

Quebec nurses union imposes sellout deal in face of widespread rank-and-file anger

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Despite strong opposition from nurses to their onerous and psychologically punishing working conditions, expressed in numerous sit-ins and protest actions in recent months, the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ—Quebec Interprofessional Health Federation) has succeeded in pushing through the sellout agreement it reached with the Quebec government in June.

This three-year agreement constitutes a further assault on nurses' wages and working conditions. It provides salary "increases" of just 2 per cent per year (far less than the current 3.5 percent inflation rate), excludes any serious measures to combat chronic staff shortages, perpetuates a punishing mandatory overtime regime and maintains the "emergency" COVID-19 ministerial decrees that give the government extraordinary powers to dictate working conditions in the health care sector.

The August 4-5 membership vote on the agreement was marred by confusion over the online voting process, failure to provide some members with the voter code, and the presence of a video on the voting page trumpeting the major gains FIQ had purportedly made in the proposed contract.

Despite these "lapses," which border on outright manipulation by the FIQ leadership, nurses in several regions, including Lanaudière and Montreal, rejected the agreement. In the end, it was ratified by a narrow majority of 54 percent.

The FIQ leadership is refusing to disclose the overall participation rate. However, several nurses have posted the results from their locals on Facebook, reporting participation rates below 50 percent, and in some cases as low as 30 percent.

These numbers show that the new collective agreement has the support of only a small proportion of the 76,000 nurses, nursing assistants and respiratory therapists who comprise the FIQ membership. In addition, many who voted in favour of the deal did so with gritted teeth, understanding well that the union had absolutely no intention of waging a genuine struggle on their' behalf. Taken as a whole, the results represent a vote of no confidence in FIQ and its leadership, which systematically demobilized the rank-and-file during the year-and-a-half of on-again, off-again contract negotiations.

When the results were announced, anger erupted on social media. Several workers questioned the process and the vote

count. "The FIQ never answered my request for my code to vote, even though my information was up to date and I had signed my membership card," wrote one worker. Another worker asked: "Is it normal that so many people doubt the result? Reading all the comments before the vote, everyone seemed to be against [the proposed agreement], and all of a sudden, it's a 'Yes' vote that seems to come out of nowhere."

Contrary to the claims of the FIQ leadership, the deal does not include major gains, but rather derisory "improvements" combined with new attacks on working conditions.

In a context where the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the extreme fragility of the public health network, already bled dry by decades of budget cuts, the promised 1,500 new permanent nursing positions constitute a mere drop in the ocean. Tens of thousands of additional nurses and health care workers would have to be hired, and billions of new dollars invested, to provide real relief to the overworked and psychologically taxed workforce and adequate health care services to a population that has been deprived of them for far too long.

The deal hatched between the province's right-wing *Coalition avenir Québec* (CAQ) government and the FIQ has a different purpose: to force existing staff to work harder, for a few more crumbs, in the form of small bonuses and premium increases that are not included in the calculation of pensions and could be canceled in the next contract.

In a move that will increase, not reduce, workloads, the workweek for full-time nursing will increase from 35 to 37.5 hours per week. The minimum number of days workers with a part-time post must work in every two-week period has been increased from 4 to 7. Meanwhile, nothing is being done to eradicate mandatory overtime, which has forced thousands of burned-out nurses onto medical leave or to quit the profession entirely.

Added to this is the absence of any serious measures to protect health care workers from the pandemic, even though thousands of them have been infected by COVID-19.

FIQ bears principal responsibility for the defeat this sellout agreement represents.

While nurses were determined to fight and had strong popular support, the FIQ refused to call on all public sector workers to join nurses in a counter-offensive to defend healthcare,

education and all public services and radically improve the wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them.

Instead, the union did everything possible to demobilize, isolate and divide nurses. Even though workers across the public and private sectors, irrespective of gender or ethnicity, face the same big business attacks, the FIQ has portrayed nurses as victims of “systemic sexism,” not capitalist austerity. The FIQ also sought a separate, supposedly more advantageous, agreement with the CAQ government, thereby dividing nurses from other public sector workers on the pretext that they are a “special case.”

While the FIQ was wearing the nurses down, the other public sector unions, whether affiliated to the FTQ, CSN, CSQ, or FAE, were dividing and betraying their members and ultimately signed their own rotten deals with the government.

Through their suppression of workers' opposition, the various union apparatuses enabled CAQ Premier and ex-Air Transat CEO François Legault to maintain his hard line and make thinly-veiled threats of an emergency back-to-work law, should the rising anger of rank-and-file members get out of the control of the union bureaucrats.

Nurses, especially those who participated in the militant province-wide strike in June-July 1999, are painfully aware of how the government suppressed it with strike-breaking legislation. No doubt, a major factor impelling many nurses to vote in favour of the sellout agreement was that they did not see how to respond to a similar threat today, under conditions where the FIQ, and the main union federations, like the FTQ and CSN, showed no willingness to defy anti-strike legislation—let alone advance a strategy to mobilize the working class against the government.

In 1999, Quebec's nurses courageously defied government back-to-work orders, mounting an “illegal strike” for almost two weeks. Despite strong popular support for the nurses, the FIQ (then known as the FIIQ) isolated the striking nurses, refusing to call on the hundreds of thousands of other public sector workers, also then in negotiations, to organize solidarity strikes. At the same time, the major union federations which, like the FIIQ, had endorsed the brutal budget cuts carried out by the Bouchard-Landry Parti Québécois (PQ) government in the name of achieving a “zero deficit,” refused to lift a finger to defend the nurses. The latter were finally driven back to work, paving the way for the imposition of further concessions and the punitive sanctions stipulated in the anti-strike law.

More than twenty years later, the FIQ and all the main labor federations have adopted the same posture in the face of the CAQ's threats of anti-strike legislation. FIQ leaders even mounted their own campaign of intimidation to force through ratification of their sellout agreement, as evidenced by this comment from a union delegate on Facebook: “Refusing the agreement means going on strike? It's the possibility of having worse conditions imposed by (government) decree.”

Nurses who want to counter the big business government's threat of back-to-work legislation, and reject the cowardly submission of the union apparatus to this threat, must link up the defense of their working conditions with a broader perspective based on the independent political mobilization of the working class.

They must reject the nationalist perspective of the union bureaucracy that serves to divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and the world. Instead, they must turn to all public sector workers, and the entire Canadian working class, to build a broad movement in opposition to capitalist austerity, growing social inequality and the criminalization of workers' struggles.

In the face of a fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that risks being even worse than the previous three, the Legault government, with the full complicity of the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau, is removing all remaining public health measures in order to “open up the economy,” i.e., restore an uninterrupted flow of corporate profits at the expense of public health and human life. To oppose this criminal mishandling of the pandemic, of which they are the first victims, nurses must build rank-and-file safety committees, independent of and in opposition to the FIQ and the other pro-capitalist unions.

These committees, working in a cross-Canada network, will have the task of uniting nurses and health care workers across the provincial boundaries used by the ruling class and its union allies to quarantine and suppress workers' struggles. They will work to mobilize the full collective strength of the working class against social cuts and anti-strike legislation, and in defense of jobs, wages and public services.



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