

# Quebec public sector strike wave swells, as 420,000-member Common Front launches seven-day strike

Keith Jones

8 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.*

On Friday, 420,000 Quebec public sector workers launched what the Common Front inter-union alliance has said will be a seven-day, province-wide strike ending Thursday, Dec. 14.

The workers—who include hospital orderlies, kitchen and maintenance staff; health care professionals; public school teachers and support staff; and CEGEP (junior and technical college) and CLSC (public health clinic) personnel—join more than 65,000 other elementary and high school teachers who have been on unlimited strike since Nov. 23.

Also poised to join the strike movement for four days, starting Monday, Dec. 11, are 80,000 nurses and nurses' aides, for whom the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé (FIQ) is the bargaining agent.

As would be expected, the corporate media and the avowedly pro-big business, “Quebec First” CAQ government are becoming increasingly shrill in their denunciations of the strikers. They are accusing them of putting children's education at “risk” and forcing the cancellation of non-urgent medical procedures.

However, among working people there is massive support for the public sector workers. Whatever the immediate inconveniences, it is widely recognized that they are fighting to defend education, healthcare and other vital public and social services. All of these have been ravaged by decades of capitalist austerity and the ruling class's ruinous profits-before-lives response to the pandemic.

Although the unions have grudgingly authorised “escalating” job action since November, some eight months after the contracts covering the 625,000 Quebec public sector workers expired, they are doing nothing to mobilize this support—let alone to initiate a mass working class challenge to the Quebec and Canadian capitalist elite's agenda of austerity and war. Nor are they making any appeal for solidarity and support from workers, whether public or private sector, outside Quebec.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Labour Congress and the unions outside Quebec are conspicuously silent on the class confrontation in Quebec.

This under conditions where the CAQ government, at big business' behest, is seeking to impose major rollbacks on public sector workers that will impact wage levels and public services across the country and is preparing the political terrain for “emergency” legislation that would criminalize worker job action. When asked last week whether the government would resort to an anti-strike law, Quebec Premier and CAQ leader François Legault said, “We're not there yet,” then continued what was a tirade against striking teachers.

The leaders of the Common Front unions—the Quebec Federation of

Labour (QFL), Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), Centrale de syndicats du Québec (CSQ), and the health professionals' union, the APTS—as well as the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Teachers Federation) and the FIQ have spent recent days meeting separately with Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel and other senior government officials in the hopes of finding a pretext to scuttle the strike movement.

Senior Common Front leaders like CSQ President Eric Gingras and FAE head Mélanie Hubert have said they stand ready to call off job action at any time—without securing tentative agreements or any rank-and-file vote—if there is “real progress” at the bargaining table.

## A fresh government provocation

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the government made new, “enriched” offers to the unions. These offers only served to further underscore that it is determined to impose major real-terms wage cuts on workers who have already experienced a vast erosion of their living standards due to decades of “wage restraint.”

Under the “enriched offer” the vast majority of workers would receive a total wage “increase” of 12.7 percent spread over five years. The government's initial offer, made last December, was 9 percent. In late October it bumped this to 10.3 percent. Thus after 12 months of the unions telling workers that they have to pressure the government to “wake up”—twelve months during which living costs have continued to soar—Legault and LeBel have increased their miserly wage offer by the equivalent of just 0.74 percent a year.

Were this not bad enough, the government is adamant that its wage-cutting pay-offer is conditional on workers accepting sweeping changes to work-rules, scheduling, and employer rights. These changes would increase their already punishing workloads and place them at the beck and call of management.

In the name of increased “flexibility” and “efficiency,” the government is seeking, among many other changes, the power to redeploy nurses and other health care workers “as needed” from one facility to another; to force nurses to work every second weekend; and to pay out overtime pay to health professionals only if they have or will work a full workweek. Seniority rights in many sectors would be significantly weakened, if not gutted, while precariously employed teachers and teachers' aides would be obliged to take the first contract offered them or risk losing their hiring-priority rights.

Given all this the union bureaucrats felt they had no choice but to reject

the government's offers.

"It's pretty much an insult," declared FIQ President Julie Bouchard. "What the government means by flexibility," said CNTU First Vice-President François Enault, "is to tear out pages of a collective agreement and insert management rights."

The comments of QFL President Magali Picard were particularly significant. She told a Common Front press conference Thursday morning, "It would be a huge drama ... if we accepted an offer like that." The union bureaucrats, in other words, fear a rank-and-file rebellion, and are frantically maneuvering to maintain their politically deadening grip over the strike movement.

Even as they rejected the CAQ government's offers, union officials made a series of public retreats. No doubt in their closed-door talks with government officials they have or are in the process of going much further in trashing workers' demands wholesale.

On Thursday, CSQ President Gingras said that the Common Front unions, which are formally committed to fighting for three-year agreements with a total wage increase of 21 percent and a cost-of-living clause, would be willing to negotiate longer contracts and for workers' "wage catch-up" to be spread out over a still longer term.

By Friday, the various unions were rushing to proclaim that they have not shut door on the government's demands for increased flexibility. The Common Front, said the CNTU's Enault, recognizes, "the status quo is not possible." The problem, he claimed, is the government has ignored the unions' proposals to "find solutions to the flexibility problem."

Predictably, these retreats are emboldening a government that has seen its popularity plummet over the past year. The premier, who served in the Bouchard-Landry Parti Québécois government that imposed massive social spending cuts in the 1990s, complained to reporters that workers have too many rights. "It's not normal our network (of public services) should be administered by unions rather than managers." To make changes, continued Legault, "will take courage because the unions for decades have never given up those powers."

On Friday, with nearly half-a-million public sector workers formally on strike (although many of those in the health care sector were limited by anti-worker "essential services" to picketing before or after work), Legault said his government would be prepared to again nudge up its derisory wage offer. But only if this was paid for by the workers themselves many times over through the gutting of workers' rights. Things "risk to get heated," he declared.

The CAQ's attack on public sector workers' working conditions goes hand in hand with its privatization agenda. On Friday, it announced it was invoking closure to force legislation (Bill15) through the Quebec National Assembly that will create a new public agency, Santé Quebec, to manage the province's entire health network along corporate cost principles and by "top guns" recruited from big business.

### **Workers must take the struggle into their own hands**

The Quebec public sector workers are in a powerful position. They enjoy strong support within the working class of Canada's second most populous and lone majority French-speaking province. Even more decisively, their struggle is part of a growing working class upsurge across North America and around the world fueled by inflation, decades of contract concessions and austerity, the pandemic, and imperialist war.

But if they are to prevail, they and their supporters across Canada and internationally must recognize what is at stake in their struggle and take the requisite steps to defeat what is a conspiracy between the CAQ government and the corporatist trade unions to contain and suppress the

strike movement.

The Quebec public sector workers face a political struggle, and not just because their employer is the provincial government, and they are threatened with a back-to-work law. In opposing real wage cuts and the dismantling and privatization of public services, they are challenging the class war agenda of the entire ruling class in Quebec and Canada. It is determined to increase worker exploitation and gut what remains of the social rights won by the working class in the mass struggles of the last century to pay for the repeated bailouts of big business and the wars Canadian imperialism is fighting and preparing to fight alongside Washington against Russia and China and in the Middle East.

The pro-capitalist union apparatuses—and this goes as much for the unions in Quebec as in the rest of Canada—are determined that the Quebec public sector workers struggle remain isolated. They want it confined within the straitjacket of a provincial collective bargaining struggle, whose rules can be changed to criminalize workers' job action at will, and within the reactionary political framework of the politics of the Quebec establishment.

The union bureaucrats in Quebec and across Canada share a common fear that the militant struggle of the Quebec public sector workers will serve as a catalyst for a broader working class upsurge that will threaten the global position of Canadian capitalism and the pro-austerity, pro-war trade-union and NDP backed Trudeau Liberal government.

Quebec public sector workers must unite in an all-out strike and make it the spearhead of a cross-Canada industrial and political working class counter-offensive in defence of public services and workers living standards, against the state assault on the right to strike and the diversions of massive social resources to imperialist war, and for workers' power.

None of this can be done through or by pressuring the corporatist trade union apparatuses. Workers must take the struggle into their own hands, through the building of rank-and-file committees in every hospital, school, and other workplace. Led by the most militant workers, these committees will fight to unify all the groups of public sector workers over the heads of the union leaders, mobilize active support within the working class in Quebec, across Canada and beyond, and prepare to answer and defeat any anti-strike law with a political general strike.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**