

Meeting of striking Quebec public sector workers calls for building of rank-and-file committees to expand struggle, oppose union sabotage

Our reporters
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Are you a Quebec public sector worker determined to prevail in your struggle for inflation-busting pay increases, an end to grueling workloads, and increased resources for health and education? To join the struggle to build rank-and-file committees and stop the union bureaucracies' efforts to betray your struggle email cbsectpub@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this article.

Over half-a-million public sector workers in Quebec have been on strike since Monday after nurses and nurses' assistants represented by the Federation interprofessionnelle de la sante Quebec (FIQ) began a four-day strike. They joined the 425,000 education, healthcare, and other government employees in the Common Front alliance of unions who have been on strike since Friday, and 65,000 teachers in the Federation autonome de l'enseignement (FAE), who have been on an indefinite strike since November 23.

While the trade union bureaucracy is determined to end the strike as soon as possible and agree to a sellout deal with the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government, a meeting of striking public sector workers held Sunday underscored that the sentiment among the rank-and-file is for a broadening of the fight to win workers' demands.

The meeting was called by the Facebook group "Public sector workers on strike" and the *World Socialist Web Site*. It was attended by striking workers from the education and healthcare sectors and featured a lively discussion on critical political issues confronting the strikers. Following extensive discussion lasting over an hour, the meeting voted overwhelmingly in favour of the following resolution:

This meeting of Quebec public sector workers urges our fellow workers to join us in taking the struggle to win inflation-busting wage increases, end punishing working conditions, and defend healthcare, education and other vital public services into our own hands.

If we do not do so, the pro-capitalist union apparatuses will sabotage our struggle, whether by negotiating

concessionary contracts or surrendering to an emergency back-to-work law.

The CAQ government has the support of the capitalist elite in Quebec and across Canada in dismantling public services and attacking our working conditions. Premier Legault will stop at nothing to impose this anti-worker agenda, including by criminalizing our struggle through an emergency back-to-work law.

Therefore, this meeting resolves to found within the coming days a Public Sector Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee. It will spearhead the fight to build rank-and-file committees in every hospital, school and other workplace, politically and organizationally independent of the corporatist union bureaucrats. These committees will enable us to: 1) rally opposition to the unions' effort to shut down our struggle and ram through concessions-filled contracts; 2) organize a united all-out public sector strike over the heads of the union leaders; 3) rally support in Quebec and across Canada by making our strike the spearhead of a working class counter-offensive to defend worker rights and public services and oppose anti-strike laws and the massive diversion of social resources for war; and 4) prepare defiance of any anti-strike law.

The main report to the meeting was delivered by Laurent Lafrance, a striking education assistant and regular writer for the WSWs. Lafrance emphasized in his report that public sector workers face a political struggle against the CAQ government, which is carrying out the class war agenda of the entire Canadian ruling elite by enforcing austerity and privatization. He also placed the Quebec public sector strike in its international context, noting the resurgence of working class struggles around the world. Finally, he stressed that the strike is at a crossroads, with its success depending on the rank-and-file seizing control of the contract fight from the privileged pro-capitalist union bureaucracies, which wish to preserve their close corporatist ties with the CAQ government, big business, and the state by imposing

a sellout on the workers.

Underlining why workers must build rank-and-file committees politically and organizationally independent of the unions, a teacher elaborated in the subsequent discussion on the anti-democratic character of the union apparatuses. “I’ve been a union delegate at my school for several years,” she said. “I’ve become disillusioned. The more active I am in the union, the more I realize that everything is decided in advance.

“The members create the union. It’s the members who should have a say.

“I’m one of the people who voted for a GGI (indefinite all-out strike) to happen... It’s by uniting, right here, right now, that we’re going to be able to change something. We can’t wait.”

A government lawyer, François, remarked on the role of the union bureaucracies in demobilizing the strikers and separating them from their colleagues across Canada and internationally. Recalling a discussion with union representatives at his workplace, he explained, “I told them that the strike, which at that time had not yet started, was going to have massive support among the population, because they could see that public services are in an advanced state of disrepair, and that we workers are fighting not just over a question of wages, but to defend public services, accessibility to quality education, quality care, and so on.

“Their response was, ‘No, Legault has a very high approval rating among the population and the population right now is really against us.’”

François said he responded by saying, “We should be looking to unite public sector workers with other workers, because there is a strike movement internationally. Then I mentioned to him the conflict in the auto sector in the US that there was at the time, and his response was, ‘Those others, they voted for Trump. Forget it.’ As Laurent said at the beginning, the union bureaucracy in no way represents workers. They are organizations that depend entirely on the legal framework of the capitalist state and derive their privileges from the status quo and their collaboration with the government.

“When I talk to people on the picket lines, most tell me, ‘We voted for an unlimited general strike, it should be an unlimited general strike right now.’ A lot of the workers I talk to say that rank-and-file committees would be a good idea, a way of taking back control of this struggle, which is being led by the workers... There’s a huge determination among the workers to lead this struggle.

“The committees will create a democratic space, allow discussion of the current state of affairs and broaden the debate, not only on collective bargaining, but also on all the lessons of the past.”

François also addressed the issues of low pay and the rising cost of living. “I know people in the office who have two jobs, who are struggling to get by,” he said. “Living standards are already under serious attack from previous cuts, but also from inflation.”

A medical laboratory technologist concurred with the description of the union bureaucracies as hostile to the workers’ interests. “We don’t have much hope with our union [APTS],” she said. “They’re not present. When we talk about dues, we call it the food budget, because their only action is to sometimes hold information

days where they give us box lunches.

“What worries me a lot is that there’s going to be a back-to-work law, and the APTS’s first reflex is going to be to fold. If we don’t go all the way, the government will know that it can do absolutely anything it wants.”

She went on to explain how privatization in the healthcare sector is undermining public services. “What’s at stake is even more than salaries and working conditions, because in the laboratory we see a lot of privatization,” she stated. “The traceability of samples: they mustn’t get lost when they’re transferred from one place to another. This now belongs to the Atek platform. The storage of procedures in the computer system no longer belongs to the hospital, it belongs to Omni-Assistant, which is also private.

“They closed microbiology in our hospital, and everything is sent to Sacré-Coeur Hospital. This means a contract worth \$4,000 a month for six shipments a day. The company that makes these deliveries, Globex, didn’t exist before this contract. It was created from scratch just to get the exclusive contract with the government. Their drivers have very poor working conditions. They’re poorly paid. They don’t get sick days. They’re considered self-employed, so they have no protection.

“What we’re seeing is the system being torn apart to insert private players at every stage. A lot of resources are drained to partners, the government’s little friends.”

Another teacher added, “To give the services that we (the population) deserve, we need better conditions. We’re not slaves. We’re at our wits’ end.

“In the media, it’s always about wages, and yes, we want our wages to go up too, but it’s much more than that that we’re fighting for.

“I’m a shop steward starting this year. I went to a consultation where several members were opposed to a school calendar for next year, but the leaders said, ‘By a majority, that’s what we’ve decided.’ It wasn’t a consultation. We were presented with a fait accompli ... I’m a shop steward, I wanted to do this to help my school, but it’s just frustration.

“We need a massive movement; we need the population to be with us. Not just the Common Front.”

Email cbsectpub@gmail.com to support the building of rank-and-file committees and stop the union bureaucracy’s efforts to betray your struggle.



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