

420,000 Quebec public sector workers launch three-day strike

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21 November 2023

Some 420,000 Quebec public sector workers affiliated with the Common Front inter-union alliance began a three-day strike Tuesday, shutting down the province's public schools and CEGEPs (junior and technical colleges) and disrupting the normal provision of healthcare and other government services.

The workers—who have been without contracts for nearly eight months—are determined to win inflation-busting wage increases after decades of declining real wages, put an end to punishing working conditions, and secure increased funding for the province's dilapidated health and education systems.

A worker picketing outside the downtown Montreal campus of the CHUM hospital (Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal) expressed her indignation to a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter at the state of public healthcare and the fact that her younger colleagues cannot afford to buy a home. She carried a sign that pointed to the government's abuse of those it had briefly celebrated at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. It read: "D'ange gardien à moins que rien [From Guardian angel to less than nothing]."

Three other public sector unions that are negotiating separately from the Common Front have also called walkouts for later this week. The Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ), which negotiates on behalf of 80,000 nurses, nurses' aides and other healthcare professionals, has called a two-day strike for Thursday and Friday. The Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) has vowed to launch an "indefinite" strike of its 65,000 teacher members beginning Thursday.

The overlapping job actions mean that on Thursday, November 23, the vast majority of Quebec's 625,000 public sector workers will officially be on strike, making it, if only for a day, among the largest strikes in Quebec history.

Backed by Canada's ruling elite, the avowedly pro-big business, "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is determined to impose concessionary five-year contracts, including cuts to workers' real wages and pensions, and increased workloads. Indicative of the type of regressive changes the government is seeking to impose is its demand that henceforth overtime pay for nurses, no matter the length of their shift, only kick in if they have worked a full-time workweek.

With much fanfare, the government tabled a derisory "revised" offer at the beginning of November. It provided an additional wage increase of just 1.3 percent pay spread over five years, raising the government's total proposed wage increase to a meager 10.3

percent.

This was followed by a government "economic update" in which Finance Minister Eric Girard painted a stark picture of the government's financial position to justify the CAQ's arrogant assertion there is "no money" for improving public services and the wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them. In fact, the CAQ government has provided billions in subsidies and tax cuts to big business and the rich. It also fully supports the Trudeau government diverting tens of billions of dollars from meeting crying social needs to funding new fleets of warplanes and warships and partnering with Washington to wage war against Russia, back Israel's genocide against the Palestinians and prepare for war with China.

Yesterday, there was something of a celebratory mood on the hundreds of picket lines that ringed schools, CEGEPs, hospitals and CLSCs (local health clinics) across the province. Having voted weeks ago and by majorities of 90 percent and more for unlimited strike action, workers were gratified that their collective power was, even if only partially, finally being mobilized.

In what was a huge turnout of the 10,000 members of the CSQ-affiliated Syndicat de Champlain, 7,000 educators and school support staff, some with their children in tow, joined a rally in a park in the south shore Montreal suburb of Longueuil. Many carried homemade placards that incisively denounced the contract offers of Premier François Legault and Treasury President Sonia LeBel. Some mentioned the billions in subsidies the government is giving to the battery maker Northvolt.

Most of the workers who spoke with the WSWWS agreed that a three-day protest strike would not secure their demands and that at the very least a public sector general strike would be needed.

The pro-capitalist union apparatuses, meanwhile, are working to contain and suppress the growing strike movement, just as they have connived in the imposition of round after round of austerity for decades.

At Tuesday's Syndicat de Champlain rally, union officials confined their remarks to complaints about the increasingly impossible working conditions educators face due to swelling class sizes, inadequate resources and the explosion of societal problems in the classroom. Although the CSQ is part of the Common Front, not a word was said about the demands of hospital workers and the defence of the public health system, let alone broader political questions such as privatization, the criminalization of worker struggles, rampant social inequality and war.

Workers are manifestly on a collision course with the CAQ government. But they are also objectively challenging Canadian big business as a whole, for it fully supports lowering workers' real wages and starving public services, with the double aim of funding ruling-class priorities (tax cuts, corporate subsidies and increased military spending) and creating a constituency within the most privileged sections of the middle class for the privatization of healthcare and education.

Yet the unions are doing everything to keep the public sector workers' struggle confined within the straitjacket of a narrow collective bargaining dispute, in which the government sets all the rules, and the reactionary framework of Quebec establishment politics.

They fear nothing so much as the struggle of the Quebec public sector workers becoming the catalyst for a broader working class upsurge against austerity and war across Canada, one that breaks through the Quebec and Canadian nationalist political-ideological frameworks that serve to uphold the rule of the capitalist elite and the anti-working class corporatist partnership that the union bureaucracy has forged with it.

There is huge sympathy for the public sector workers in the working class, and recognition that whatever temporary hardships may be caused by the closure of schools and childcare programs and the delay of hospital procedures, they are fighting for improvements to public services that will benefit all working people.

The unions, however, have done nothing to mobilize this support. Nor have they systematically warned workers about the CAQ government's preparations to use an emergency back-to-work law to criminalize public sector strikes and impose concessionary contracts by decree as Liberal and Parti Québécois governments have repeatedly done in the past.

Instead, their focus is on appeals to CAQ Premier François Legault to "see reason" and futile calls for his government to "get serious" about the negotiations. On Monday, the Common Front leaders applauded the government's announcement that it has ceded to their request it name a mediator to assist the negotiations at the central bargaining table. This, the unions triumphantly declared, had never been done before.

The role of the FIQ and FAE union bureaucracies is no different. Although the entire working class is targeted by the CAQ's austerity agenda, they have been angling for separate deals with the government on sectional grounds: that nurses are a "special case" (FIQ) and that "only teachers can negotiate for teachers" (FAE).

Significantly, in an interview published Tuesday, FAE President Mélanie Hubert signaled that the ostensibly more militant FAE bureaucrats will bow to an anti-strike law without a fight. When asked whether she feared the Legault government would ultimately illegalize the "unlimited strike" the FAE is set to launch Thursday, Hubert said, "Putting down teachers will maybe work in the short-term," but it would undermine the public education system—as if the government is concerned about ensuring a quality public education system.

The unions in the English Canada, for their part, are actively blacking out news of the Quebec public sector workers' struggle,

doing nothing to inform their members about it, to say nothing of mobilizing the working class to support them in their confrontation with the CAQ government.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) warned in a statement distributed among the striking workers Tuesday that unless rank-and-file workers take the struggle into their own hands, the union bureaucrats will run it into the ground. The statement urged public sector workers to build rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the corporatist union apparatuses. "These committees," the statement explained, "will be able to mobilize the 600,000 public sector workers and seek the active support of all workers—provincially, nationally and across North America—in a working class counteroffensive against austerity and war."

The statement pointed to the lessons of last November's militant struggle of 55,000 Ontario education support workers: "They defied anti-strike legislation passed by Doug Ford's Ontario Conservative government, stirring up powerful sentiment for a province-wide general strike. But Canada's major unions intervened to save the Ford government and terminate the strike in exchange for a withdrawal of the draconian legislation, thus allowing Ford to impose a new collective agreement full of concessions on workers.

There are two major lessons for public sector workers in Quebec: 1) like Ford, the Legault government is much weaker than it appears, and will be quickly put on the defensive as soon as they openly enter the struggle against it; 2) such a struggle must not be left in the hands of the union bureaucracy: workers must form rank-and-file committees to broaden their struggle into a mass political movement against war, austerity and social inequality, and for a workers' government.



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