

Amid mass anger and broad public support

Quebec unions plot betrayal of contract struggle of 650,000 public sector workers

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Almost six months after the expiry on March 31 of collective agreements covering 650,000 Quebec hospital workers, nurses, public school teachers and other public sector workers, the leaders of the Common Front—an inter-union alliance representing 420,000 of them—have announced that they will poll their members on a possible strike.

These votes will be held in an explosive social and political situation. On the one hand, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, with the full support of big business, is determined to impose massive concessions on public sector workers. On the other, workers are determined to put an end to decades of declining real wages and increased workloads. Moreover, there is mass popular anger over the deplorable state of public services. Polls show widespread support for public sector workers' demands for improved wages and working conditions and major investments in healthcare and education.

Workers' determination to fight was on display last weekend at a Common Front protest in Montreal in which more than 60,000 participated. The *World Socialist Web Site* will report separately on the September 23 demonstration in coming days.

In announcing the strike votes, Common Front leaders said they were “facing a wall” at the negotiating table. This was a tacit admission that their “strategy” of pursuing “social dialogue” with Quebec Premier François Legault and treating his CAQ government as a “partner” has utterly failed.

The CAQ is determined to intensify the assault on public services and working conditions mounted by its Liberal and Parti Québécois predecessors. It is maintaining its provocative offer of a 9 percent wage increase over five years—a massive real-terms pay cut when inflation is taken into account. It is seeking pension rollbacks and more “flexibility” in the workplace, meaning increased workloads for workers, and vowing to press forward with privatization. The government's contempt for public services and the working people who depend on them was highlighted by the recent comments of the minister of education, the notorious right-winger Bernard Drainville. Faced with a shortage of thousands of teachers, Drainville announced that the government's objective was to have “an adult”— i.e., not a trained teacher—“in every

classroom.”

The leaders of the three major union federations (the CSN, CSQ and FTQ), joined by the ATPS, have dubbed their temporary public sector alliance a “Common Front” to lend themselves a false air of militancy. In workers' minds the term Common Front is associated with the militant struggles of the early 1970s, when workers repeatedly defied anti-strike court injunctions and laws and made important gains.

This fraudulent posture of militancy and the strike votes are part of the union bureaucracy's maneuvering to avoid a political confrontation with the CAQ government while maintaining control over a restive rank and file. Workers have repeatedly shown that they are ready to fight, including through a wave of “illegal” nurse sit-down strikes over the past two years. Many workers have made trenchant criticisms of the union leaders on social media.

The strategy of the unions, including those outside the Common Front—the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) and the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ)—remains the same as it has been for decades. That is, confine the struggle within the narrow framework of “negotiations” over a collective agreement for which the financial parameters have been fixed in advance by the government and which the unions have no intention of seriously challenging. String out the negotiations for as long as possible, to defuse worker anger and demoralize the rank and file; then use the adoption or threat of a law criminalizing job action to impose sellout agreements.

It is through their suppression of workers' struggles that the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy maintains the corporatist relationship it has developed over the past four decades with the bosses and the state—the basis for the six-figure salaries and other privileges it receives in return.

The last thing the union leadership wants is an indefinite public sector strike, which would have the potential to become the spearhead of a working class political counteroffensive against the ruling class' austerity program in Quebec and across Canada.

This is demonstrated by recent comments from the union

leaders themselves. They have insisted that any indefinite public sector strike, over whose timing they exert exclusive control, must be “preceded by strike sequences,” i.e., a lengthy series of partial and rotating walkouts.

From the union bureaucrats’ point of view, these strikes would be designed not to mobilize workers as an independent social force and rally public support against the dismantling of public services. Rather, they see them as another “pressure tactic,” a vain appeal to the government to drop its hard line, and whose principal purpose is to demobilize and divide workers.

FTQ (Quebec Federation of Labour) President Magali Picard said she hoped to reach an agreement with the government before Christmas if it presented “respectable offers with at least wage catch-up.” In other words, the union bureaucrats want to continue negotiating behind closed doors with the government for many more months, while reserving the right to call off any and all job action, under the pretext of having secured another “historic agreement” with the government. Such an agreement would in fact be full of concessions. Union leaders have also made clear that they are committed to ensuring that all the anti-worker essential services legislation, which curtails the basic right to strike, is strictly observed.

Should union leaders find themselves forced under pressure from the rank and file to call an indefinite province-wide strike, they would immediately use the threat of back-to-work legislation to say that “nothing can be done” and that their members must bow to the government’s anti-worker diktats. This is exactly what they did in 2015 in the face of mounting rank-and-file opposition to their acceptance of wage cuts and inaction in the face of massive social spending cuts implemented by Philippe Couillard’s Liberal government.

Public sector workers must recognize that they are facing a political struggle. This is not just because their employer is the government, but because their demands for quality public services, better wages and decent working conditions conflict with the vital interests of the ruling capitalist class, in Quebec and across Canada. This is true regardless of the political label of the party in power—whether it’s the CAQ, the *indépendentistes* of the Parti québécois or the federalists of the Quebec Liberal Party at the provincial level; or the social-democrat NDP, the Conservatives or Justin Trudeau’s Liberals at the federal level.

The intransigence of the CAQ and Legault, himself a multimillionaire ex-CEO, expresses the demands of the banks and big business. They see public services, wages and pensions as an unacceptable drain on their gigantic profits. They are also waging class war against private sector and manufacturing workers, whose wages Legault has denounced as “too high.”

This is the same anti-worker attitude adopted by the ruling elite in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Desperate to maintain the flow of profits, the CAQ pushed for a premature reopening of schools and workplaces, leading to successive

waves of the deadly coronavirus, which continues to evolve and spread. The unions have fully supported this homicidal policy, which has accelerated the deterioration of public services and resulted in as many as 10 percent of all front-line health workers contracting Long COVID.

The chauvinist laws that the CAQ has made central to its rule, such as Bills 9, 21 and 96, are all designed to divide workers along ethnolinguistic lines and inflame Quebec nationalism. The latter, defended tooth and nail by both the ruling class and the unions, is the reactionary ideological cement of the Quebec bourgeoisie’s rule. At the heart of Quebec nationalism is the false idea that French-speaking workers have more in common with French-speaking capitalists than with their English-speaking and allophone class brothers and sisters in North America.

The urgent task facing workers is not to demand “respect” from the CAQ government, but to turn to their natural allies: the working class throughout Quebec, the rest of Canada and internationally. Public sector workers must see themselves as an important contingent of the international working class, which is returning to the path of mass struggle. The majority of workers in Quebec speak a different language from their North American brethren, but they are all facing the same treacherous unions and the same capitalist class determined to make them pay for the profound crisis of global capitalism and its ruinous wars.

No struggle can move forward without challenging the subordination of society to a handful of the ultra-rich. To win their just demands, public sector workers must organize independently of the union bureaucracy, forming rank-and-file committees that will take as their starting point the needs of workers, not what the ruling class says it can “afford.”

These committees will enable workers to communicate, exchange information and coordinate their struggles with their powerful allies throughout the working class, in Quebec and beyond.

This must be combined with a political struggle to break the monopoly of the rich on social life and reorganize society’s resources rationally and democratically, on the basis of human need, not private profit.



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