

Quebec nurses' union admits much of rank and file view it as "sellouts" and government accomplices

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The *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ), a union representing 76,000 Quebec nurses, nursing assistants and respiratory therapists, has told the *Tribunal administratif du travail*, the province's labour court or tribunal, that there is seething rank-and-file anger against the union after it imposed yet another concessions-filled contract.

Patrick Guay, a FIQ vice president, said "the loss of credibility is enormous." Nathalie Lévesque, who was interim president of the FIQ after Nancy Bédard's sudden departure last October, added that the FIQ has been "completely discredited as a union organization at all levels."

Top FIQ officials told the labour tribunal that rank-and-file nurses have questioned the integrity of the union officials who negotiated the three-year collective agreement narrowly ratified last August, calling them "sellouts" and government accomplices and asking if they had received "bribes."

This damning, self-incriminating testimony was given as part of a legal challenge launched by FIQ and five other unions to the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government's fall 2021 announcement that it was offering bonuses of up to \$15,000 to attract full-time nurses to alleviate severe, chronic staff shortages in the public health system. These shortages are the product of decades of capitalist austerity and have been further aggravated by the CAQ government's ruinous profits-before-lives COVID-19 policy, which has led to six waves of mass infection and death.

The CAQ announced its bonus plan just weeks after the FIQ leadership had imposed a new collective agreement on its members that was full of rollbacks and contained no measures to address the staffing shortages. In arguing for the agreement's ratification, FIQ leaders insisted they had done everything they could and parroted Premier Legault and Health Minister Dubé's lying claims that the government simply had no more money to give.

In their testimony before the labour tribunal, FIQ bureaucrats argued that the anger among rank-and-file members was simply the result of the government making them look bad, by claiming it had exhausted all means of alleviating the staff shortages just weeks before it announced a bonus scheme, without consulting the union officialdom.

In reality, the anger and outrage among rank-and-file nurses, and health care workers more generally, is the outcome of decades of

betrayals by the corporatist unions, which have repeatedly smothered worker opposition to austerity. This includes the setbacks nurses suffered in the latest collective agreement, despite their manifest readiness to fight and a huge well of sympathy for them among working people.

In June 2021, after more than a year of negotiations, the FIQ leadership reached an agreement with the CAQ government. While inflation was then increasing annually at 3.5 percent and is now well over 5.5 percent, the sellout contract negotiated by FIQ provided for salary increases of barely 2 percent per year over three years, and this despite the fact nurses and other Quebec public sector workers have endured years of wage "restraints."

Concluded in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the new agreement failed to provide any consequential measures to bolster pandemic protection for nurses, thousands of whom have been infected and continue to be infected by the deadly virus.

No less critically, it contained no measures to address the acute shortage of nurses, other than a vague promise to add 1,500 nursing positions. Even if this promise is kept, it will amount to little more than a futile gesture given that tens of thousands of additional nurses and billions of dollars in investment in the public health care system are needed.

In respect to staffing, the contract negotiated by FIQ made major concessions to the government and its claim that the nursing shortage can be solved by having the nurses, many of whom are already suffering burnout and other forms of psychological stress due to onerous workloads and forced overtime, work more. Thus, the new collective agreement prolonged the standard workweek a nurse must work to be considered full-time, while maintaining the mandatory overtime that nurses abhor.

Despite the manipulative and intimidating tactics of the FIQ bureaucrats, the membership ratified the agreement last August by only a small margin. According to the union, just 54 percent of those who voted approved the agreement. In many locals, particularly in the greater Montreal region, the majority of nurses outright rejected it. Overall, turnout was very low, in some areas less than 50 percent and in others barely 30 percent.

Underscoring that this rotten agreement did not solve anything, nurses across Quebec mounted a series of job actions to protest against their miserable working conditions in the weeks following its ratification.

Organized by nurses themselves, these sit-ins provoked an angry and frightened backlash from the ruling class and the CAQ government, complete with cynical and hypocritical claims that nurses fighting for increased staffing and against taxing work schedules were imperiling patients' care.

The government rushed to the labour tribunal, which promptly declared the sit-ins illegal. Convening in emergency session on a Sunday, the *Tribunal administratif du travail* ordered the nurses to return to work immediately. Failing that, the tribunal decreed they would be liable to fines of up to \$10,000 or jail time.

In September 2021, just weeks after FIQ members had voted on the new contract, the Quebec government announced its bonus program, which it said would go a long way toward addressing the nursing shortage. Offering sums of up to \$15,000 to nurses in the private sector who want to return to the public network, to retirees willing to return to nursing or to part-time nurses ready to accept full-time positions, the government's initiative was nothing more than a band-aid on a gaping wound.

The program proved unpopular. One reason for this was that it contains numerous strict conditions, including regarding sick days, that if not met would cost nurses their bonuses. A January 2022 report said the program has attracted only 2,163 nurses, well below the Quebec government's already modest and insufficient goal of adding 4,300 nurses. According to nurses themselves, the principal reason the bonus program has failed is that it does nothing to address the abysmal working conditions they experience, including punitive workloads and mandatory overtime.

The FIQ, like the other five unions involved in the litigation before the labour tribunal, opposed the CAQ bonus scheme not to defend nurses but to preserve the privileges of the union bureaucracy and its role as a junior partner of the government with a "place at the bargaining table."

The unions have challenged the ministerial order establishing the bonus program before the anti-worker labour tribunal, while "welcoming the government's plan" itself. Their objection is over "the way it was done," over the "circumvention of the negotiation process." They are petitioning the labour tribunal to reaffirm "the role of the unions as the sole interlocutor" between the government and the various health institutions and rank-and-file workers.

In other words, the unions' complaint is that because they were not involved in the planning of the bonus scheme and its announcement, they were prevented from making optimum use of it in deflecting the mounting anger among rank-and-file nurses and the other health care professionals offered similar bonus schemes.

The FIQ bureaucrats—with their frank admissions of the extent to which they are discredited and hated by rank-and-file nurses—are in effect pleading to the labour tribunal and government to bolster their position so as to prevent nurses from breaking free from their organizational and political control.

The government's bonus scheme, it need be added, is essentially a worker-retention plan consistent with the new contract the government imposed on nurses with the collaboration of the FIQ. That is, it is aimed at making nurses work more, by eliminating many part-time positions, extending the workweek and perpetuating the brutal forced overtime regime.

Unsurprisingly, the FIQ did not lift a finger to mobilize its members against the bonus program to fight for better working conditions. Rather it turned instead to the pro-business labour tribunal, and with the avowed objective of getting it to reaffirm its status as the nurses' state-recognized collective bargaining agent and assist it in subduing the anger boiling within the rank and file.

The FIQ is thus continuing the role that it and the other unions have played for decades as junior partners of the ruling class, charged with suppressing the class struggle, imposing concession-laden contracts, and channeling workers' anger and energy behind calls to vote for one or another of the big business parties.

The FIQ's orientation towards the ruling class is epitomized by the recent election of Shirley Dorismond, until recently one of its vice-presidents as the CAQ's candidate in the April 11 by-election in Marie-Victorin, a South Shore Montreal constituency. The fact that a high-ranking FIQ leader, who gained notoriety in the mainstream media for her demagogic criticism of the government during the negotiations, can make a smooth transition to the hard-right governing party of multimillionaire and former Air Transat CEO François Legault demonstrates once again that unions are no longer workers' organizations.

Led by well-paid bureaucrats, these organizations represent wealthy middle class layers whose comfortable lifestyle depends on the ability of the ruling class, with their direct complicity, to intensify workers' exploitation and drive up profits.

The rank-and-file anger invoked by frightened FIQ bureaucrats in testimony before Quebec's labour tribunal court is another sign of the developing conflict—across Canada and internationally—between the pro-capitalist apparatuses that call themselves unions and a working class that is determined to defend its working conditions, standard of living and social rights, such as public health care, in the face of decaying capitalism.

But this nascent rebellion must become conscious and be armed with a clear political program. Nurses, like other health care workers, and the working class as a whole must organize outside of these sclerotic apparatuses by building rank-and-file committees that are independent of and opposed to the pro-capitalist unions.

These committees will fight to mobilize the full social power of the working class against capitalist austerity, the danger of world war and the criminal "profits before lives" pandemic policy of the ruling class. They must adopt a Zero-COVID strategy and lead a struggle for social equality. This requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class fighting for a workers' government.



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