

Striking Quebec child care workers should oppose union efforts to sabotage their struggle

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11,000 daycare workers spread across 400 facilities have been on an unlimited strike in Quebec since December 1.

However, the strike is now in grave danger. On Wednesday, the Fédération de la santé et des services sociaux (FSSS—the Health and Social Services wing of the Confederation of National Trade Unions) announced it had reached a tentative contract settlement with the province’s right-wing CAQ government.

Soon after, two other unions—the Quebec Federation of Labour-affiliated SQESS and the FIPEQ, which is part of the Centrale des Syndicats du Québec—that represent more than 4,000 child care educators and support staff announced that they too had reached agreements with the government, and were therefore calling off plans to join the strike beginning yesterday.

The day care workers represented by the FSSS remain on strike, pending the outcome of ratification votes.

The FSSS provoked outrage among the striking workers when it effectively declared the strike over, by posting on its Facebook page following the announcement of the tentative agreement, “As soon as the national results are known, we will announce the return to work for Monday, December 13.”

Strikers responded furiously. “If you say we are going back to work on December 13 why vote then?” wrote one day care worker. “They’re taking it for granted that we’re going to vote for the proposal,” commented another. “Looks like they already know the results,” said a third.

Treasury Board President Sonia Lebel congratulated herself on having signed an “historic” agreement. Knowing that the agreements they have signed do not meet the real needs and demands of the workers, the various central labor bodies have not dared to officially recommend it to the workers. Calling it a “presentable” offer, Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) representative Stéphanie Vachon said, “We did everything we could to advance workers’ priorities at the bargaining table, but in the end the decision is theirs.”

Although the unions refuse to disclose the details, it is known that the agreements do not come close to workers’ initial demands. Ignoring the solidarity that exists among the rank-and-file, the unions have accepted “differentiated” or lower offers for support staff (janitors, cooks, educational assistants, receptionists and administrative assistants). The support staff, who represent about 20 percent of the workforce, have reportedly been offered 11 percent wage increases over three years, about half those offered to educators. In real terms, this would further impoverish these

workers, many of whom earn little more than minimum wage.

All told, the agreements would provide all the workers increases amounting to only a few more dollars an hour after three years. Moreover, they will do nothing of substance to improve working conditions and reduce workloads, which as a result of the pandemic and labour shortages have deteriorated significantly.

From a meagre \$19 an hour at entry level to \$25 an hour at the top level, child care workers’ wages would rise by the end of the proposed contracts to roughly between \$22 and \$30 an hour. These wage “increases” are in fact a retention plan in a field plagued by a shortage of educators. And again, with inflation already at 4.7 percent this year, these increases do not represent a real pay rise, nor do they represent any kind of wage catch-up after decades of low wages.

Following the template of the agreement it reached with nurses last August, the CAQ government is also seeking to increase the workweek for child care educators. It is offering a \$50 per week bonus for those who agree to work 40 hours per week.

To justify the “differentiated” offers, Treasury Board head Lebel said that the government did not have the “ability to pay more”—the same old lie that has been repeated for decades by the ruling class to justify social cuts and transfer immense social wealth to big business and the rich.

Significantly, the agreement does not appear to contain any additional protections against COVID-19 for childcare educators. This despite the fact that they work on the front lines, without adequate protection in virus-infested environments, surrounded by mostly unvaccinated children.

The unions’ attempt to sabotage the day care workers’ struggle is part of their longstanding collaboration with big business and capitalist governments to enrich the ruling elite at the expense of workers. Now fully integrated into the capitalist state, the union officialdom act as an industrial police force against the workers. After decades of imposing wage and social cuts, the unions are now working hand-in-hand with the government to keep schools and day care centres open so that parents can go to work and generate profits for big business in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

The unions have done everything they can to suppress the strike movement and prevent any form of working class unity. As FIPEQ president Valérie Grenon said, “We are doing everything possible to settle and to avoid an unlimited general strike because we know that it causes problems for parents and financial losses for our members.”

Although the CNTU was forced to call an all-out strike under pressure from rank-and-file workers (which they are maneuvering to end as soon as possible), the unions affiliated to the QFL (Quebec Federation of Labour) and CSQ (Centrale des Syndicats du Québec) refused to launch a strike at the same time despite rank-and-file strike mandates of over 90 percent. As with every labour dispute, the unions fear that a united movement of resistance will spread to other sections of the working class and become the catalyst for a broad counteroffensive against capitalist austerity. Polls show strong support among parents for child care workers and support staff.

In late November, just days before the strike at Quebec's childcare centers began, bus drivers in Laval, the province's third largest city, held two days of strike action. The 800 warehouse workers at the Société des alcools du Québec (the government-run liquor commission) held three days of strike action in November and have just rejected by 86 percent a tentative agreement reached between the government and their union.

As part of its strategy to smother the child care workers' strike, the unions issued a "joint statement" last weekend with the three opposition parties in the National Assembly—the Parti Québécois (PQ), Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) and Québec Solidaire (QS). The statement called on Premier François Legault, a former CEO of Air Transat and a multimillionaire, to "get directly involved in order to resolve the labour dispute." The last labour dispute in which the unions pleaded for the Premier's intervention was the 18-month lockout at the ABI aluminum smelter in Bécancour. While the unions refused to mobilize the working class in support of the ABI workers and instead made futile appeals to ABI shareholders and various representatives of the political establishment, including Legault, the latter "regularly defended the multinational by denouncing the "excessive" demands of ABI workers and the "too high" wage levels in Quebec's manufacturing. Due to the United Steelworkers' sabotage of the ABI workers' struggle, the lockout concluded with the imposition of a sweeping concessions contract.

The PQ and the PLQ, with whom union leaders have allied themselves to pressure Legault, have been gutting public services for the past 40 years. Along with the Liberals, the Conservatives and the NDP at the federal level, they are the directly responsible for the deplorable state of public services and the onerous conditions faced by the workers who provide them.

The unions' submission to Legault gives him all the leeway he needs to prepare back-to-work legislation, which is always one of the "tools that are available" if workers reject the proposed agreements. As always, union leaders have done nothing to warn and prepare their members to defy such legislation—which has been repeatedly used in Quebec and across Canada in recent years to stifle growing worker opposition to austerity measures. This is because resisting back-to-work legislation would immediately raise the need to mobilize broader layers of the working class in a political struggle to defend the striking workers.

The anti-working class attitude of the unions is linked to the full support they have given to Legault in his disastrous handling of the pandemic. They have fully embraced the deadly policy of putting profits before lives that the Legault and Trudeau federal

governments have implemented, including sending parents to work in unsafe workplaces in the midst of the pandemic. The capitalist governments have insisted, with the unions' full support, that non-essential workplaces and schools remain open so that profits can continue to be extracted from the working class.

Childcare workers must reject the agreements signed by the Legault government and the union leaders. The proposed contracts will do nothing to address the vast problems of chronic underfunding of childcare centers or to improve the daily lives of educators and support workers. As in education, the agreements do not allow workers to meet the growing needs of children at a time of unprecedented economic and social crisis.

Contrary to what union leaders say, childcare workers should have no confidence in the government or the opposition parties. Instead, they must look to their real allies: Quebec's half-million public sector workers and the working class as a whole. The conditions for such working-class unity are favorable: after years of concessions and capitalist austerity, a wave of militant labour struggles is now sweeping across North America.

In addition to openly opposing anti-democratic back-to-work legislation, workers must unite around a joint program demanding massive investments in public services, the hiring of thousands of workers, significant improvements in working conditions for all, and increased workplace protection in the face of the fifth wave of the pandemic and the spread of the Omicron variant.

Such an initiative cannot go forward without the political mobilization of all workers in rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses.



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