

Quebec government demands sweeping concessions as unions work to demobilize half a million public sector workers

Laurent Lafrance
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With less than three weeks to go before the contracts of Quebec's 600,000 public sector employees expire, the province's hard-right Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is making increasingly belligerent threats against hospital workers, nurses, teachers, public school support staff and other provincial public sector workers.

Premier François Legault is being aided in his push for sweeping concessions by the unions, including the "Common Front" inter-union alliance, which are working to demobilize the public sector workers.

Legault posted a letter on Twitter on February 25 denouncing the unions for refusing to participate in the "forums" he wanted to create outside the usual collective bargaining framework to "discuss burning issues" in health and education.

In a provocative move, Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel subsequently sent an email to union leaders with proposals she said she wanted to discuss in the forums. These proposals were in fact additional details contained in the first government offer that the unions were forced to reject last month in the face of mass worker opposition.

Through these forums, the government hoped to impose reactionary measures without allowing workers to have their say. For example, in her email, LeBel proposed adding the equivalent of 15,000 "classroom assistants" to the province's schools. Many of these, as the government proposal makes clear, would have no formal training in education, nor would they be offered any. In exchange for this "reform," the government is demanding that education workers abandon their central demands—namely "lighter workloads," "smaller class sizes" and more classroom teachers.

Legault's ultimate goal with these provocations is to send a signal to the Common Front union bureaucrats that they will have to make massive concessions in the coming

collective agreements.

The unions have already indicated that they are prepared to impose major concessions in wages and working conditions—as they have done repeatedly over recent decades. Their only condition is that the government must "sit down, negotiate, [and] ratify these negotiations," in the words of Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) President Magali Picard. In other words, the union bureaucracy wants nothing more than to partner with the hard-right, "Quebec First" CAQ government in a phony "negotiation" process that serves to prepare new attacks on public sector workers while upholding its own privileges, based on its role in policing the working class and suppressing the class struggle.

In his letter, Legault complained about the unions' "closed-minded attitude" and claimed that he does not want to "slash the wages or working conditions of nurses and teachers," but rather "improve their conditions."

This is populist demagoguery. Legault, a multimillionaire ex-Air Transat CEO turned right-wing pro-privatization politician, has no intention of improving either the quality of public services or the working conditions of the employees who provide them. In fact, he is proposing to "increase" salaries by 9 percent over five years while inflation has risen by 7 percent in the last year alone. In addition to cutting the Government and Public Employees Retirement Plan (RREGOP) and forcing workers to work longer to be eligible for full pensions, the Legault government is calling for more "flexibility" in the "organization of work." This is a transparent attempt to further undermine workers' rights, as the government has done since the beginning of the pandemic under the pretext of dealing with a "state of emergency."

The current lamentable state of public services and the working conditions of those who administer them is the

result of the choices made by successive governments—federalist and pro-Quebec independence, and at the federal and provincial levels alike—to slash social spending in order to fund tax cuts for big business and the rich.

The Legault government's criminal, “profits before lives” response to the pandemic has intensified this crisis. It has resulted in dilapidated and overcrowded hospitals and schools, unprecedented labour shortages and forced overtime, increased deaths in emergency rooms, and worker burnout. Meanwhile, workers continue to catch the coronavirus, a debilitating and deadly pathogen that has already claimed more than 51,000 lives in Canada alone, and millions worldwide.

These conditions, found not only in Quebec but all over the world, have inevitably pushed thousands of overworked, exhausted, poorly treated and poorly paid workers to leave the public sector. The frustration is widespread, particularly in the health care sector where there have been recurring waves of worker sit-ins in recent years. On February 26, more than 500 health care professionals in the Mauricie and Centre-du-Québec regions demonstrated in opposition to their employer's decision to merge departments and transfer employees at will in the name of greater “flexibility.”

While the unions try to isolate workers in the straitjacket of the state-regulated, pro-employer “collective bargaining” system without ever raising the broader political issues at stake, the Legault government has a clear plan: use the contract dispute to intensify its assault on the entire working class.

In a March 3 interview with *La Presse*, Legault said he is ready to use his “political capital” to improve “state efficiency.” Legault's reference to spending “political capital” was borrowed from his political mentor, the former Parti Québécois Premier Lucien Bouchard, who regularly used the phrase while implementing the most brutal social spending cuts in Quebec history in the late 1990s. Among other things, Legault wants to further concentrate control of public services in the hands of the government by installing CEOs in the province's health care network who will be tasked with dictating what cuts to impose in order to be “cost-effective,” using private sector principles.

The union bureaucrats, who have collaborated in the imposition of round after round of capitalist austerity, are well aware that worker anger is rapidly reaching the boiling point and that their own support base is dwindling. It is because they fear that they will not be able to contain

the growing opposition among rank-and-file workers if the conflict drags on and workers begin to engage in job action that they are in a hurry to ratify new contracts and uphold “social peace.”

While they collaborate behind closed doors with the government, the bureaucrats of the Common Front, the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé (FIQ) and the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) are preparing phony protest actions that only serve to lull workers into a state of inactivity and channel their anger in a harmless direction.

What is needed is for workers to develop a new strategy for the struggle ahead. The CAQ's attack on public sector workers is part of a generalized assault by the Canadian ruling elite on the entire working class. It is to this social force that they must turn and with the aim of transforming the public sector contract struggle into a broad, politically self-conscious working class movement against austerity and social inequality.

Such a movement is inseparable from a struggle against imperialist war. While workers are being told that “there is no money” for public services and wage increases, the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau—with the support of the Legault government and the entire Quebec political establishment—is massively increasing Canada's military spending, and assuming an ever-larger role in the US-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine and its preparations for war against China.

By creating a network of rank-and-file workers' committees, totally independent of the unions and in opposition to their nationalist and pro-capitalist policies, workers will be able to unify their struggles with their colleagues in all workplaces and across all sectors, private and public. The rank-and-file committees will serve as the basis for the mobilization of the entire working class in a political struggle against the Legault government and capitalist austerity.

We urge all workers interested in fighting for this perspective to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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