

“There is not enough staff and wages are low”: Striking Quebec healthcare worker speaks out on deteriorating public services and Gaza genocide

Our reporters

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to an orderly at the multi-hospital McGill University Health Center about his working conditions, the politics of the trade unions, and the Trudeau government’s role in Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians.

The worker, who requested anonymity to speak freely without fear of reprisals, is among the more than 600,000 public sector workers who are taking strike action this week to improve their working conditions after decades of attacks on wages, pensions and public services. We encourage all Quebec public sector workers to fill out the form at the end of this article to tell us about your working conditions and what you are fighting for.

The strikers confront the right-wing CAQ (Coalition Avenir Quebec) government which, like its Parti Québécois and Liberal predecessors, is determined to intensify the attacks against workers through below-inflation wage increases, privatization and more “flexibility,” i.e., increased workloads and inhumane working schedules.

Describing working conditions at the hospital, he said, “There is not enough staff and wages are low. They are always making excuses for not paying double overtime. Like if you miss a day because of an appointment or if you arrived late, they pay time and a half.”

Conditions have worsened steadily over recent years, especially following the implementation by the Quebec Liberal government of Philippe Couillard (2014-2018) of the largest social spending cuts since the devastating austerity program enforced by the Bouchard-Landry Parti Québécois government of the 1990s. “Yes, they [the Couillard government] cut staff,” he said. “We are overworked. In the afternoon, there is often one person for the entire floor. We have to go from room to room. Before we used to team up, but now you have to do it on your own.”

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ruling elite’s homicidal

“back-to-work” campaign in response produced a further dramatic deterioration in public services and working conditions for all workers. “They didn’t take care of the schools,” the worker explained. “A lot of students were disorganized. In the hospitals we didn’t have enough time because a lot of us were calling in sick or were burned out or stressed. They paid us a few extra dollars for a few months but then they got rid of that as soon as they said the pandemic was going away...Wearing a mask every day is very uncomfortable. But some of us still do it, especially in our interaction with patients.”

Workers confront not just the right-wing Legault government, which speaks for the banks and big business, but also the trade union bureaucracy, which is doing all it can to isolate and suffocate the growing movement of the public sector workers. The “Common Front” unions, which together represent 420,000 workers, have worked tirelessly to quarantine the public sector workers’ struggle within the borders of Quebec, even though the issues facing the workers are the same as those that have driven millions of workers into struggle across Canada, the US, and internationally over the past year.

The nominally more radical FAE teachers’ union and the FIQ, which represents 80,000 nurses and nurses’ aides, are not part of the “Common Front” but pursue the same strategy of confining the public sector workers to the “collective bargaining” framework, which is rigged in favour of the employer.

The worker explained that the mood among workers is “changing,” with a significant growth in militancy. “We voted 95 percent for a strike,” he added. “Workers see what’s going on.”

The support among workers for an all-out struggle is not only being driven by the attacks of the right-wing Legault government, but also the efforts by the union bureaucracy to

smother the class struggle with toothless protest actions and short strikes. The unions have also bowed to the government and corporate media by accepting anti-worker “essential services” rules, which prevent large numbers of workers from participating in strike action.

Asked what his colleagues thought of the short-lived 10-hour strike organized by the public sector unions on November 5, the orderly said, “They think it’s bullshit. But I don’t think we have a choice because they are already saying that we will be abandoning our patients. We will take turns to go out, a rotating strike.”

The worker stressed that a fundamental change in social conditions is required to secure jobs and public services.

“We don’t want to live a precarious life,” he remarked. “I see my colleagues working overtime, eight hours and more. People are killing themselves just to survive. And we are spending less time with our children, with our families. I have to commute to and from Montreal every day. Why should I have to worry about paying for my house? We shouldn’t be living a precarious life.

“We should be fighting for a shorter workweek, to be with our families and raise our children, but also to be able to educate ourselves and learn. They want us busy and distracted. We need money, but we need time as well.

“We should be fighting for a better economic system, a more democratic workplace. We should be fighting for better human relations starting with the workplace. Our fight should not be only about economic demands but also about the organization of society.”

In the course of the discussion, the worker drew a connection between the CAQ government’s callous hard-line stance against the public sector workers and the support extended by the Trudeau Liberal government to Israel’s genocide on the Palestinians in Gaza. “Because what is going on between the capitalist class and the working class is a war,” he said.

“The capitalist class does not love us,” he continued. “They don’t respect us. Everything that is going on in Palestine is a metaphor for the way the capitalist class sees us. They see us as vermin, as expendable, the same way they see the children of Gaza. It doesn’t matter whether you’re white, you’re black, or your gender... The people who favor imperialism don’t care about regular people. The regular people have to look out for one another, and try to form communities that prepare us for life and not just work.”

He was especially angered by the Trudeau government, which like the Biden administration in the US has backed the ultra-right Netanyahu government to the hilt during its relentless onslaught on Gaza. “I never thought that the country that I live in would engage in such an atrocity,” he stated. “Their actions are atrocious. We call ourselves free

and democratic and there is nothing free and democratic about that. I’m not proud to be living in Canada.”

He continued, “It’s anti-human. They don’t like other human beings, especially when they are poor. The government is not neutral. The government functions to push the agenda of the corporations and the workers are suffering. I wish I knew that earlier.”

He referred to the standing ovation given by the Canadian parliament to Waffen-SS veteran Yaroslav Hunka in September. Hunka was a member of the Galicia Division, whose members consisted overwhelmingly of Ukrainian nationalists, swore loyalty to Adolf Hitler, and participated in the Holocaust of European Jewry and massacres of Polish civilians.

“To salute the Nazis and now we are supporting a government that is committing genocide,” he commented. “Hitler would be proud of these actions. Martin Luther King would be very disgusted and Hitler would be very proud. Zionism is an extreme right-wing ideology. Getting rid of Hamas will not bring any peace. Look at this level of destruction.”

The worker also took issue with the massive campaign of intimidation by the ruling elite against the mass protests that have erupted in defence of the Palestinian people. The witch-hunt has included the denunciation of protesters as “antisemites,” the firing of workers, and hounding of others from their jobs. “Is it a crime to say that it’s a crime to kill thousands of children?” he asked. “It’s beyond me!”

He concluded by stressing his agreement with the *World Socialist Web Site’s* call for workers to establish rank-and-file committees in order to seize control of the contract struggle from the union bureaucracies and broaden the public sector workers’ fight beyond Quebec’s provincial borders. “I think it is a necessity. Everything has to be done,” he stated. “The main players in the unions are too docile. The environment calls for radicalism in the working class.”



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