

Quebec government makes provocative, wage-cutting offer to half-million public sector workers

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The Quebec government's contract offers to the 550,000 public and para-public sector workers whose collective agreements expire next March 31 are a veritable declaration of war.

Premier François Legault's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is offering hospital workers, nurses, teachers, school support staff and other public sector employees a 9 percent salary "increase" spread over five years. This would constitute a sweeping real-terms pay cut in the face of galloping inflation, which is currently running at close to 7 percent per year.

The government's initial contract offer, tabled late last month, also included a one-time lump sum payment, effectively a signing bonus, of \$1,000 that would not be indexed to retirement and vacation benefits. The Legault government is also seeking significant pension rollbacks. It wants to force those with 35 years of service to wait until age 57 before being able to retire without penalty, and to slash the benefits paid out by the Government and Public Employees Retirement Plan (RREGOP).

The CAQ government has announced that it intends to focus this negotiating round on the "organization of work," not wages, and wants greater "flexibility" from employees. In other words, the government intends to impoverish workers and make them work harder, while maintaining appalling working conditions and continuing to starve public services of resources so as to lay the groundwork for their privatization.

The inter-union "Common Front"—which represents the vast majority of public sector workers, including those affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour, the Confederation of National Trade Unions, the Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ) and the Alliance of Professional and Technical Employees in Health and Social Services—has categorically rejected the government's provocative contract proposals.

But this is mere window dressing. As they have done in every negotiation for decades, the unions will do everything in their power to sabotage a working-class mobilization against the austerity policies of the ruling elite for fear that such a movement would destabilize Quebec and Canadian capitalism.

It is only a matter of time before they back down on their demands and attempt to impose contracts little different from the government's concessionary proposals.

The Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé (FIQ), the collective bargaining agent for most of the province's nurses, and the Autonomous Federation of Teachers (FAE) have also rejected the government's "global" contract offer but using milder language. In the past, these two unions have postured as more "militant" than the others and are once again refusing any and all cooperation with them. However, the FIQ and FAE have invariably imposed essentially the same concessionary contracts on their members as the other public sector unions.

The current negotiations are taking place in an even more explosive context than the previous ones, held in 2020-2021.

The past three years have been characterized by the Quebec government and ruling class's ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and by a dramatic surge in inflation, with prices for basic necessities including food, energy and housing spiking. Under the guise of defending "democracy," tens of billions of dollars that could be used to fund public services and provide decent living standards for the working class are being spent by Canada and its NATO allies on their proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The unions are aware of the widespread anger and frustration among public sector workers, who have endured decades of wage "restraint" and austerity and are among the principal victims of the Legault government's disastrous profits-before-life and "forever COVID" pandemic policies.

There have been numerous signs of rising militancy over the past year and a half, including numerous sit-ins by nurses compelled to perform endless hours of mandatory overtime.

As in the 2015 negotiations, the principal union federations have formed a "Common Front"—invoking the memory of the militant struggles Quebec public sector workers mounted in the 1970s. But this is a fraudulent maneuver. Their objective is not to prepare for a mass mobilization against the government, but to better control and suppress rank-and-file opposition.

Led by Legault, a former Air Transat CEO and multimillionaire, the CAQ government is pursuing the class war

agenda of the entire capitalist elite in Quebec and across Canada. Its key aims include intensifying worker exploitation through wage cuts and speed-up; the privatization of public services; and further tax cuts for big business and the rich.

Since coming to power, Legault has repeatedly attacked workers, including threatening to use anti-strike legislation against government employees and construction workers. With the support of the entire political establishment, the CAQ is stoking Quebec nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism to divide the working class along linguistic, racial and religious lines.

If the CAQ has proven able to impose such a program, it is because the privileged union bureaucrats have done everything possible to demobilize workers and sabotage the mass social opposition movements that have erupted repeatedly over recent decades.

Between 1996 and 1998, they worked with the Parti Québécois (PQ) government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry to impose the largest budget cuts in Quebec's history. In 2012, when a powerful province-wide student strike shook the Liberal government of Jean Charest and threatened to unleash a mass working class movement against austerity, the unions intervened to shut it down, channelling the mass opposition behind the election of another right-wing PQ government.

Ever more fully integrated with big business and the capitalist state, the unions serve not as instruments of militant struggle, but rather as means to control and police the working class. Boasting of their role in upholding "social peace," i.e., suppressing the class struggle, the leaders of the Quebec Federation of Labour, Confederation of National Trade Unions and CSQ have repeatedly called for "social dialogue" with the hard-right CAQ government.

The unions have intimate ties with the political establishment, including working for decades as close allies of the big-business PQ and, alongside the like of Pierre Karl Péladeau, the billionaire media and telecommunications mogul and ex-PQ leader, they have promoted Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism.

Albeit less overtly than in the rest of Canada, the Quebec unions also support the governmental alliance between the New Democratic Party (NDP) and Justin Trudeau's minority federal government, under which the social-democratic NDP has pledged to keep the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals in power until June 2025.

The recent struggle mounted by 55,000 Ontario education support workers has critical lessons for Quebec public sector workers as they prepare to confront the Legault government.

For two days in November, the school support workers defied a vicious anti-strike law, galvanizing mass popular opposition to Ontario's hard-right Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government and sparking a growing movement for a province-wide strike.

Desperate to prevent such an explosion of class struggle, the union bureaucracy—including the leaders of the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—pleaded with Ford in backchannel talks to withdraw his anti-strike legislation. In exchange, they scuttled the strike, ordering workers to immediately take down their picket lines, returned to the "bargaining table," and then imposed another concessions-filled contract.

This experience demonstrated the growing militancy of workers and the enormous social and political power that they can wield if mobilized. No less crucially, the Ontario education workers' struggle demonstrated that the union apparatuses are enforcers of capitalist austerity, with interests different from and hostile to those of the workers they purport to represent.

There is no lack of fighting spirit among Quebec public sector workers, and widespread popular support for their demands for increased funding for the province's dilapidated health and education systems.

However, if workers are to prevail in the struggle against Legault and his CAQ government, this militancy must be leavened by a new political perspective based on the independent mobilization of the working class against capitalist austerity and the entire political establishment, both federalist and Quebec-sovereignist.

The conditions are ripe for such a counteroffensive, as evidenced by the entry into struggle in the last period of powerful contingents of the Canadian working class: railway workers, miners, Montreal longshoremen, Toronto-area bus drivers, New Brunswick public sector workers, to name just a few.

These struggles, however, were immediately confronted with the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy, raising the urgent need for workers to build new organizations of struggle to assert their own class interests: rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the nationalist and pro-capitalist union apparatuses.



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