

Threat of back-to-work legislation looms over Quebec construction workers

Frédéric Charlebois**26 May 2021**

Since April 30, more than 190,000 Quebec construction workers have been working without a contract. Despite the workers being in a legal strike position since Tuesday morning and enjoying broad popular support, the Construction Union Alliance has refused to call a strike and is working tirelessly behind the scenes to reach a rotten sellout deal with management.

Negotiations are still ongoing between the Quebec Construction Association (ACQ) which represents the employers and the Construction Union Alliance which includes the five construction unions (FTQ-Construction, Provincial Council, Quebec Construction Union, CSD-Construction and CSN-Construction).

The process is dominated by the ACQ's demands for further attacks on wages, pensions, benefits and working conditions.

While the Union Alliance is keeping workers in the dark about the content of the negotiations, all indications are that it has accepted major concessions. It submitted a "final offer" on Sunday that "meets" most of the employers' demands. Its spokesman, Eric Boisjoly, said the parties are "within striking distance of an agreement" on "major benefit issues."

The only point of contention is the employers' demand that an app be installed on workers' personal smartphones to monitor hours spent on the job. While declaring itself open to such an app, the Union Alliance says it fears for workers' privacy because of geolocation and is asking that the proposal be excluded from the current negotiations and postponed for later discussion.

As of Tuesday evening, the ACQ had not yet given an official response to the offer made by the unions on Sunday. The two parties continued to negotiate yesterday.

It is still possible the ACQ will reject the union offer in order to provoke a strike, knowing full well that the pro-business CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government stands ready to intervene quickly with back-to-work legislation.

When such a scenario was invoked, Labour Minister Jean

Boulet indicated that "there is nothing that is excluded," while stating that "we cannot ... tolerate a conflict." The contracts that would be imposed by an arbitrator appointed by the Quebec government following the imposition of a law criminalizing strike action would invariably be to the advantage of the employers.

All construction workers should be warned that the Union Alliance is preparing to impose new collective agreements filled with major concessions—whether through a phony "negotiation" process from which rank-and-file workers have been completely excluded, or through enforcing anti-democratic back-to-work legislation against which union leaders will not lift a finger.

There is an alternative to this path of betrayal. As Quebec's 192,000 construction workers are in a legal position to strike, more than half a million Quebec public sector workers are in a similar position, having worked for over a year now without collective agreements. While the construction and public sector unions are doing everything to keep workers apart, they are objectively facing the same attacks on wages and working conditions, and the same threats of back-to-work legislation, from the employers and the big business CAQ government.

A unified struggle of these two key sections of workers, who have an immense combined social weight, would have the potential to trigger a working class counteroffensive in Quebec and across Canada against the austerity agenda of the entire capitalist ruling elite.

As in many other sectors, construction workers have faced an unending attack on their wages and conditions for decades. In the current negotiations, the unions were initially asking for 12.2 percent wage increases over 4 years while the ACQ was offering 7.5 percent. The business newspaper *Les Affaires* recently reported that the unions had reduced their demand to a meager 8.2 percent, which represents at best a freeze in real wages for the next 4 years.

On a number of key issues, including the medical insurance (MEDIC) and pension plans, the employers are seeking further concessions, with workers asked to

contribute more from their own pockets.

Meanwhile, working conditions in the industry continue to worsen. According to a survey conducted in January by Quebec's Construction Commission, 35 percent of new workers leave the industry after only five years. Among the principal reasons cited for these departures, 50 percent of respondents mentioned job insecurity and speedup to meet shortened production times. Furthermore, one worker out of three finds that the industry is not safe enough. These fears are more than justified. Even though the construction industry accounts for only 5 percent of the workforce, it represents 25 percent of the deaths that occur in Quebec as a result of work-related accidents.

However, anger and militancy are inadequate if the sweeping concessions demanded by the employers and supported by the François Legault-led CAQ government are to be defeated. Construction workers must prepare for a political confrontation with the Legault government and the entire ruling elite that it represents.

As in 2013 under the Parti Québécois (PQ) government of Pauline Marois and in 2017 under the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard, the capitalist state is once again preparing to deploy the repressive tools at its disposal to back the construction bosses' assault on workers' wages and conditions.

It should be recalled that in 2017, Legault's CAQ, then in opposition, fully supported Couillard when he passed Bill 142 to legalize a province-wide construction workers' strike.

And just a few weeks ago, Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government criminalized the strike by the 1150 dockers at the Port of Montreal after only 4 days with the full support of its Quebec counterpart. The dockers, like the construction workers, were protesting speed-up and dangerous working conditions, as well as attacks on job security and a rigid disciplinary system that has seen dozens of workers fired.

Construction workers are ready to fight back but are faced with a pro-capitalist union bureaucracy that is dedicated to imposing the employers' demands and suppressing working class resistance in the name of upholding "social peace."

During the 2017 strike, the Union Alliance enforced compliance with the back-to-work legislation, fearing that any defiance by construction workers would serve as the spark for a mass movement against the hated Liberal government of Philippe Couillard.

The courageous strike of crane operators in June 2018 is another glaring example of the cooperation between the union bureaucracy, big business, and the government. At the time, 2,000 crane operators went on strike for 8 days because of a significant drop in training requirements for

new operators, which posed a major threat to health and safety on the job. When the strikers defied a court order, FTQ Construction threatened to place their local under trusteeship and otherwise indicated its support for workers facing heavy fines. Ultimately, the union strangled the strike, and promptly accepted the government's new training requirements for crane operators with cosmetic adjustments.

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has claimed the lives of more than 11,000 Quebecers and over 25,000 Canadians. It has also exposed the role of unions as accomplices of the ruling elite in imposing the "reopening of the economy," i.e., maintaining a steady stream of profits, by allowing the virus to spread freely among the population, bringing death and suffering on a massive scale.

At the beginning of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, a powerful intervention by construction workers, autoworkers, and other manufacturing workers across Canada forced the closure of plants and worksites and pushed governments to institute a lockdown. But since then, the unions have worked with the Legault and Trudeau governments to force workers back to work as the pandemic rages on, putting their health and lives, and those of their families, at great risk.

Since the beginning of the pandemic's second wave, workplaces and schools have become the greatest vectors for the spread of the coronavirus. Construction sites have been no exception, as evidenced by the 1,400 complaints filed by workers and the 17,686 correction notices issued to contractors between March 13, 2020 and May 5, 2021.

At the end of April this year, 34 worksites had an outbreak, 3 times the weekly average in last November, and 70 facilities had an outbreak, more than double the number in March.

If they are to avoid another sellout deal—whether "negotiated" or imposed via back-to-work legislation—construction workers must wrest the control of their struggle out of the hands of the Union Alliance.

They must form rank-and-file committees, entirely independent of the pro-capitalist unions, to mobilize the entire working class across Canada in a unified struggle to defend jobs and working conditions for all. This industrial mobilization of the working class must be combined with the development of a mass political movement for the formation of a workers' government that will reorganize the economy to meet social needs, not ensure profits for a tiny minority.



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