

“We’re at a turning point, it’s time to change things.”

Hundreds of thousands of Quebec public sector workers stage walkouts after CAQ government reiterates demand for real wage cuts

Our reporters
7 November 2023

Hundreds of thousands of Quebec public and para-public sector workers—including school teachers and support staff, hospital orderlies, kitchen staff and medical technicians and CEGEP (junior college) personnel—walked off the job for part of the day Monday.

They were protesting the demands of the right-wing, “Quebec First” Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government for after-inflation wage cuts, pension cuts, and still heavier workloads.

Although workers’ contracts expired more than seven months ago, Monday’s job action was the first sanctioned by the Common Front inter-union alliance. Formed by the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), and the health and social service professionals and technicians’ union ATPS, the Common Front represents 420,000 of the 625,000 Quebec public sector workers currently without contracts.

Workers responded enthusiastically to Monday’s strike call, setting up picket lines at hundreds of workplaces across Quebec. But for many workers the walkout was over almost as soon as it began, as the unions, in keeping with their bogus “escalating” strike strategy, limited the job action to only part of the work-day, generally just a few hours. For example the CSQ, the largest education union, authorized job action between midnight and 10:30 a.m., meaning teachers, teacher aides, and school support staff were on strike for just two-and-a-half hours.

The pro-capitalist union apparatuses are acutely aware that there is seething anger among the workers they claim to represent. The pandemic has exacerbated the staff and equipment shortages in the healthcare and education systems caused by decades of austerity budgets. Meanwhile workers’ incomes, long subject to so-called “wage restraint,” have been further squeezed by the recent spikes in inflation and interest rates.

The overriding aim of the union bureaucracy is to prevent an eruption of class struggle—a direct clash with the CAQ government that could serve as the catalyst for a broader working class upsurge in Quebec and across Canada against the ruling class’ program of austerity and war.

The unions have allowed the government to drag out the negotiations are only now grudgingly authorizing any job action and peddling the lie that a circumscribed collective bargaining struggle can pressure Quebec Premier François Legault and his CAQ government into “seeing reason.”

The government, meanwhile, is girding itself for a showdown with public sector workers. It is demanding the unions make major concessions on work rules and, in the health sector, overtime pay, before it will consider any change to its latest provocative wage offer—a 10.3 percent “increase” spread over five years. Moreover, with their increasingly shrill rhetoric about strikes “disrupting” public services and “taking school children hostage,” Legault, Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel and Health Minister Christian Dubé are preparing the political terrain for “emergency” strikebreaking legislation.

The unions have announced further job action in coming days. But as the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) warned in a statement distributed among the striking workers Monday, unless workers take the struggle into their own hands, the union bureaucrats will run it into the ground. The statement urged workers to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist union apparatuses, to rally support from workers across Quebec and Canada to defeat an anti-strike law and mobilize the working class in an industrial and political counter-offensive against austerity and the Legault government.

The province’s principal nurses’ union, the FIQ (Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé), which is seeking to strike a separate deal with the government based on the reactionary claim nurses are a “special case,” has called a two-day strike for Wednesday and Thursday of this week. Few nurses, however, will be off the job, because it would be illegal under the province’s anti-worker Essential Services Act. So restrictive are its provisions that in previous walkouts, more nurses have been required to work than normally!

The Fédération autonome de l’enseignement (FAE – Autonomous Education Federation), which represents 65,000

elementary and secondary teachers, including the majority in Montreal and Quebec City, is threatening to launch an “unlimited strike” starting November 23 unless the government comes up with a “satisfactory offer.”

Like the FIQ, the FAE has boycotted the demonstrations and job actions initiated by the Common Front. It claims to be more “militant,” but its sectional strategy conclusively demonstrates that it is just as opposed as the other union bureaucracies to any and all efforts to mobilise the working class against the Legault government.

“The 10.3 percent offer over 5 years is absurd, it’s an impoverishment”

According to CSQ President Éric Gingras, Monday’s strike was organized to cause “as little disruption as possible.” This cowardly attitude in the face of the CAQ government’s attacks was in flagrant contradiction with the combativeness of the rank-and-file workers *World Socialist Web Site* reporters met on the picket lines.

The CSQ had instructed its members in the education sector to demonstrate in front of their schools until 10:30 a.m., then return to work. But the WSWS encountered workers from a school located in an outlying area of a South Shore Montreal suburb who had defied the union’s instructions and moved their picket line to a busy thoroughfare. Here support for the striking workers was obvious, as hundreds of cars sounded their horns to express their solidarity.

Claudia, a teacher with 11 years’ experience, explained why she was on strike. “I’m angry. The 10.3 percent offer over 5 years is absurd, it’s an impoverishment. We’re being laughed at. In terms of retirement, it’s atrocious what the government is offering: 35 years of service, 50% of salary. We’ll soon be living on the streets in cardboard boxes.

“Right now, I have to be a teacher, a psychologist, a psycho-educator, a mom, a nurse. It puts me in distress. I see lots of teachers at the end of their tether. I’m dying a slow death, and I wonder if I’ll be able to make it to the end.”

Another teacher explained that apart from his teaching and planning duties, he had to carry out over 200 student-support measures for his 26 students. “When am I supposed to do that?”

It’s the same story in the healthcare sector. Antony, a worker at Montreal’s CHUM Hospital, walks 18 to 21 km a day, earning \$21.90 an hour. “I’m 49 years old and this is the first demonstration I’ve attended in my life.

“COVID has led to a lot of inflation from all sides. Wages are not rising in consequence. I’m a single parent and I can’t even afford a plane ticket to see my family. I can’t put money aside. My first fortnight’s pay goes to pay my rent and the second goes to pay everything else. We’ve cut back on meat, on everything.

“This is the first time I’ve been out on the streets shouting, but we have to do it.” Antony denounced the Essential Services Act, which the government and unions use to limit the impact of strikes and divide workers. “I don’t work with patients, I’m in supply,

but they tell me I’m an essential service.”

Maude, a medical-imaging technologist at CHUM Hospital, said, “It’s not normal that people with so much experience and who work so hard and full-time have trouble making ends meet. But during the pandemic we were the ‘guardian angels.’ In reality, our conditions are abysmal, and that’s what we’re fighting for.”

Claudia explained the real needs of workers, which the unions have failed to seriously address in successive public sector bargaining rounds. “We need to lower the (student-teacher) ratios. We’ve been asking for this for a long time. Twenty-six students is too many. With report cards approaching, I’m working close to 60 hours a week, but getting paid for 32. What’s needed are real resources. Not just adult supervisors, but qualified people, and a better-structured system. Right now, we’re patching things up and it’s not working.”

The issue of privatization is also at the heart of workers’ concerns. Asked about the CAQ government’s drive to privatize services, Claudia said, “The CAQ is a right-wing government that favors business. I’m against privatization. Over the past two years, many parents have been angered by the lack of services their children receive, and those with the means are sending them to the private sector.”

On Monday morning, as the impact of the public sector walkout reached its peak, the Common Front issued a press release to announce it is calling a second limited strike, this time for three days on November 21, 22 and 23. This second walkout, it added, could be cancelled at any time. Noting that the unions have “trimmed our demands at all the sectoral tables,” the Common Front leaders declared, “Our negotiating teams are fully available for the next two weeks.”

In other words, the union bureaucrats are eager to arrive at a deal with the government, if only Legault and LeBel reduce their concession demands so they can hoodwink the rank-and-file with false claims of “victory.”

Workers, on the other hand, are determined to fight and don’t want a cut-rate deal. Like most workers, Claudia found Monday’s two-hour strike rather “soft.” She declared herself ready to go all the way to an unlimited province-wide public sector strike. “Financially, without strike funds, it would be difficult, but despite that I’m ready to tighten my belt. Power is solidarity. We’re at a turning point. It’s time to change things.”

She felt that prolonging the conflict over time would give the government ammunition. “We know that the media and politics are interconnected. The government is going to run a smear campaign so that we lose popular support.”

As Abdelaziz, a health worker, put it, “there’s a class struggle going on, and if we don’t fight back, the rich will continue to exploit us.”



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