

Striking Quebec public sector workers speak out on deplorable working conditions, need to mobilize to defeat a back-to-work law

Our reporters

23 November 2023

Close to 600,000 Quebec public sector workers were on strike Thursday to secure inflation-busting wage increases, end punishing working conditions and resist the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government's attempt to extort further contract concessions.

Thursday's job action was one of the largest in Quebec, or for that matter, Canadian history.

Those off the job (or in the case of health care workers designated "essential employees" who joined pre- or post-work picket lines) included:

- *420,000 hospital workers, medical technicians, public school teachers and school support staff, CEGEP (junior and technical college) personnel and social affairs workers affiliated with the Common Front inter-union alliance;

- *80,000 nurses, nurses' aides and other health care workers for whom the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé (FIQ) is their bargaining agent;

- *and 65,000 public school teachers who are members of the FAE (the Autonomous Teachers' Federation).

For the workers affiliated with the Common Front, Thursday was the final day of a three-day province wide walkout. FIQ—which has refused to participate in Common Front protests based on the false, sectional claim that nurses are a "special case"—has limited its members to a two-day walkout ending Friday.

The FAE, which is also angling for a separate deal with the government, has ceded to rank-and-file pressure and called the first unlimited Quebec teacher strike since 1983.

Not only are the public sector workers determined to reverse decades of falling real wages and ever more onerous working conditions. They enjoy widespread support, as working people recognize that they are fighting to defend public services that have been ravaged by decades of social spending cuts and since 2020 by the ruling elite's ruinous profits-before-lives response to the COVID pandemic.

However, the union apparatuses are seeking to put an end to the strike movement as quickly as possible, so as to avert a head-on clash with the Quebec chauvinist, right-wing populist CAQ government and prevent it becoming the catalyst for a cross-Canada working-class upsurge against austerity, anti-strike laws, and imperialist war.

On Tuesday, for example, the Syndicat de Champlain—an affiliate of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), one of the four organizations that comprise the Common Front—emailed its 10,000 education sector worker-members an "emergency" survey that

proposed another limited walkout before moving to an "unlimited strike," even though workers had voted by 95 percent for one almost two months ago.

Then on Wednesday morning, Common Front leaders told a press conference that they would not set a date for another strike in order to give negotiations a "chance." They also intimated that they intend to override the will of the membership and call one or more limited strikes (in their parlance "strike sequences") before even setting a date for an all-out strike.

The aim of such foot-dragging is to demobilize workers and isolate the 65,000 teachers now on indefinite strike.

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited various picket lines on Wednesday to give rank-and-file workers a voice and get their perspective on how the struggle is unfolding.

Workers in Montreal's South Shore suburbs spoke out on a range of issues. Émilie, an elementary school teacher, said she was "surprised" at receiving the Syndicat de Champlain's email proposing pushing off the calling of an all-out strike. "I would much prefer that we mount an indefinite strike with the FAE so that we are 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."

Émilie observed that the union's failure to provide for a strike fund, despite her and other educators paying "\$100 a month in union dues," serves to weaken the workers. "All I have from my union is an agenda, bandanas and a contest to win soft clothing (referring to the union's silly "pressure tactic" of reporting to work in pajamas every Friday.)

Demonstrating workers' eagerness to overcome the divisions incited by the union apparatuses, Emilie told the WSWs, "Tomorrow my colleagues and I have made up our own minds to join the march organized by the FAE."

Annie, a Grade Three 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: "Right now we've got the momentum, the population is with us, if we stop it'll run out of steam and we'll lose."

Another teacher held up his placard when asked what he thought of the government's repeated claims that there is no money for public services—that it is necessary, to use the words of CAQ Premier

François Legault, to “respect Quebecers’ ability to pay”. “There are the billions given to battery companies,” explained the teacher. “A lot of money is invested in areas deemed ‘good’ for the economy, but when it comes time to invest in health and education, the government is stingy.”

He concluded by saying: “We should take the billions given to companies and put them into our schools and hospitals to lighten the workload and increase public services.”

Frédéric, a special educator at Le Tremplin School, which is located in a youth center, told the WWS: “I left my old job, after 21 years in youth centers, because of the poor conditions. The only ‘gain’ we had through collective agreements was going from having to work one weekend out of two to one weekend out of three. After 17 years of service, you get an extra day off a year, and after 25 years you get an extra week off.”

Frédéric explained that the school environment is also difficult. “There are young people residing at the youth center who go to school and who, despite their behavioral problems, don’t have a precise diagnosis and are qualified as ‘regular’ students. This means that a teacher can have up to 11 students in his class, with the support of a single overworked aide who has to wander from class to class.”

For him, the government’s offer of a total 10.3 percent wage increase spread over 5 years “is adding insult to injury.” Frédéric continued, “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.”

Cassandra is a preschool teacher. “Working conditions are difficult,” she said. “We need more support from professionals, personalized support for each student, and lower (teacher-pupil) ratios so we can take the time to develop each student’s learning. But the government doesn’t represent our interests at all. For it, essential services for the population are not a priority at all.”

Frédérique, who is in her last year of high school, told the WWS, “Both my parents are teachers and I know why they’re protesting. They want better conditions and smaller classes. I want to go into teaching too, but I’m afraid for the future. I’m hoping for better conditions for teachers and students. The good students go to private schools or special programs, but the regular classes are crap.”

Sandy, a nurse in training at one of the campuses of the CHUM hospital, described to the WWS how the terrible working conditions during the pandemic caused many nurses to quit and seek jobs in the private sector or the US. “We had a first wave, a second wave, a third wave ... and then they gave us what quite frankly were poisoned gifts—bonuses if you don’t get sick for seven days. Honestly, I understand those who left.

“My goal is not to stay in Quebec, because we’re treated so badly. The workload is incredible ... and with people having to do TSO (mandatory overtime), no need to wonder why there are so many people in health care with mental distress. And the worst thing is that we’re not even equipped to help these people. It’s been going on for years, but with the pandemic it just crashed.”

Sandy called the government’s contract offers “disrespectful.” She continued, “What I want to say to them is: ‘Come and work with us for two days. Come to the emergency room with us. Come to where we work’.” She also voiced her support for the teachers. “They are the ones who educate your child. How is it possible that these people who mark us for life can have such a miserable salary?”

A second CHUM nurse said, “I’ve been here 19 years and it took me 12 years to get my weekends ... I thought I’d taken the kind of job that would allow me to have an acceptable family life.” Pointing to the history of mass strikes in France, she said that she thought “it would take a real unlimited general strike where we stop everything” like in France, for public sector workers to win their just demands.

A teacher who preferred to remain anonymous raised several key issues. “The unions just want to sign an agreement, no matter what’s in it.” Then emphasizing her willingness to fight, she said she was “ready to go on indefinite strike, and if there’s an emergency strikebreaking law, I’m not going in. Everyone should say: ‘I’m not going back until we get what we want and deserve’.”

Having studied and worked in Ontario, she pointed to last November’s pivotal struggle of education support staff in that province, exposing in the process the unions’ nationalist and provincialist perspective. They present the current class confrontation in Quebec as a world of its own, a “special case,” never mentioning the huge struggles workers are waging across Canada, in the US and globally.

“We’re experiencing the same issues everywhere,” she said. She recalled that Ontario’s Doug Ford-led Conservative government had adopted an emergency strikebreaking law in an attempt to impose real wage cuts and other concessions. “I was an intern for the French school boards and we were forced to teach online during that time.”

She was surprised to learn that the country’s major unions had secretly negotiated a deal with Ford to withdraw his anti-democratic legislation in exchange for CUPE putting an immediate end to the support staff strike and suppressing a burgeoning movement for a province-wide general strike. Subsequently, CUPE imposed a contract on the 55,000 education support workers that was full of concessions.

The teacher acknowledged that the unions are sweeping the key political issues raised by the public sector workers’ struggle under the rug and doing nothing to prepare a mass working class counter-offensive to defeat any government attempt to illegalize job action. “We should already be preparing for it and finding ways to communicate with each other to discuss it and mobilize. For example, consult each other on what we’re going to do if an emergency strikebreaking law is imposed.” She said she agreed that if this was to be done workers would have to take matters into their own hands and establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the nationalist, pro-capitalist union apparatuses.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact