

“Society has plenty of resources, but the question is where are they going?”—Quebec teachers speak out as they launch indefinite strike

Our reporters
28 November 2023

The 66,500 teachers affiliated to the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) launched a courageous unlimited all-out strike last Thursday, shutting down around 40 percent of Quebec's public elementary and high schools. To mark the launch of the strike, a demonstration in north-end Montreal brought together an enthusiastic crowd of some 40,000 teachers from the Greater Montreal area, Quebec City and elsewhere.

The FAE has refused to join the “Common Front” coalition of unions, which represents some 420,000 workers in the health care, education and other public sectors. The FAE leadership justifies this stance with the reactionary sectional argument that “only teachers can negotiate for teachers.” This policy, coupled with the Common Front unions' efforts to suppress the struggle of public sector workers by confining them to toothless short strikes, has left the FAE teachers to strike alone for now.

However, there are strong sentiments among rank-and-file FAE teachers for a joint struggle with their public sector colleagues and workers in other economic sectors. The start of the FAE's unlimited strike coincided with the third and final day of strikes by the Common Front unions. Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* criticized the union bureaucracy's efforts to divide them and appealed for a unified struggle against the right-wing “Quebec First” government led by Premier Francois Legault.

To organize such a struggle, teachers in the FAE and public sector workers in the Common Front unions must seize control of the contract struggle by establishing rank-and-file committees in opposition to the union bureaucracies. These committees must fight to broaden the struggle to all sections of public and private sector workers, who confront the same issues of falling wages and deteriorating working conditions. They must also fight to break out of the provincial limits imposed on the public

sector workers by the Quebec unions, who use this strategy to divide workers in Quebec from their English- and French-speaking colleagues in the rest of Canada. Fighting unity must be forged with workers across Canada and internationally to mobilize a worker-led counter-offensive against the ruling elite's class war agenda of public spending austerity to pay for war and the enrichment of the wealthy at the expense of the working class—an agenda shared by Legault, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and governments in every major country around the world.

Claire is a Grade 4 teacher in a school north of Montreal with many immigrant students. She explained, “The school is old and overcrowded. We've been waiting four years for a 12-classroom extension, a double gymnasium and professional offices, but no contractor is interested.

“Specialists (music, English) have no space, and the special education technicians' office is next to the boiler room. Even the psycho-educator can't follow up on students because he has to help an overwhelmed colleague.

“In the public sector, a young person can wait two years to receive a psychological assessment, or never get one at all. If you have the money, you go private, because it's \$1500-2000. We end up with children who have difficulties but no diagnosis, so no necessary services.

“There are more and more ‘reception/integration’ classes with young people arriving from Ukraine or elsewhere, who have lived through wars and experienced trauma, who are emotionally and behaviorally fragile, and who don't speak French or English. School staff aren't equipped for that. There are also a lot of untrained, non-legally qualified teachers, and we don't even have the time to help them.”

Claire continued: “I can't believe that private schools are subsidized at 60 percent. Instead, let's cut their subsidies and put that money into public schools to expand and renovate the overcrowded, outdated schools. Buildings in

Montreal are not being maintained. Recently, a school had to be destroyed because water infiltration in the roof caused mold, and then children and teachers got sick. It took so long to intervene that the entire school had to be destroyed and rebuilt. Some children developed respiratory illnesses and one teacher can no longer work due to chronic respiratory problems.”

Mr. Ricky is an art teacher in Oka, a suburb north of Montreal. He told the WSWs that he is fighting to “improve the attractiveness of education for young teachers, but also for special education technicians and all workers. We’re fighting for all of society.”

His colleague said there is “a two-tier system—public vs. private—in health and education. Legault is giving too much to the private sector, when he should be looking after the people.”

“The government,” she continued, “does not represent the interests of the workers.” Asked whether the movement should be expanded, she concluded, “It would be great if private sector workers could join us. We would have liked to unite all workers.”

Charlotte, a young teacher, joined her colleague Marc-Antoine at the demonstration. “I won’t be able to continue in this profession if the situation stays like this,” she said. “The government’s offers are jokes, pure nonsense.” Marc-Antoine added: “It’s more givebacks than offers. The government is asking us not to be able to help our students.”

According to Charlotte, “Legault’s priority is not government employees, not those at the bottom of the ladder, but those at the top.” Marc-Antoine agreed: “His priorities are not public services, but rather companies and businessmen.”

Jairam and Alicia, two young teachers from Ste-Marthe-Sur-le-Lac, a North Shore Montreal suburb, addressed the broader social crisis. “Inflation is upon us,” said Jairam. “We want better conditions and better services in the classrooms. Society has plenty of resources, but the question is where are they going?” Alicia asserted, “It’s not just the teachers, it’s the janitors, the educators, the secretaries. We can’t live without them. Health care workers too. We need everyone.” Alicia explained that she knows “a lot of teachers who have two jobs. It’s not normal, after 4 years of university, so many student debts, that you need a second job to pay your bills. You start at \$45,000 a year. It only goes up \$4,000 after several steps.”

Another young teacher, Saul, explained that, as his mother is a teacher, “I’ve been hearing about the struggle for better conditions in education for 15 to 20 years.” He said he was “disappointed that the Common Front’s strike strategy seems to be quite different from that of the FAE.” “We’re launching an unlimited all-out strike,” he noted, “while

they’re proceeding with small actions. In the end, that takes away from our strike, because there’s no unified struggle. But I think it should be easier than ever to organize as the working class, through social networks and so forth.”

Joannie, a Montreal teacher, told the WSWs: “We want the well-being of our students. It’s not normal for our classrooms to fall into disrepair, for us to be short of materials.

“I’m in a public high school and we have classes with 36 students. The teachers don’t have time to spend with the children, all they do is classroom management. People don’t want to come into the profession anymore. Students, even when doing their final education internship, aren’t paid,” she added.

Simona, a teacher originally from Romania, told the WSWs, “We started in August missing 6,000 teachers in Quebec. There is a reason for that. We’re working from 9am to 9pm every day. I’m spending my evenings grading, prepping, finding amazing lessons for my students because I care. If I just work from 9 to 4, the kids are not getting enough. We’re not paid for that extra amount of hours that we are putting in.

“And the salary being proposed, c’est n’importe quoi (just nonsense), bearing no relations to the rising inflation,” she said. Simona admitted she’s thinking of leaving the profession, commenting, “I’m burnt out. Physically, I’m not doing well. And honestly, it’s not what I thought it was. You become a teacher because you care about kids, but I need to care about myself. This is not the right environment to be working in. I’m speaking to the new teachers in my school and they’re feeling it. They’re crying every day, they are literally crying. That’s not OK. You shouldn’t be in a work environment that makes you feel that way.”

Acknowledging the wider social issues raised by the public sector struggle, Simona asserted: “Yes, it’s this idea of the One Percent vs. the rest and the divide is becoming bigger and bigger. I’m concerned because our conditions are poor. We can’t afford things anymore. At one point, we need to start fighting, because we can’t keep living like this.”



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