

Quebec nurses should reject sellout agreement, spearhead fight to mobilize working class against austerity

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The 76,000 nurses, nursing assistants, respiratory therapists and perfusionists who are members of FIQ (the Quebec Interprofessional Health Federation) are being asked to vote this week on the tentative three-year agreement the union recently reached with the right-wing provincial government of François Legault.

The proposed contract represents a further assault on nurses' wages and working conditions, and is part of a generalized ruling class attack on public sector workers in Quebec and across Canada. It is a continuation of the ruling elite's austerity agenda that has ravaged the public health and education systems for decades.

Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ—Coalition for Quebec's Future) government is seeking to “reward” health care workers, who have been putting their health and lives at risk during the pandemic, by offering them poverty wages. The FIQ-blessed tentative contract's 6 percent “wage increase,” which is to be doled out in increments over three years, is equivalent to a pay cut in real terms, with annual inflation already running at 3.6 percent.

Faced with chronic staff shortages at hospitals and other health care facilities—the product of years of cutbacks and the punitive working conditions that have caused nurses to quit the profession in droves—the government steadfastly refuses to make major investments to train and hire the necessary staff and improve health care for all.

On pensions, the government and the FIQ want to negotiate separately once the new contract is in force. This is a sure sign they intend to impose rollbacks behind workers' backs.

To this sellout agreement—which perpetuates the gutting of public services and maintains the unbearable working conditions made still worse by the COVID-19 pandemic—rank-and-file FIQ members must respond with a resounding “No”!

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not call for a “No” vote lightly. Rejection of the contract will pitch the nurses

into a headlong political conflict with the right-wing populist CAQ government and the institutions of the capitalist state, which Legault will not hesitate to deploy to crush health care workers' opposition. But nurses have more powerful allies among working people across Quebec and Canada, who all confront the political establishment and financial elite's class-war agenda of job, wage, and benefit cuts, and the dismantling of public services. The key question facing nurses who want to beat back the government's concessions demands, improve their working conditions and defend the public health care system is how to mobilize the vast social power of the working class in a counter-offensive against capitalist austerity and the battery of anti-strike laws.

Such a struggle can only be waged through a political and organizational break with the FIQ and entire union bureaucracy, which is working to confine the nurses to the reactionary state-designed collective bargaining framework so as to isolate them from the rest of the working class.

Throughout the now almost two-year long Quebec public sector contract negotiations, the main labour federations (the FTQ/QFL, CSN/CNTU, and CSQ) have systematically divided public sector workers among themselves. They have deliberately ignored the threat of back-to-work legislation in order to politically disarm the rank-and-file. Last but not least, they have entirely separated the contract negotiations from the vital issues raised by the pandemic—above all the fact that Legault and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have prioritized profits over human lives with their premature reopening of schools and nonessential production.

Similarly, the FIQ has isolated the nurses. In an attempt to get a better deal with the government, at the expense of other public sector workers, they have pleaded nurses are a “special case.” And the FIQ leadership has sought to conceal the real class issues raised by the ruling class assault on working people by advancing the absurd argument that the government forces nurses to endure onerous working conditions because they are women.

In opposition to the complicity of the unions in the big business assault on the working class and the authorities' disastrous handling of the pandemic, nurses must turn to their class brothers and sisters in health care, education, and industry throughout Quebec and across Canada. This will pave the way for a common struggle in defense of the wages, jobs, pensions and working conditions of all workers, for a vast reinvestment in public services and for the implementation of all necessary measures to eradicate the pandemic.

This class unity is all the more necessary given that Legault has already indicated he is prepared to use the repressive arsenal of the capitalist state, including anti-strike legislation, in support of his frontal assault on nurses and all public sector workers. His Minister of Health, Christian Dubé, has said he intends to keep the "emergency pandemic" ministerial decrees in the health sector in place until new collective agreements are signed, suggesting thereby that they could be used to suppress militant job action. The decrees were arbitrarily enacted by the government early in the pandemic to give itself extraordinary powers such as the right to cancel workers' vacations, move staff around at will and impose mandatory overtime, with no more than token opposition from the unions.

In addition to impoverishing public sector workers, Legault has denounced wage levels in Quebec's manufacturing sector as "too high," supported the federal Liberal government's back-to-work legislation targeting Port of Montreal dockworkers, and hinted that he might resort to a similar coup-de-force against public sector and construction workers.

Nurses must use the rejection of the sellout deal as the launching pad for a working class counter-offensive. The government refrain that there is "no money" is a lie. There are abundant resources to fund significant wage increases, a massive hiring program and a vast expansion of the health care system. The problem is that these resources are being monopolized by the financial markets and big business to further enrich the capitalist elite.

In rejecting the tentative agreement, nurses must call on all workers to demand that the vast resources that exist be used to expand public services and ensure decent working conditions for all, not to fill the pockets of the super-rich, company executives, and wealthy shareholders. They will then find powerful class allies in the struggle against the Legault government and its arsenal of anti-strike legislation, including from nurses in Alberta, who are facing the threat of a 5 percent pay cut imposed by the hard-right Kenney government, and industrial workers across Canada, who confront the drive by multinational conglomerates, like

mining firms Vale and Rio Tinto, to impose savage rollbacks to boost corporate profits.

The only way to mobilize the social power of the working class is to mount such a struggle in a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy and the union apparatuses they use to straitjacket the working class. Nurses must combine their no vote with a direct appeal to the broadest sections of workers across Quebec and Canada for a political struggle against the capitalist austerity championed by Legault's CAQ, Trudeau's federal Liberals, Ford's Tories in Ontario, and the New Democrats in British Columbia.

The necessity for this new political orientation is the central lesson that nurses must draw from their previous struggles. In 1999, nurses showed tremendous determination and militancy in defying the pro-austerity Parti Quebecois (PQ) government and its anti-strike laws. But courage and militancy proved inadequate. The lack of a political perspective capable of unifying workers in a joint struggle against the attacks of the ruling elite enabled the unions to sabotage the nurses' struggle. The main labour federations, which, like FIQ, had supported the Bouchard-Landry PQ government's "zero deficit" austerity drive, lifted not a finger to defend the striking nurses. As for the FIQ leadership, it made no broader appeal, then imposed a sellout agreement, setting the stage for the government to take savage reprisals against the nurses.

To wage a genuine fight against capitalist austerity, Quebec nurses should establish a network of rank-and-file committees committed to a policy of broadening their struggle to other sections of workers across Quebec, Canada and internationally. In opposition to the pro-capitalist, nationalist union bureaucracy, the central task of these committees will be to fight to unite nurses, health care and other workers across the artificial provincial boundaries imposed by the ruling class and its union accomplices in a joint struggle for improved working conditions, decent-paying secure jobs and quality public services.



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