

# Quebec public sector workers' struggle at the crossroads

Laurent Lafrance  
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The struggle Quebec's 550,000 public sector workers are waging against the efforts of the right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government to impose new wage-cutting contracts on them is in grave danger. The province's major labour federations—the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) and the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec* (CSQ)—have all announced in recent days that they have reached “global agreements” with the government of the ex-Air Transat CEO François Legault.

There is immense anger among the Quebec public sector workers—who include nurses, hospital orderlies, medical technicians, public school and college (CEGEP) teachers, school support staff and provincial civil servants. Their wages and working conditions have been eroded by decades of capitalist austerity. Moreover, they have been in the front lines of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, which, due to the ruinous back-to-work/back-to-school policies of the CAQ and federal Liberal governments, has resulted in more than 11,000 deaths in Quebec.

In recent months, tens of thousands of workers have participated in one- and two-day strikes and other job actions. However, the public sector workers' struggle is being systematically sabotaged by the union bureaucracy, which is determined to uphold “social peace,” that is, to prevent a working-class challenge to Legault and his right-wing populist “Quebec First” government and the austerity agenda of the entire capitalist elite.

Seeking to stampede workers into voting “yes” to the tentative agreements they have struck behind workers' backs with the CAQ government, some unions have rushed to submit them to ratification votes just hours, or at most days, after releasing self-serving “highlights.” By this means the QFL succeeded in getting collective agreements for 57,000 workers in the education, health and social services sectors ratified. However, the vast majority of public sector workers will only be asked to vote on the agreements in coming weeks, and in the case of school support staff only in September.

Workers should unequivocally reject these agreements and for two good reasons—their contents and their political consequences.

While the unions are keeping workers in the dark about the terms of the tentative agreements, the “highlights” that have been made public point to major givebacks. In terms of the “global” agreements, the QFL, CNTU, CSQ and the main nurses' union, the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé* (FIQ), have all agreed to wage “increases” that will, when inflation is taken into

account, result in real terms wage cuts for the vast majority of workers. Apart from small salary adjustments for teachers and the lowest-paid health sector workers, the agreements call for pay increases of 2 percent per year for three years, under conditions where inflation in Canada is running at 3.6 percent, its highest level in a decade.

FIQ is claiming “victory” because the government has provided nurses—who have been leaving the profession in droves due to relentless forced overtime, burnout and other forms of psychological stress—increases in shift and other premiums equivalent to a further 6 percent. But there has been a hostile reaction on social media, with rank-and-file nurses noting that the proposed agreement does little to nothing to eliminate chronic staff shortages and forced overtime, and that the much-vaunted premium increases are not indexed to retirement benefits and are subject to repeal in the next contract negotiations two years hence.

A ruthless servant of the financial and business elite, Premier Legault is determined to impose concessionary contracts on public sector workers so as to serve as a launching pad for an intensified drive to boost the “competitiveness” of Quebec big business through privatization, job and social spending cuts for workers and further tax cuts for the corporations and rich.

The unions' sabotage of the public sector workers' contract struggle is of a piece with their criminal response to the pandemic. Quebec's unions, like their counterparts across Canada, have closed ranks behind the government and corporate elite, supporting the funnelling of hundreds of billions in bailouts to the banks and big business, and endorsing the ruling class' ruinous profits before lives agenda. The unions failed to take any action against the CAQ government's use of emergency pandemic powers to abrogate health care workers' collective agreements, and have raised not a single pandemic-related demand in the contract talks.

The CAQ government, like its predecessors and capitalist governments around the world, bears full responsibility for the health and socioeconomic disaster caused by a pandemic that was both foreseeable and, indeed, widely foreseen by international scientists.

The unions have completely separated the issues raised by the pandemic from the struggle for better working conditions. They did so as their members in the health and education sectors were sent to the front lines without adequate personal protective equipment or safety measures.

For over a year, continuing into this summer, the unions

negotiated behind closed doors with the Legault government as it pursued its anti-scientific herd immunity policy based on rushing to reopen the economy and schools so that the banks and the rich could continue to pocket their profits at the expense of human lives.

In recent months, the unions were forced to organize a few token job actions due to mounting pressure from rank-and-file workers. But these were carefully calibrated and scripted to serve as a means of venting workers' anger and channelling it into futile appeals to Legault and his CAQ government. The unions' "innovative strikes," promoted as a more combative strategy, were in fact nothing more than limited, rotating walkouts. Walkouts, moreover, organized in such a way as to divide workers by region, occupation and union and to cause the least possible disruption to the economy. Some of these "innovative" protests were quite simply farcical. Teaching assistants, for example, were called on to "strike" in the middle of the night, when they were asleep!

Throughout the negotiations, the unions have kept studiously silent about the open threats of the CAQ to criminalize an all-out public sector workers' strike by adopting an emergency back-to-work law. Such silence is by now a long-established union stratagem in Quebec and across Canada. Workers are thereby left utterly unprepared to oppose the government's recourse to state repression, by defying an anti-strike law and appealing for support from workers across Quebec, Canada and internationally.

If the QFL, CNTU, CSQ and other unions succeed in pushing through their sell-out agreements with the CAQ government, it will represent a defeat not only for the public sector workers, but for the working class as a whole. Not only will these agreements do nothing to improve public sector workers' working conditions, they will ensure that vital public services continue to deteriorate.

The pandemic has laid bare the impact of the austerity measures pursued by all governments, irrespective of political stripe, in Quebec and across Canada since the 1980s. Decades of cuts, underfunding and staff shortages—exacerbated by the massive spread of the coronavirus among poorly protected health care workers—have resulted in overflowing emergency rooms and hospitals in Ontario, Quebec and Alberta. Tens of thousands of surgeries have been postponed. Earlier this month a Quebec woman died in a Hull hospital after being forced to spend several hours lying on the floor due to a lack of hospital beds and medical staff.

Although the public sector workers' struggle is in great danger, its defeat is not inevitable. However, to prevail public sector workers must adopt an entirely new strategy and political orientation.

First, workers must take control of their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy by forming rank-and-file committees entirely independent of and in political opposition to these right-wing sclerotic apparatuses. As evidenced by the growing number of hospital sit-ins and the recent wildcat strike at the Montreal Molson brewery plant, workers are striving to break out of the union-imposed straitjacket. But this must become a conscious strategy.

The repeated betrayals of the unions are not the product of a few bad apples at the top, but rather the outcome of their

fundamentally nationalist and pro-capitalist character. Over the course of the past four decades, the unions have abandoned any previous association with militant worker struggle or the defence of workers' immediate interests, and integrated themselves ever more completely with management and the state, through myriad corporatist and tri-parties bodies. This has included union officials becoming managers of lucrative investment funds, like the QFL's Solidarity Fund and the CNTU's Fondation CSN.

Second, public sector workers must recognize that their struggle is a political struggle, one that goes far beyond the narrow confines of collective bargaining. Workers are confronting not just Legault and his CAQ, but the entire political establishment and ruling class, which for decades has been pressing to "reduce the size of the state." The government's threat to use back-to-work legislation to impose the dictates of the ruling elite on public sector workers only further underscores the political character of their struggle.

Third, workers must break with Quebec nationalism, which is promoted by all the parties in the National Assembly, from the CAQ, Liberals and Parti Québécois to the ostensibly left Québec Solidaire. Quebec workers must reject the canard that they share "common values" with their exploiters in Quebec's capitalist elite, and that they have more in common with the multi-millionaire Legault and billionaires like Pierre-Karl Péledeau than with their class brothers and sisters in English-speaking Canada and throughout North America. To defeat capitalist austerity, they must join forces with their class brothers and sisters across Canada and internationally. Whatever language they speak or the colour of their skin, workers everywhere are facing the same attacks on their living standards and confront the same murderous response to the pandemic on the part of their respective governments and ruling elites.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has established the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to unite workers' struggles on a global scale. The Socialist Equality Party (Canada) calls on all public sector workers and their supporters interested in organizing such independent committees to contact us today.



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