

The struggle of Quebec's 600,000 public sector workers at the crossroads

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7 December 2023

Are you a Quebec public sector worker? We want to hear about your working conditions, what you think of the union bureaucracies' strategy in the contract struggle, and your views on the construction of rank-and-file committees to place power in the hands of the workers themselves. Fill out the form at the end of this article to contact us.

The confrontation between Quebec's more than 600,000 public sector workers and François Legault's avowedly pro-big business, "Quebec First" CAQ government has led to one of the biggest strike waves in the province's history. The militant actions of recent weeks show that workers are determined to put an end to deplorable working conditions and to defend public services. They have also won widespread popular support.

However, if public sector workers are to prevail, they must wrest control of their struggle from the pro-capitalist union apparatuses and develop it as a unified political movement of the entire working class against the Quebec and Canadian ruling elite's agenda of austerity and war. Otherwise, a militant struggle that has the potential to unleash a powerful working class counteroffensive in defence of public services and to secure quality wages and working conditions for all will be torpedoed by the union bureaucracy, just as it was in 2015 and 2020.

The bureaucrats who lead the Common Front inter-union alliance, the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Quebec Teachers Federation) and FIQ, the bargaining agent for 80,000 nurses and nurses' aides, are currently engaged in closed-door talks with the government to put an end to strike action and reach concession-laden agreements. To counter the unions' efforts to divide workers along sectional lines and to limit their struggle to a collective bargaining dispute in which the government's austerity agenda is not challenged, public sector workers must break free of the political and organizational control of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. This will enable them to fight to mobilize all public sector workers in a unified strike and to rally support from all workers, private and public sector alike, in Quebec and beyond.

The current conflict in Quebec is part of a resurgence of class struggle in Canada and internationally. All over the world, the ruling classes are seeking to impose the full weight of the capitalist crisis on the backs of working people by slashing wages, pensions and working conditions. This assault goes hand in hand with the destruction and privatization of public services, which is used to finance bailouts and generous tax cuts for big business and the

financial elite.

The ruling elite's drive to increase profits and workers' exploitation at home is accompanied by a rise in imperialist aggression abroad. The federal Liberal government is funneling tens of billions of dollars of public money into the US-NATO war against Russia and preparations for war against China. Canadian imperialism is also supporting Israel, its close Middle East ally, in waging a genocidal war against the oppressed Palestinian population of Gaza.

Legault and his Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), as loyal servants of the employers and the rich, are determined to impose major rollbacks on the province's 625,000 public and para-public employees. On Wednesday, Premier Legault and Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel presented a provocative new offer of a 12.7 percent wage increase spread over five years. This is a miniscule 0.48 percent per year more than their previous offer of 10.3 percent. Given the surge in inflation, it would mean a further huge real-terms wage cut for public sector workers, who have already suffered years of declining living standards due to repeated wage "restraint" programs.

What's more, the government has insisted time and again that any "enriched offer" is conditional on workers accepting an increased workload and greater managerial powers over scheduling and overtime in the name of "flexibility." The government's aim is to make permanent the punishing conditions it imposed during the pandemic, when it used the state of emergency to systematically violate workers' rights.

The government is also seeking to privatize entire sections of the healthcare network to make medicine an even more abundant source of profit for big business. Bill 15, which the government is adamant must be adopted by the National Assembly next week, will place management of the province's entire public health system under the control of a government agency, Santé Québec, that will be run like a business by "top guns" recruited from the corporate world.

Legault is seeking to ram through further concessions by relying on his collaboration with the unions, those ardent promoters of "social dialogue." But should the bureaucracy prove unable to quickly bring the strike movement to heel, he is prepared to use the full repressive arsenal of the capitalist state to impose his anti-worker diktats, including by using "emergency" legislation to criminalize all job action.

Last Friday, in response to a journalist who asked whether the

government would impose concessionary contracts by decree, the premier declared: “We’re not there yet.” He went on to set the stage for back-to-work legislation by publicly attacking the 65,000 striking teachers affiliated with the FAE, exhorting them “to stop the strike for the sake of our children.”

The public sector workers’ struggle must not be restricted to a bogus “collective bargaining” process, whose rules are set by the state. It is first and foremost a political struggle, directed not against a single government, but against the austerity and war agenda of the entire Quebec and Canadian capitalist elite.

The union bureaucrats, however, are doing their utmost to avert a head-on clash with Legault, for fear it could spark a broader working class upsurge. Above all, they want to prevent the development of a working class political challenge to the CAQ government and the ruling class as a whole. That’s why they are negotiating behind the scenes with Legault and LeBel, and within the reactionary financial parameters they have set.

Meanwhile, workers are kept in the dark and denied any means of developing genuine rank-and-file interaction across professional and union jurisdictional lines. The unions are determined to contain and constrain the struggle within the framework of Quebec provincial “negotiations,” hiding the fact that Quebec workers are facing the same attacks as their class brothers and sisters across Canada and North America.

The unions organized the first round of time-limited strikes only in November, more than eight months after public sector workers’ contracts had expired. The leaders of the Common Front responded to workers’ massive participation in the November 21-23 strike by pushing back the plans, authorized by a 95 percent rank-and-file vote, for an all-out strike, announcing instead a new “sequence” of strikes from December 8 to 14. A major motivation for this was to prevent the 425,000 Common Front workers from joining their FAE colleagues, who have been alone on indefinite strike since November 23.

At the same time, the Common Front gave itself the right to cancel this sequence at any time under the pretext that a “satisfactory” agreement is in sight. This is what Éric Gingras, president of the Common Front-aligned Centrale des syndicats du Québec, meant when he declared last week, “There will most likely be a meeting at a quarter to midnight.”

As for Mélanie Hubert, president of the FAE, which is negotiating separately on the reactionary basis that teachers are a “special case,” she indicated that her union could instruct the 65,000 striking elementary and high school teachers to end their now two-week-long strike if it felt it had made sufficient “progress” at the bargaining table, without any signed agreement, let alone a rank-and-file vote.

These maneuvers are part and parcel of the repeated betrayals of working class struggles by the corporatist union apparatuses that do everything in their power to keep workers in Quebec divided from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, and confined within the reactionary framework of Quebec establishment politics. Their hostility to a unified class struggle against the capitalist elite of Quebec and Canada and subordination of workers’ interests to capitalist profit underlies their relentless promotion of Quebec nationalism and decades-long staunch

support for the big business Parti Québécois (PQ).

The pro-Quebec independence PQ—along with the federalists of the Quebec Liberal Party (QLP)—are the provincial parties principally responsible for the past four decades of austerity, including the dismantling of public services and the adoption of numerous anti-worker laws and initiatives. This includes savage anti-strike legislation such as the PQ’s Bill 37, which robs most nurses and healthcare workers of the legal right to strike.

This did not prevent the Common Front leaders from parading PQ leader Paul St. Pierre-Plamondon and prominent QLP legislator Marwah Rizqy before a crowd of workers demonstrating in front of the National Assembly on November 23.

Public sector workers are at the crossroads. To avoid the sabotage and suppression of their struggle, rank-and-file workers must go over the heads of the union leaders and take it upon themselves to organize a unified strike of all public sector workers.

To counter the threat of a CAQ back-to-work law and other forms of state repression, workers must fight to mobilize the entire working class (public and private sector alike), and prepare a political general strike. This must be combined with a systematic appeal to workers in the rest of Canada who face the same big business-state assault—inflation-driven wage cuts, the dismantling of public services, and the criminalization of their struggles—for a joint struggle.

None of this will be possible without an organizational and political break with the pro-capitalist union apparatus, through the building of rank-and-file committees. Led by the most militant workers and under the democratic control of rank-and-file workers themselves, these committees must spearhead the fight to unite and expand the strike movement and prepare defiance of any government back-to-work order.

The fight against capitalist austerity and anti-strike laws is inseparable from opposition to the capitalist elite’s program of aggression and war. It must be animated and developed through the fight for an independent political movement of the working class aimed at establishing a workers’ government committed to the socialist reorganization of the economy, so that the wealth of society produced by the working class can serve social needs, not further bloat the fortunes of a tiny minority.

Those interested in building rank-and-file committees in every hospital, school and other workplace and fighting for this perspective should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* forthwith.



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