

# How the 2015 Quebec public sector workers' struggle was derailed—vital lessons for today

Laurent Lafrance  
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Quebec's 625,000 public sector workers are rapidly approaching a direct political confrontation with Premier Francois Legault, his right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government, and Canada's capitalist elite as a whole, which fully supports the CAQ's austerity and privatization agenda.

The 425,000-strong, three-day Nov. 21-23 province-wide walkout reluctantly sanctioned by the "Common Front" alliance of unions, as well as the ongoing indefinite strike by 65,000 teachers in the Fédération Autonome des enseignants (FAE), demonstrate that public sector workers are more than ready to fight for improvements in their working conditions after decades of cutbacks.

The unions, however, are dragging the movement into the same dead-end as they did in 2015, during a similar struggle triggered by the renewal of collective agreements. While the Common Front unions have announced a seven-day-long strike beginning December 8, they have done so with the hope of announcing a sellout agreement before the strike goes ahead. Revealing perhaps more of the union bureaucrats' strategy than he intended, Éric Gingras—the president of the CSQ, one of the Common Front's four component union federations—told reporters last week after he and the other senior-most Common Front leaders had met with Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel, "It is very likely they'll be a meeting at 15 minutes before midnight. Then maybe, we'll speak about more crucial issues and in greater detail. But we aren't at that point yet."

Even if the union apparatus allows the walkout to proceed, it is adamantly opposed to broadening the struggle, to mobilizing the powerful working class support for the public sector workers and their defence of health care, education and other vital public services. And it is doing everything to disarm and demobilize workers in the face of the threat of an "emergency" back-to-work law.

If they are to prevail and avoid the imposition of further real wage cuts and concessions, workers must learn the bitter lessons of the 2015 Quebec public sector struggle. First, in 2023, as in 2015, public sector workers are engaged in a struggle that is in essence political, and not simply a "collective bargaining" dispute over new contracts. Secondly, workers are trapped inside union apparatuses that do not represent their interests, but whose function is to suppress social opposition and impose the concessions demanded by the government.

Seven years after the financial crash of 2008, the collective bargaining round in 2015 took place in the context of a new push by the ruling classes in Canada, the US and internationally to implement a savage austerity program aimed at making the working class pay for the massive financial bailout of the banks, big business and the ultra-rich.

Three years earlier, Jean Charest's Liberal government had proclaimed, as part of an attempt to break popular resistance to massive new social spending cuts and fee hikes, the scrapping of a longstanding freeze on university tuition fees. But university and CEGEP (junior and technical college) students responded with a militant six-month strike that at its height in May 2012 threatened to spark a massive upsurge of the working

class. The ruling elite only succeeded in putting an end to the student strike thanks to their union "partners," who suppressed a burgeoning movement for a general strike and diverted social opposition behind the election of the Parti Québécois (PQ), the representative of that section of the Quebec bourgeoisie which advocates the formation of an independent capitalist *Républic du Québec*.

This betrayal paved the way for a period of social reaction, marked by the PQ's anti-worker and xenophobic policies, followed by the Liberals' return to power just 18 months later. Picking up where Charest and then the PQ had left off, Premier Philippe Couillard and his Liberal government launched a draconian austerity program, implementing the biggest social spending cuts since those imposed by the PQ in the late 1990s under the Bouchard-Landry government.

Faced with an upsurge in the class struggle, the major public sector unions joined forces in a "Common Front" to give themselves a militant air. However, in reality they did everything they could to demobilize their members and isolate them from the youth and other sections of the working class that were incensed by Couillard's austerity policies.

In the spring of 2015, in conjunction with the expiry of the contracts of more than a half-million Quebec hospital workers, nurses, teachers, CEGEP personnel and other provincial public sector workers, the anarchist-led Association for Student Solidarity launched a new student strike. But their national-reformist strategy was essentially the same as that student leaders had pursued in 2012 and which had led the strike into a political dead end. It consisted in appealing to the bureaucratic union apparatuses to put pressure on the Couillard government to back off on its austerity measures. Unsurprisingly, the pro-capitalist union leaders were determined to prevent the development of a movement similar to 2012 that would threaten "social peace." Fiercely opposed to the burgeoning student strike, they gave the police and government a free hand to savagely repress the student protesters.

Throughout the 2015 public sector struggle, the unions consciously buried the broader political issues, covering up the fact that the attack on the wages and working conditions of public and para-public workers was part of a class-war assault on the entire working class, not just in Quebec, but across Canada and internationally. Despite the powerful popular support the workers enjoyed, the unions never attempted to link the public sector workers' contract struggle to the fight against Couillard's cuts, let alone sought to make it the spearhead of an offensive by all workers—both in the public and private sectors—against the ruling elite's agenda of capitalist austerity. Instead, the Common Front let the conflict drag on in a long, phony negotiation process, the parameters of which were fixed in advance by and for the government.

**The Common Front's sellout agreements in 2015**

Under pressure from the rank-and-file, union leaders were forced to seek strike mandates in September 2015, which they then translated into a series of brief, innocuous “rotating strikes.” They then cancelled a three-day strike scheduled for December 1-3, only to present workers with sell-out agreements that abandoned their demands and fully respected the government’s fiscal framework.

In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) and the *World Socialist Web Site* sought to arm workers with a socialist perspective. In an article published before the ratification votes, the SEP wrote: “Rejection of the agreements must be combined with a call to all workers in Quebec and Canada to transform the anti-austerity sentiment that runs through broad swathes of the population into a conscious counter-offensive in defense of jobs, wages and public services. Such a mobilization—involving strikes, demonstrations, occupations and other militant actions—should be based on the perspective of social equality and the struggle for a workers’ government.”

In early January 2016, after using the holiday season to weaken the opposition movement, the unions held meetings at which they suddenly raised the threat of the government imposing concessionary contracts by means of a back-to-work law. Up to that point, they had kept this issue completely under wraps, as it exposed the bankruptcy of their “negotiating” strategy with the government. Their decision to raise the threat of anti-strike legislation certainly had nothing to do with any intention to mobilize support among the Quebec and Canadian working class to defy it. Rather, it was meant to intimidate the rank-and-file workers into accepting rotten contracts.

Backed into a corner, workers reluctantly accepted contracts with wage increases of barely 7 percent over 5 years, whereas the official union demand had been for pay hikes of 13.5 percent over three years—a far cry from what was needed to catch-up after decades of Liberal and PQ government “wage restraint” programs. In addition, the government succeeded in raising the retirement age from 60 to 61, increasing the penalty for early retirement from 4 to 6 percent of pensions, and imposing a series of rollbacks in working conditions. For their part, leaders of the teachers’ and nurses’ unions that had remained outside the Common Front (the FAE and the FIQ) with the sole aim of dividing workers, rammed through similar concession contracts.

Demonstrating its role as the “left flank” of the political establishment, Québec Solidaire was quick to endorse the sellout agreements. Its spokesperson at the time, Françoise David, falsely claimed that workers had succeeded in “wresting precious concessions” from the government.

The anti-worker policies of the PQ and PLQ, imposed over the previous four decades with the active collaboration of the union apparatus, created the conditions for the coming to power of François Legault and his CAQ in 2018. Since its formation in 2011, the CAQ has always been a vehicle for pushing the axis of official politics even further to the right. That didn’t stop the unions from collaborating with the millionaire ex-CEO and former PQ government minister Legault as soon as he came to power.

### **How the unions endorsed Legault’s homicidal pandemic policies**

This relationship took on a criminal character during the COVID-19 pandemic, whose onset coincided with that of the 2020 public sector contract negotiations. In the name of “national unity,” the unions endorsed the Legault government and Canadian ruling class’ catastrophic pandemic response, including forcing workers back to work prematurely and reopening schools while they remained hotbeds of contamination.

The unions meekly submitted to all the CAQ’s machinations. First, they agreed to put negotiations on ice, then they participated in a “negotiation

blitz” for three-year “interim” agreements that set aside most issues relating to working conditions. This, even though the pandemic had made what were already punishing working conditions as intolerable, as the government used “emergency” decrees to impose forced overtime and otherwise run roughshod over work-rules. Each union negotiated separately, only to sign 3-year contracts with wage increases below inflation and no improvement in working conditions. The “innovative actions” proposed by union leaders turned out to be stunts, such as “90-minute walkouts,” aimed at venting workers’ anger and avoiding a confrontation with Legault and his avowedly pro-big business, Quebec chauvinist CAQ government.

In 2023, the consequences of these union betrayals are being felt more than ever in the workplace. Legault’s continued cuts and privatizations and the impact of the pandemic and the ruling class policy of “learning to live with the virus” have intensified chronic shortages of resources and staff, bringing public services to the brink of collapse.

The objective crisis of the capitalist system, marked by a devastating pandemic, rising levels of social inequality, the environmental crisis and a rapidly developing world war, has radicalized large sections of the working population in recent years. With the explosion of workers’ struggles on an international scale, conditions are even more favorable for the development of a mass movement against austerity and war. But the unions are just as determined as they were in 2015 and 2020 to prevent a rebellion against the capitalist status quo and keep Quebec’s public sector workers isolated from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada.

Rank-and-file workers must wrest control of their struggle from the hands of the union bureaucrats, otherwise it will be torpedoed as it was in 2015. The pro-capitalist unions are not workers’ organizations, but agencies of big business and government for the suppression of the class struggle and the imposition of concessions on workers. This treacherous role flows from their nationalist outlook and corporatist integration into the profit system, as embodied in their control of wealthy investment funds like the Solidarity Fund (which is run by the Quebec Federation of Labor). This finds its political expression in the unions’ long-standing support for the big business Parti Québécois.

Only by building new forms of organization, rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus, will the 600,000 public sector workers be able to mobilize the full social power of the working class—in Quebec as in the rest of Canada and North America—and make their struggle the spearhead of a powerful political and social movement in opposition to capitalist austerity and war.



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