

Workers must fight Quebec Common Front leaders' sabotage of swelling public sector strike movement

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22 November 2023

With enthusiasm and determination, hundreds of thousands of Quebec public sector workers have joined the three-day—Tuesday through Thursday—province-wide strike called by the Common Front inter-union alliance.

On Wednesday, for the second day in a row, hospital and other healthcare workers, public school teachers, school support staff, CEGEP (junior and technical college) personnel and other government workers mounted hundreds of picket lines and joined pro-strike rallies in their thousands.

Even the right-wing, pro-corporate media concedes that there is widespread support for the public sector workers and for their demands for inflation-busting wage increases and for massive reinvestment in Quebec's crumbling public health and education systems to slash nurse-patient ratios and class sizes and otherwise improve working conditions and public services.

With its popular support plunging in the opinion polls, the avowedly pro-big business, "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is increasingly isolated.

But workers must be on their guard. The pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses that comprise the Common Front are moving to isolate, sabotage and shut down their struggle.

Proponents of "social dialogue" and "social peace"—that is, the subordination of workers' livelihoods to the profits and predatory global economic and geostrategic interests of big business—they are doing everything in their power to prevent a head-on clash between the 625,000 Quebec public sector workers and the CAQ government. In the event that proves impossible, the union bureaucrats are determined to ensure that the workers are divided and left alone to fight a government that is backed to the hilt by big business and ready to deploy the state's arsenal of repressive powers, beginning with an anti-strike law, against them.

The greatest fear of the pro-capitalist union bureaucrats is that the militant public sector strike movement, including nurses and teachers represented by unions outside the Common Front, will become the catalyst for a broader working class upsurge in Quebec and across Canada against capitalist austerity, the criminalization of workers' struggles and imperialist war.

For months, the Common Front leaders have decried the government's concessionary demands and refusal to negotiate. But at a Wednesday morning press conference, they suddenly declared that the government's appointment of a Labour Department conciliator on Monday had produced "momentum" at the bargaining table. In order to give mediation "a chance," they went on to declare they would now focus on negotiations and put a pause on announcing any further job action beyond Thursday.

The union bureaucrats' claims of new-found "momentum" at the bargaining table are manifestly a lie. Or to the extent that there is any

"progress" toward reaching new agreements, it is only because the union top brass are abandoning workers' demands wholesale.

Far from signalling any softening of the government's stance, however modest, its lead negotiator, Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel, provocatively announced Tuesday that the government would not budge from its most recent derisory wage offer of a 10.3 percent total wage increase over five years, unless and until the unions cede to its demands for major concessions on the "organization of work" at the sectoral bargaining tables.

In the name of "flexibility," the government is trying to increase what are already punishing workloads for educators and healthcare workers. It is also intent on denying overtime pay to nurses without full-time posts, no matter the length of their shift, and to perpetuate a punishing regime of forced overtime for nurses and some other healthcare professionals.

That the Common Front leaders' claims of "momentum" at the bargaining table are a subterfuge is further proven by their own complaints over the government's decision to exclude the conciliator, whose powers are restricted to making suggestions, from the central bargaining table. This exclusion only serves to highlight that the government is determined to impoverish the public sector workers by imposing below-inflation wage increases and to trash the unions' calls for a three-year contract and a cost-of-living (COLA) clause.

The Common Front leaders have said they will hold another press conference next Monday, at which they will discuss next steps, including future job action. Whether they will be true to their word remains to be seen. But on Wednesday they all but announced that they intend to introduce a further "step" or "steps" before even setting a date for an indefinite strike. This despite the workers represented by the Common Front, most of whom have no recourse to a strike fund, voting by a majority of 95 percent in favor of an all-out strike almost two months ago.

In a further indication of the Common Front leaders' plans to demobilize workers, the local union from which Eric Gingras, the president of the CSQ (Quebec Union Confederation) hails, announced its support for delaying an all-out strike by way of an online poll asking its 10,000 members to authorize additional limited walkouts.

With this maneuver, the Common Front leaders are trying to string out the negotiations with a view to wearing down the rank-and-file, whose contracts expired last March 31. They are also seeking to block joint action with 65,000 teachers, members of the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Teachers Federation), who are set to launch an all-out strike Thursday.

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demobilize us.”

Educators who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* while picketing Tuesday expressed anger at the Common Front leaders’ maneuvers. Émilie, a primary school teacher from the Eastern Townships, said she was “surprised.”

“I would have preferred that we go on all-out strike along with the FAE so that we would be united as ‘one voice’ like our union says, not divided... If we delay an unlimited strike, there are strong chances that the strike movement peters out and we are forced to accept a concessionary agreement.

“My colleagues and I,” continued Émilie, “have taken the decision on our own to join the FAE demonstration” in Montreal tomorrow.

Annie, a third grade teacher, spoke along the same lines: “Another limited walkout is a joke. The time to fight is now. I’d say our union leaders are trying to demobilize us. But we workers have wind in our sails. It’s now or never. We can’t abandon the FAE [teachers], we need to support them through to the end.”

Her colleague Catherine added, “Actually we have momentum. The population is with us, if we stop now the movement will dissipate and we’ll lose.”

Frédéric told the WSWs, “This is my fourth contract struggle and we always end up with less than inflation. We’re being impoverished. In the conditions we face an all-out strike is scary. But we must act on our convictions. We are fighting for our pupils, for our working conditions, to be able to do this profession for years to come.”

The Quebec public sector workers’ struggle is at a crossroads.

If it is not going to be run into the ground by the pro-capitalist unions, workers must take matters into their own hands. At every hospital, school, CEGEP, CLSC (local health clinic) and other worksite, workers must organize rank-and-file committees, organizationally and politically independent of the trade union bureaucracy, to broaden and intensify the struggle and wage it as a working-class political struggle.

Public sector workers affiliated with the Common Front are right to say that teachers in Montreal, Quebec City and elsewhere for whom the FAE is the bargaining agent must not be left to fight and strike alone.

Already, the press is mounting a foul campaign accusing them of taking children hostage, when it is the CAQ government and the ruling class in Quebec as across Canada that has starved public services of funds for decades.

But to be clear: to support the striking teachers means opposing the FAE bureaucrats. Like the leaders of the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ), which negotiates on behalf of 80,000 nurses and other healthcare professionals, the FAE leadership has been angling for a separate deal with the right-wing CAQ government on sectional grounds. Although all workers have been targeted by the austerity measures imposed by successive Liberal, Parti Québécois (PQ) and CAQ governments, FIQ claims nurses are a “special case,” while the FAE declares “only teachers can negotiate for teachers.”

No less than the Common Front unions, the FAE and FIQ leaders are adamantly opposed to a working class political struggle and challenge to the CAQ government.

When asked this week about the threat of a back-to-work law, FAE President Mélanie Hubert signaled that the FAE bureaucrats will bow to an anti-strike law without a fight. This of course is entirely consistent with their refusal to support the protests and strikes of other public sector workers.

The Common Front, FAE and FIQ bureaucrats must not be allowed to isolate the striking primary and high school teachers, thereby paving the way for the FAE leaders to surrender before an anti-strike law or justify their imposition of a sellout contract by pointing to the threat of one.

The striking teachers for their part must go over the heads of the FAE and Common Front union apparatuses and appeal for all public sector workers to join them in a united struggle.

Above all, workers must recognize that they face a political struggle. They are opposing not only the austerity and privatization agenda of one right-wing government. They are challenging the class strategy of the capitalist elite as a whole, which is determined to intensify the exploitation of the working class to pay for the repeated bailouts of big business and the wars Canadian imperialism is waging and planning to wage in alliance with Washington against Russia, China and in the Middle East.

While Quebec public sector workers confront powerful enemies, they have even more powerful allies among workers in Canada, the US and beyond who are likewise being propelled into struggle by the ruling class assault on democratic and social rights and its aggression and wars.

An appeal for a working class counteroffensive against austerity and war will strike a powerful chord among workers across Canada.

Pivotal for the development of such a unified struggle of the working class is repudiation of the unions’ Quebec-nationalist perspective which for decades has served as the political-ideological cement of their corporatist ties to big business and the state. In the late 1990s, the unions supported the Bouchard-Landry PQ government’s brutal “zero deficit” campaign, which permanently ravaged public services, in the name of establishing winning conditions for an independence referendum. Similarly, they rallied behind the ruling class’ homicidal “back-to-work/back-to-school campaign” during the ongoing COVID pandemic in the name of “national unity.”

Workers in English Canada for their part must come to the support of the Quebec workers. That is only possible insofar as they mobilize in opposition to the union apparatuses and repudiate the alliance whereby the unions and the union-sponsored NDP are propping up the minority Trudeau Liberal government as it squeezes workers’ living standards with austerity and high-interest rates, wages war on Russia, pours tens of billions into procuring new weapon systems and backs Israel’s genocidal assault on the Palestinians.



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Workers face a political struggle