

Quebec teacher unions hold phony 90-minute strike to dissipate rank-and-file anger

Richard Dufour
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The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be holding its next meeting on Sunday, April 25, at 1 p.m. eastern time. We urge all teachers and education staff from Quebec and across Canada who want to attend to contact us at cersc.csppb@gmail.com.

The collective agreements of more than half a million workers in Quebec's health, education and broader public sector expired on March 31, 2020. Since then, the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has stepped up its efforts to impose new contracts that maintain the low wages and precarious conditions of recent decades, while intensifying the dismantling of public services.

The government's hard line against public sector workers is combined with an aggressive back-to-school and back-to-work drive in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Putting profits before lives, this campaign has allowed the coronavirus to circulate freely and infect tens of thousands of health and education workers, who have been left unprotected while enduring punishing workloads.

This ruinous course is fuelling deep anger among workers and has provoked numerous spontaneous protests by health care workers, especially in the early months of the pandemic, and more recently, mounting calls for strike action from public school teachers. It is this growing rank-and-file opposition that union leaders are seeking to dampen and smother through futile gestures and pathetic appeals to Quebec's hard-right premier, François Legault.

The public sector unions have backed Legault in his disastrous handling of the pandemic, supporting his calls to keep schools open, even after they became major vectors in the spread of the lethal virus during both its second and third waves. And for more than a year, they have taken part in a sham bargaining process, from which workers are completely excluded, while they plot with the government to impose further rollbacks in working conditions.

The political cowardice of the trade unions in the face of big business and its governments knows no bounds. Even the strike, historically developed by the working class to assert its interests and prosecute the class struggle, is

emptied of its meaning.

Thus, the Quebec Teachers Federation (FSE-CSQ) and the Quebec Provincial Association of Quebec Teachers (QPAT), which represent some 73,000 Quebec elementary and secondary school teachers, held a "short" strike on April 14, from 12:01 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. What the unions pompously called an "innovative" strike lasted barely 90 minutes, since schools are shut at night. It was designed as a diversionary manoeuvre to cover up the unions' complicity in the campaign to keep schools open, even as they become hotbeds for COVID-19.

Although all 550,000 public sector workers face the same government offensive to impoverish them and privatize public services, the unions are isolating teachers from health care, CEGEP (pre-university and professional college), and other workers. Within the schools themselves, teachers' aides and other support staff, following union orders, did not join last Wednesday's walkout.

The unions are refusing even to organize a coordinated struggle by all teachers. The supposedly more "militant" Federation autonome de l'enseignement (FAE)—which represents about 50,000 educators, including teachers at the main Montreal school board—refused to participate in the 90-minute walkout. Then on Friday, it announced it had reached its own separate deal with the government. While the FAE is refusing to provide any details of this tentative agreement, the right-wing CAQ government's promotion of it as a "win-win" is an unmistakable sign that it does not address any of the teachers' key demands.

Underscoring the union leaders' hostility to any genuine mobilization of workers against the austerity agenda of the ruling class, the president of the FSE-CSQ, Josée Scalabrini, told the press conference announcing the April 14 job action, "We are not happy to talk about a strike today."

Even after school boards, with the undoubted support of the CAQ government, turned to the courts to have the brief walkout ruled illegal, union leaders continued to implore them to listen to reason. "If the employers had put as much energy into organizing this day with a 90-minute delay

rather than challenging teachers' legitimate right to strike, we wouldn't be in this position," the CSQ wrote on its Facebook page.

The FSE-CSQ and QPAT have called another "innovative strike" for next Tuesday, April 27. Like the first, it is little more than theater. Announced to go from 2:45 to 5 p.m., the strike will only affect the last hour of teachers' working day.

In recent decades, the ruling class has erected a vast arsenal of anti-strike laws to keep workers in a straitjacket. If it is now challenging even token gestures by union leaders that have nothing to do with a genuine class struggle, it is out of the fear that the unions will lose control of their members in the explosive social context created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, any unified action by the more than half-million public sector workers could quickly develop into a broader working class challenge to capitalist austerity and the ruling elite's disastrous response to the pandemic. And, like the ruling elite, this is what is most feared by the corporatist trade union apparatuses, whose function is to impose rollbacks on workers and stifle working class opposition so as to maintain "social peace" on behalf of the ruling class.

As in the 2015 public sector struggle, the unions are following a predetermined script in which they lock workers into a lengthy collective bargaining process whose financial and legal framework is entirely defined by the big business government.

In every country, governments are putting the profits of the financial elite ahead of workers' health and lives. In Canada, while health and education workers are being sent to the front lines without adequate protective measures and equipment in the face of a potentially debilitating and deadly virus, the major banks and corporations are receiving hundreds of billions of dollars in bailouts from Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government. These massive debts will be paid off through fresh attacks on public services and workers' wages, jobs, and working conditions.

The reopening of schools in the midst of the pandemic was aimed at sending parents back to work to generate more profits for big business. The result of this policy is the infection of over 1 million Canadians, including 315,000 Quebecers, and 23,000 preventable deaths. Just in Quebec, more than 30,000 students and education workers have been infected with the coronavirus, and this number is growing daily as schools remain open in the middle of the pandemic's third wave.

In the name of "national unity" and the "solidarity" of all Quebecers, the privileged bureaucrats who head the teachers' unions have worked closely with Legault to orchestrate the return to school by sabotaging any opposition from workers and parents.

As for the so-called contract "negotiations," they have been marked by the continual capitulation of the unions. In both health and education sectors, the various unions have reduced their demands to the point where they are barely distinguishable from the government's.

Demonstrating its determination to slash wages and jobs and privatize public services, the CAQ's latest offer is effectively unchanged. The government is proposing a 5 percent wage increase over three years with a possible 1 percent additional increase if and only if the "inflation rate exceeds 5 percent" and Quebec's GNP meets government growth targets. This amounts to a real terms wage-cut, and after public sector workers have suffered decades of eroding living standards and working conditions.

It is urgent that teachers take their struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file strike committees independent of the pro-capitalist unions.

Rejecting the corporatist and nationalist alliance of the Quebec unions with the ruling class, these committees must energetically appeal to workers throughout the public sector and private industry, as well as to parents and students.

Quebec workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada around a common demand: the immediate closure of nonessential schools and workplaces, with full financial compensation for all workers and parents forced to stay home to care for their children!

This demand must be coupled with a political mobilization of the entire working class, including the preparation of a general strike, against the ruling elite's murderous handling of the pandemic and the capitalist austerity measures that are jeopardizing jobs, working conditions and public services.

It is on the basis of this program of struggle that the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC) was formed and held its inaugural public meeting earlier this month. We urge all teachers and education workers to contact and join this committee, by emailing cersc.csppb@gmail.com.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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