membership meeting last week.

Some 250 support workers, members of the *Syndicat de Champlain*, affiliated with the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec* (CSQ—Federation of Quebec Trade Unions), attended an online general meeting on January 28. Throughout last week, thousands of teachers and education workers across Quebec were called on to vote on the CSQ leadership's proposal that it be authorized to call up to five days of strikes. The latest results show that Quebec's teachers and educators, who have been without a contract since April 1, strongly support job action.

The worker, who has asked to remain anonymous, explained that he proposed a motion condemning the Quebec government's catastrophic handling of the pandemic and calling for an emergency meeting so that rank-and-file members could discuss what action must be taken to fight the pandemic, and protect the health and lives of school staff and students and their families.

This was all the more necessary given that the CSQ teacher unions—including the Champlain local, which with some 10,000 members is one of the largest—have not held a single union meeting on this issue since Premier François Legault and the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government reopened schools at the end of August. Instead, for the past five months the unions have confined themselves to recycling the propaganda of the Ministry of Education that schools are "safe" and do not contribute to the spread of the virus.

As the worker explained in motivating his proposal, "We cannot talk about our working conditions without talking about the protection of our health and even our lives, which are threatened by the pandemic." (The full text of his remarks, which he provided to the WSWWS, is available at the

end of this article.)

The motion he submitted read as follows: "This meeting condemns the disastrous handling of the pandemic by Quebec's Legault government, in particular the reopening of schools which endangers the health and lives of teachers and educators, students and parents. Given the gravity of the situation, this meeting calls for the holding of an emergency union meeting within a week to discuss actions to be taken in response to the pandemic."

After the motion was seconded, union president Eric Gingras intervened to block the motion. Using the bureaucratic language and mechanisms the union bureaucracy routinely employ to justify anti-democratic decisions, Gingras stressed that the agenda was "closed" and that the meeting could only discuss matters relating to "Law 37 of the Labor Code," which governs public sector collective bargaining.

He instructed the meeting's chairman to verify the "admissibility" of the motion. A minute later, the chairman confirmed the rejection of the motion under the same fraudulent pretext invoked by Gingras. No opportunity was given to the proposer to challenge this flagrantly anti-democratic ruling. The chairman indicated that the motion would not be discussed nor voted upon, but that it could be raised at a future meeting in two months!

This bureaucratic maneuver to block any discussion on the government's disastrous handling of the pandemic must be denounced by all workers.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, union leaders have done everything possible to suppress the class struggle, leaving the response to the pandemic entirely in the hands of the CAQ government, led by Legault, a right-wing, Quebec First populist and former corporate CEO.

Not surprisingly, Legault is acting as a ruthless defender of the interests of the financial elite. He has put the profits of a minority before the health and lives of workers by applying the homicidal policy of "herd immunity," which allows the

virus to spread unchecked through the population so that the economy can be kept open and big business can continue to extract profits by exploiting working people.

Legault has been one of the main promoters in Canada of reopening nonessential businesses and workplaces and keeping schools open amid the pandemic. This policy, combined with decades of underfunding of public services by provincial Parti Quebecois and Liberal governments, has led to a disaster including a catastrophic loss of life in nursing and seniors' homes. During the pandemic's first wave, Quebec had one of the highest COVID-19 per capita death rates in the world.

The unions—which over the past four decades have become corporatist organizations deeply integrated into the capitalist state and corporate management—have worked hand in hand with the federal Liberal government and provincial governments to orchestrate a reckless reopening of schools. The main goal of this homicidal policy has always been to free working class parents from childcare responsibilities so they can go back to work.

Faced with the guilty silence of union leaders on the devastating impact of the pandemic—including tens of thousands of infected workers and students, and a dozen deaths among health care workers—rank-and-file workers must take matters into their own hands.

The struggle of public sector workers in defense of jobs and services must be linked to the growing working class opposition to Legault's murderous pandemic policy. This would create the conditions for a mass movement against the entire austerity program of the ruling class.

As international scientific experts have explained, there are solutions to stop the pandemic and protect human lives. These include mass testing, systematic contact tracing, closure of nonessential production and schools, massive investments in health care, and accelerated deployment of the vaccine throughout the population.

But such solutions can only be imposed if workers organize as an independent social force by forming rank-and-file safety committees, independently of the pro-capitalist unions. Such committees will fight to put human lives before profit, including full compensation for all those unable to work because of anti-COVID 19 measures.

This must be combined with a broader political struggle to reorganize the economy on an egalitarian, socialist basis in order to satisfy the social needs of all, not the private profits of a minority.

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The following is the full text of the remarks made by the special-needs educator to motivate his motion:

“The question of our working conditions is of paramount importance. The central issue we currently face, however, is

that of the pandemic. In fact, we cannot talk about our working conditions without talking about the protection of our health and even our lives, which are threatened by the pandemic. It would be a mistake to separate these two issues.

“Everything indicates that the situation is far from being resolved. The number of cases and deaths is still at an alarming level, not only in Quebec, but around the world. The arrival in Canada of new strains of the coronavirus—which are more contagious and possibly more severe and deadly—is most worrisome. The most respected international experts say that emergency measures must be taken immediately, including the closure of schools and nonessential production, with full compensation for the workers who must stop working.

“Contrary to what Legault falsely claims, schools are one of the principal vectors for the spread of the virus. In Quebec alone, more than 16,000 students and more than 4,000 staff members have been infected with COVID-19. And it's still going on. Legault says it's a 'calculated risk' to keep the schools open. As a result, just over one person in 1,000 has now lost his or her life to COVID-19 in Quebec. It is important to remember that the virus can have serious, possibly long-term, health consequences for children.

“For the CAQ, the opening of schools has nothing to do with preserving children's mental health. The goal is to force working parents back to work to generate profit for the corporate and the financial elite. In other words, profits before human lives.

“Strict measures backed by science should have been applied as early as last spring, but Legault and his CAQ government chose to reopen everything so that the rich could get richer. Canada's 45 billionaires, including a dozen Quebecers, have increased their fortunes by \$50 billion since the pandemic, while we are being sent to the front lines without adequate safety measures or equipment. At the same time, the government wants to reduce our salaries and working conditions. Any genuine struggle to defend our conditions must, I insist, be linked to opposition to the disastrous handling of the pandemic by the Legault government.”



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