

Unions reject Quebec government's wage-cutting offer to half a million public sector workers

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The Quebec government's provocative contract "offers" to the province's 600,000 public sector workers have been rejected by the unions. But unless workers take the fight into their own hands, the union bureaucracy will derail their opposition and bow to the demands of the province's right-wing "Quebec First" CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government. For decades they have imposed concessions-filled contracts in the name of "social peace."

Far from representing a break from this unbroken record of betrayal, the unions' rejection of the government's "offer" was motivated more by their fear that attempting to push through such a brazen provocation would trigger mass opposition than anything else.

Claiming that Quebec faces difficult times ahead, Quebec Premier and big-business mouthpiece François Legault has offered the province's nurses, hospital workers, teachers, school board employees, civil servants and other public sector workers pay "increases" totalling 9 percent spread over five years. This would represent a massive wage cut.

Last year prices officially rose by 6.8 percent, although the costs of food and energy grew far faster. In 2023 prices are continuing to rise at an annual rate of close to 6 percent.

Due to decades of state "wage restraint" programs, wages in wide swathes of the public sector are lower than in comparable private sector jobs.

The government is also seeking to make cuts to the Government and Public Employees Retirement Plan (RREGOP), including introducing a measure that would force those with 35 years of service to wait until age 57 before they can retire.

Collective agreements expire on March 31 for virtually all Quebec public and para-public sector workers, who

have suffered a long series of attacks on their working conditions at the hands of successive Parti Québécois (PQ), Liberal and CAQ governments. The Legault government's "profits before lives" COVID-19 pandemic policy has further exacerbated a crisis created by decades of austerity. For the public this means overcrowded, poorly equipped public school classrooms and cruel wait-times for emergency medical care and even life-saving medical procedures. For public sector workers it means overwork, forced overtime, verbal abuse, and threats to physical and mental health.

Faced with chronic staff shortages that are themselves the result of the onerous working conditions that public sector workers endure, especially in the health care sector, the Legault government is trying to increase workers' workloads. This is the thrust of its efforts to place labour "reorganization" and "flexibility" at the heart of the current contract negotiations.

The attack on public services and the workers who provide them is part of a broader assault on the entire working class. This is the significance of the government's preparations to raise the minimum age that a Quebec worker, whether private or public sector, can begin drawing full benefits from the Quebec Pension Plan (QPP) from 60 to 62 (or even 65).

These anti-worker measures are being implemented by governments around the world with the full cooperation of the pro-capitalist unions. Legault is aware that an assault on pensions risks leading to a revolt like that in France, where workers are holding massive strikes and demonstrations against the Macron government's attempt to raise the minimum retirement age from 62 to 64.

To stifle workers' opposition, Legault is counting on the union bureaucracy by involving it in a "public consultation" in which union leaders have already

suggested that bonuses be offered to workers who continue to work past the age of 65.

It should be recalled that in 1996 it was the unions themselves who proposed—after supporting the “zero deficit” program of the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard—the early retirement of thousands of health care workers, which led to the permanent elimination of 17,000 jobs.

It is precisely this corporatist agenda—the unions’ increasing integration into the capitalist state with seats on government-management-union boards and tripartite committees—that is at work in the current sham “negotiation” process for the renewal of the public sector collective agreements.

This can be seen in the extremely limited demands put forward by the “Common Front,” which includes the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) and the Alliance du personnel professionnel et technique de la santé et des services sociaux (APTS).

The Common Front is calling for a salary adjustment based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), plus a meager additional increase (2 percent in 2023, 3 percent in 2024 and 4 percent in 2025). But the CPI is a proxy index, known to lag behind real inflation, and the additional 9 percent cumulative increase over three years is only a fraction of the wage rollbacks that workers have suffered over decades. As for its vague demands for “significant investments to improve working conditions,” these are also pious wishes for which the Common Front leaders have no intention of fighting.

These paltry demands have nothing to do with the real needs of workers, which include:

*wages fully and permanently indexed to inflation, in addition to an immediate increase of at least 10 percent per year to begin to catch up after decades of real wage cuts;

*tens of billions of dollars in additional funding to rebuild the health and education systems, bled dry by decades of budget cuts;

*hiring tens of thousands of new hospital and school employees to ease the intolerable workload caused by chronic understaffing.

The ruling class would immediately respond to these demands with the standard lie that “there’s no money.” This is belied by its own calls for new tax cuts for big business and the rich, and the tens of billions it insists be poured into buying new fleets of warships and fighter jets

and supporting Ukraine in the US-NATO-instigated war against Russia.

Demands based on the real needs of workers—not on what the government claims is affordable—are never raised by the Common Front, nor by the other public sector unions such as the nurses and health care professionals union FIQ (Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé) and the education union FAE (Fédération autonome de l’enseignement). This is for the simple reason that their strategy is not to mobilize the social strength of the working class to challenge capitalist austerity and the battery of anti-strike laws that have been used to enforce it.

Instead, the unions are leading workers into a blind alley by sowing illusions in the “good faith” of Premier Legault, a former multi-millionaire CEO and fervent supporter of privatization who has demonstrated in every labour dispute that he systematically promotes the interests of the bosses.

To avoid another defeat, public sector workers must adopt a new fighting strategy based on the understanding that they are facing not just a contract “negotiation” with the Legault government, but a political struggle against the class war being waged by the entire financial and business elite across Canada.

The allies of public sector workers are not sitting in the National Assembly, nor in the offices of the QFL, CNTU and CSQ. They are in the factories, the shops, the warehouses, the railroads, the ports and the construction sites. It is to this social force—the working class across Canada and internationally—that workers must turn to defend jobs, wages, pensions and public services.

This strategy can only be realized through the building of rank-and-file workers’ committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist unions. These committees—many of which already exist in the US, Europe and elsewhere and are united in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)—will enable workers to assert their real class demands and interests and build a unified working class opposition movement against capitalist exploitation and for social equality.



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