

Government and unions seek to contain and suppress swelling Quebec public sector strike wave

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A class confrontation is rapidly coming to a head in Quebec, with major implications for workers across North America and around the globe.

Since last Thursday, 66,500 public school teachers affiliated with the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE—Autonomous Teachers' Federation) have been on strike, shutting down 40 percent of elementary and high schools in Canada's second most populous province.

On Tuesday, the leaders of the Common Front—an inter-union alliance which negotiates on behalf of 425,000 hospital workers, medical technicians, educators, public school support staff and other provincial public sector workers—announced plans for a seven-day province-wide strike, beginning Friday, December 8.

The workers who comprise the Common Front voted 95 percent in favor of an unlimited province-wide strike in balloting in late September and early October. They are determined to win inflation-busting wage increases, reduce class sizes and nurse-patient ratios and secure desperately needed investments in public and social services.

However, the pro-capitalist union apparatuses are frantically maneuvering to prevent an all-out strike and reach a settlement with the province's right-wing, Quebec-chauvinist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government headed by Premier François Legault.

During a year of contract talks, Legault's government has adamantly insisted that workers must endure real wage cuts, pension rollbacks and further increases in their already punishing workloads.

The union bureaucrats—and this is as true of the FAE as those that comprise the Common Front—are petrified that a united, all-out strike of the more than 600,000 Quebec public sector workers could provoke a broader working class upsurge in Quebec and across Canada that would threaten not just the CAQ government, but the Canadian bourgeoisie's agenda of austerity and war as a whole.

According to the Common Front leaders' "mobilization plan," a three-day strike last week was meant to be the last preparatory walkout before their authorizing an unlimited strike. Instead, they seized on the government's Monday, November 20, appointment of a conciliator as the pretext for further foot-dragging. First, they said they were delaying announcing any further job action to this week to give a "chance" for negotiations; then they unilaterally introduced another limited walkout and put off to 2024 even setting a deadline for an indefinite or all-out strike.

In contrast to the union bureaucrats' efforts to divide public sector workers and confine them to limited strikes, a powerful sentiment is building among the rank-and-file for unified action. As one worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It's not just the teachers, it's the janitors, the educators, the secretaries. We can't live without them. Healthcare workers too. We need everyone."

The union bureaucracy's hostility to the workers they claim to represent

was graphically illustrated at a Common Front rally Thursday outside the Quebec National Assembly. There, before the workers, they paraded the leaders of the Quebec Liberal Party and the Parti Québécois, the two big business parties that for decades, ending only in 2018, alternated as the province's government, imposing round after round of savage social spending cuts, often through draconian anti-strike laws.

The Quebec unions' efforts to keep the public sector workers' struggle within the confines of the pro-employer, state-regulated collective bargaining system and the politics of the Quebec establishment are complemented by the actions of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the unions in English Canada. They have joined the corporate media outside Quebec in blacking out from workers in the rest of the country any information on the strike wave and developing class confrontation in the province.

At their Tuesday morning press conference, the Common Front leaders made clear that their overriding concern is to provide themselves with political cover to short-circuit the strike movement, preferably by obtaining a few crumbs, in the way of a lessening of the government's concession demands, but failing that by claiming to have "stuck to their guns" until confronted by the threat or imposition of an emergency government back-to-work law.

Once again, the heads of the Quebec Federation of Labour, Confederation of National Trade Unions, Central des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ, Quebec Union Federation) and the ATPS health professionals' union stressed that rank-and-file workers are seething with anger after bearing the brunt of decades of defunding of healthcare, education and other public services. They welcomed what they claimed was a change in the government's "tone" at the bargaining table, and insisted they are eager to reach contract settlements. "A strike is a tool, a pressure tactic," said CSQ President Éric Gingras, adding that the Common Front unions "will never strike, if an agreement is within reach."

The CAQ government did not immediately respond to the Common Front's threat to launch 10 days hence what would be, even if time-limited, one of the largest strikes in Canadian history, or to the announcement from FIQ, which represents 80,000 nurses and nurses' aides, that it will hold four days of job action from December 11 to 14.

In recent days, Premier Legault and Quebec Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel have said that they are willing to "improve" on their proposal for a five-year contract containing total wage "increases" of 10.3 percent—in reality, given inflation, a huge wage cut. Any nominal increase, however, would have to be paid for by the workers themselves. That is, by the unions first ceding to the government's demands for massive concessions on work rules, which in the name of greater "flexibility" would increase workloads and slash overtime pay.

The government has not yet overtly brandished the threat of legislation

criminalizing public sector worker action. But the entire political establishment, including the union bureaucracy, knows full well that the CAQ government is ready to do so, if the unions prove unable to contain and suppress the strike movement. In an interview last week, the FAE's president, Mélanie Hubert, signaled it will submit to an anti-strike law. She told *Le Devoir* that while the government could prevail in the "short-term," its illegalization of the teachers' strike would do nothing to staunch the crisis in public education. As if the government, which is pressing forward with the privatization of healthcare and education, could care less.

Workers face a political struggle

Objectively, the Quebec public sector workers are in a powerful position. But this power can only be unleashed if they recognize the stakes and international dimensions of their struggle, seize control of it from the hands of the nationalist corporatist union apparatus, and develop it as a working class political struggle.

Even the corporate media has had to concede that there is enormous public sympathy and support for the public sector workers among working people in Quebec, although the unions, as part of their efforts to contain and suppress the strike movement, have done nothing to mobilize this support. Working people recognize that the public sector workers' struggle for better pay and working conditions is crucial to the defence of public services, which have been ravaged by decades of austerity and the ruling class' ruinous "profits-before-lives" response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Were an appeal for their support to be made, workers across Canada, in the US and beyond would also rally to the Quebec workers' support, for the issues raised in their struggle are those facing workers everywhere. These include: the dismantling of public and social services to finance tax cuts and bailouts for big business and the rich and to fund the wars that Canada and its imperialist allies are waging or preparing to wage against Russia and China and in the Middle East; and the growing ruling class attack on democratic rights, including the criminalization of workers' struggles.

In picket line discussions with the WSWS, healthcare and education workers have contrasted the deplorable state of public services and the government's claims of "no money" with the billions showered on business subsidies, weapons procurement and war. "We should take the tens of billions given to companies and the military and put them into our schools and hospitals to lighten the workload and increase public services," said one teacher.

In Canada, as in the US and internationally, the past year has seen a wave of strike struggles fueled by inflation and decades of austerity and contract concessions. The most important of these—last November's strike by 55,000 Ontario education support workers and last summer's West Coast longshore workers strike—point to three critical lessons that must animate the Quebec public sector workers' struggle and its development into a working class political struggle.

These lessons are: first, the enormous social power of the working class when mobilized in struggle; second, that workers' struggle to defend their social and democratic rights is bringing them into direct confrontation with the capitalist state, the repressive apparatus that serves as the ultimate enforcer of the exploitation of working people for the benefit of the ruling class; and third, that if workers are to bring to bear their class strength and prevail, they must break free of the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses, which over the past four decades have been integrated into management and the state.

In Ontario, the political situation was transformed overnight, when the support workers defied a vicious law that preemptively criminalized an impending strike. Their militant action galvanized a movement for a province-wide strike against the Doug Ford-led Tory government. But the CLC, CUPE and Canada's other major unions intervened to arbitrarily shut the strike down and ultimately imposed a concessions-filled contract on the education workers in exchange for the government agreeing to rescind its anti-strike law.

The 13-day British Columbia longshore strike crippled a major portion of North America's export trade. Nevertheless, workers failed to secure their demands for wage gains, increased job security and better work-life balance. The ILWU worked in close concert with the CLC and the union-sponsored NDP—which is propping up the pro-austerity, pro-war federal Liberal government in parliament—to isolate the strike and prevent it from becoming a working class challenge to Justin Trudeau's government. They seized on anti-worker rulings by the Canada Industrial Relation Board and government threats to criminalize the longshore workers' struggle to push through an agreement almost identical to one workers had previously rejected.

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada) is fighting for Quebec public sector workers to build rank-and-file committees in every hospital, school and workplace, as advocated by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. These committees can and must defeat the efforts of the various union bureaucracies to divide workers and short-circuit the strike movement. They will fight to mobilize the powerful, but as yet untapped support, of working people in Quebec and systematically appeal to workers across Canada, in the US and beyond for support.

If they are to prevail, the Quebec public sector workers must make their struggle the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive against austerity, war and the state assault on workers' democratic rights. Such a counteroffensive must be guided by a socialist-internationalist perspective: the fight for working class political power and the reorganization of socioeconomic life so that fulfilling social needs, not producing profit and advancing the geostrategic interests of a capitalist elite, is its guiding principle.

The 66,500 striking teachers must not be left to fight the government alone. The striking teachers, members of FIQ and the Common Front must go over the heads of the union apparatuses to mount a joint struggle and prepare to defy any strikebreaking law. The independent political mobilization of the working class requires repudiation of the nationalist politics of the trade unions in both Quebec and English Canada, and implacable opposition to Canadian imperialism's predatory foreign policy, beginning with its leading role in the US-NATO-instigated war on Russia and support for Israel's genocidal assault on the Palestinians.



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