

The Quebec unions and the Ontario education workers' struggle—how the bureaucracy sows disunity

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Fifty-five thousand school support workers in Ontario defied a savage anti-strike bill imposed by the Doug Ford-led provincial Progressive Conservative government on November 4 and 7. Using the anti-democratic “notwithstanding clause” that allows governments to violate rights “guaranteed” by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Ford stripped the support workers of their right to strike and imposed by government decree “collective agreements” that included massive real-terms wage cuts and other concessions.

The courageous stand taken by the Ontario support workers points the way forward for workers across Canada who are facing the same big business-government assault on their wages, working conditions, right to collectively struggle, and public services. The support workers' defiance galvanized mass working class support in Ontario and beyond, provoking a burgeoning movement for a province-wide general strike.

It was precisely to avoid such a scenario, which would have threatened the very survival of Ford's hard-right government, that senior leaders of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Unifor, the Ontario Federation of Labour and the construction unions entered into secret discussions with the government to quickly end what they called a “political protest.” In exchange, Ford agreed to drop his use of the notwithstanding clause and rescind his draconian anti-strike legislation, Bill 28.

By ordering the support workers to end their strike, without so much as bothering to consult the rank-and-file, the union bureaucracy threw a lifeline to Ford, suppressing the growing rebellion among Ontario workers, including among tens of thousands of teachers angered by their unions' insistence that they take no “illegal” job action.

However, the outcome of the education workers' struggle is far from being sealed. By defying the strike ban despite possible fines of \$4,000 per day of strike, the support workers have taken a stand for the entire working class. These school custodians, educational assistants, early childhood educators, school bus drivers, librarians and administrative workers earn on average less than \$39,000 a year. They face increasing workloads due to decades of education cuts and the Ontario

government's disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which, like everywhere else in Canada, has put profits before lives.

These worsening social conditions, compounded by runaway inflation of around 7 per cent (and much higher for essentials), are repeated across the country and in all sectors of the economy. This includes Quebec, the second most populous province after Ontario and adjacent to it. A unified struggle by English-speaking workers in Ontario and French-speaking workers in Quebec, based on their common class interests and overcoming artificial linguistic divisions, would have a powerful impact across the country.

Any prospect of such class solidarity is viscerally opposed by the union apparatuses, both in Quebec and in English Canada. The unions thus continue the role that they have played for decades to isolate and sabotage workers' struggles—especially when they pose a potential challenge to the existing capitalist political and social order.

Fifty years ago, as a spontaneous province-wide general strike provoked by the jailing of union officials who had sanctioned an “illegal” public sector strike shook Quebec, Canada's main labour federation, the CLC denounced it as a threat to public order. Ten years ago, as the powerful 2012 Quebec student strike threatened to spread to the working class, the NDP (the social-democratic party in the federal parliament supported by the unions in English Canada) refused to give even verbal support to the striking students on the spurious grounds university tuition fees are a provincial matter. As for the Quebec union leaders, they explicitly forbade their English Canadian counterparts from providing any support to the striking students, in the name of Quebec's “right to self-determination.”

Quebec's unions, which collectively have over a million members, have barely mentioned the Ontario school support workers' struggle. Although it has been apparent for months that the education workers were heading for a decisive clash with the Ford government and that the latter was preparing to pre-emptively criminalize any strike, the Quebec unions waited until early November to issue timid communiqués about the

Ontario support workers' struggle on their websites.

Unsurprisingly, these communiqués contained no call to mobilize and join the ongoing struggle in Ontario. While they deplored Ford's anti-strike law, they did not highlight the evident fact that workers in both provinces are under similar attack and that governments across Canada, including those led by the union-supported Parti Québécois (PQ), have routinely passed strike-breaking laws for decades.

Like their fellow bureaucrats in Ontario, the overriding concern of the union leaders in Quebec is to secure "negotiated settlements" in order to preserve what they call their "place at the bargaining table," that is, a key role in the anti-worker "collective bargaining" system that guarantees the union bureaucrats' comfortable careers and six-figure salaries.

As the Ontario workers were preparing to defy Bill 28, a Quebec educator and supporter of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-And-File Committee (OEWRFC), which is fighting to rally the working class in support of the struggle of the school support workers, had a revealing exchange on Twitter with the heads of one of Quebec's three main labor federations. He asked Éric Gingras, president of the CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec—Quebec Union Federation), why the CSQ was not mobilizing its members, including school staff, in support of the Ontario workers?

In the language of the union bureaucrats, who are always anxious to blame workers for their own inaction and betrayals, Gingras replied that a "strike would be illegal" and that workers would stay away from it. What he failed to mention was that if workers in Quebec knew little to nothing about the strike in Ontario, it was because the unions had failed in their elementary duty to inform them; and that the central issues in the Ontario workers' struggle—opposition to austerity and the defense of the right to strike—are of pivotal importance to all workers in Quebec.

In their efforts to isolate the militant struggle of the Ontario education support workers, Quebec's union bureaucrats can count on the complicity of the supposedly "left" party in the National Assembly, Québec Solidaire (QS).

This party of the affluent middle class is a promoter of Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism. It pays no attention to the plight of workers in English Canada, and hardly more to worker struggles in Quebec. And when it does refer to such struggles, it is invariably with the aim of strengthening the union apparatuses that for decades have been strangling workers' opposition to social spending cuts, contract concessions, and emergency anti-strike laws.

Québec Solidaire's disdain for the Ontario education workers' struggle is little different from the response of the more traditional and openly right-wing sections of Quebec's political establishment, especially its allies in the pro-Quebec sovereignty camp, many of whom openly sided with Ford.

Alain Therrien, a member of the Parti Québécois' federal sister party, the Bloc Québécois, said he was "indifferent" to

what is happening in Ontario. As for the major right-wing nationalist media such as *Le Devoir*, which is close to *indépendantiste* circles, or *Le Journal de Montréal*, the tabloid of billionaire CEO and former PQ leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau, they made clear their hostility towards the Ontario strikers.

Antoine Robitaille of the *Journal de Montréal* applauded Ford's now repealed strikebreaking law, including his use of the "notwithstanding clause," on the grounds that it aimed to keep children in school and challenged the conception that the right-to-strike should be considered a "fundamental," constitutionally-protected right.

Columnist Mathieu-Bock Côté, a virulent nationalist who recently defended Italy's new fascist prime minister, presented the Ontario labor dispute in entirely legalistic terms, claiming the only important issue was Ford's use of the notwithstanding clause and a supposed struggle between "the will of the elected" and the will of the judges. He unreservedly took the side of the former, so as to champion the autocratic principle that governments should have the power to abrogate basic democratic rights.

Since the election of the "Quebec First," nationalist-autonomist CAQ in 2018, the Quebec nationalists have taken a further sharp turn to the right. They have defended the Legault government's use of the notwithstanding clause to shield its chauvinist laws, Bill 21 and Bill 96, from constitutional challenge. While these laws violate the democratic rights of minorities, Quebec nationalists present them as an expression of the "collective interests" of the Quebec "nation." This political fiction serves to mask the fundamental class divisions that run through capitalist society, in Quebec as in English Canada and the rest of the world.

Quebec nationalism has nothing progressive to offer workers. This reactionary ideology serves the interests of the capitalist class by dividing the working class along linguistic and ethnic lines, thus blocking a common struggle of French-speaking, English-speaking and immigrant workers in Canada, in unity with their class brothers and sisters in the US and overseas, against capitalist austerity and imperialist war.



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