

“This is a capitalist government that just wants to dismantle the system, then privatize it”: Over half- a-million Quebec public sector workers complete sixth day on strike

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.

A half-million Quebec hospital workers, nurses and other health care professionals, school teachers and support staff, and CEGEP (junior and technical college) personnel were on strike Wednesday for the sixth day running, continuing what is one of the largest strike waves in the history of Quebec and, indeed, all of Canada.

The workers—having been the target of decades of austerity, and borne the brunt of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—are determined to win inflation-busting wage increases, put an end to punishing working conditions, and secure major reinvestments in public services.

Quebec's right-wing, pro-big business CAQ (Coalition Avenir Quebec) government has rejected all of this out of hand. Under conditions where workers' living standards have been ravaged by years of government wage restraint programs and the post-2020 spike in inflation, the CAQ government is offering the vast majority of workers pay increases of just 12.7 percent spread over five years. This amounts to a huge real-terms wage cut.

Even this offer is conditional on Quebec public sector workers accepting sweeping concessions on work rules, seniority, overtime pay and management rights in order to provide, what Quebec Premier François Legault has euphemistically labelled, increased “flexibility.”

On Wednesday, Health Minister Christian Dubé emphasized that such concessions are critical to the implementation of the government's regressive reorganization of the health care system. Under Bill 15, which the CAQ translated into law by invoking closure late last week, a new government agency, Santé Québec, is being established that will be run, according to Dubé, by “top guns” from big business. It will be tasked with running the province's entire health network on the basis of corporate principles and promoting privatization.

Said Dubé, “The collective agreement, I have always said, is an element that goes in parallel with Bill 15. The sooner we settle the strike, the sooner we will have the conditions for flexibility.”

The pace of bargaining has picked up in recent days, with both the government and the unions saying that they are eager to reach a settlement before the end of the year.

The leaders of the Common Front, which represents 425,000 workers currently waging a seven-day (Dec. 8-14) strike, are in the midst of three days of “central table” negotiations with Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel. They continue to make threats of a possible “unlimited strike” in January, but this is only to provide political cover for their attempts to reach a sellout agreement and shut down the strike movement.

The Common Front leaders have announced a whole series of concessions to the government since the seven-day strike began. These include: saying they are willing to enter into a five-year agreement; scaling back their wage demand from 21 percent over three years to 25 percent (or less) over five; and announcing that they are prepared to negotiate over the government's “flexibility” demands.

CNTU First Vice-President François Enault told *La presse* Monday, “There are things that we've scaled back recently, elements that have been removed from one side as from the other.”

On Wednesday, Legault claimed that an agreement with the Fédération autonome des l'enseignement (FAE-Autonomous Teachers Federation) and potentially the teachers unit of the Common Front-affiliated CSQ was imminent. But this was angrily denied by the FAE, the bargaining representative for 65,000 teachers on an unlimited strike since Nov. 23.

“Contrary to what François Legault says, the news at the table is not encouraging,” the union stated on Instagram. “The government is blowing hot and cold. It promises us an opening and then closes the door immediately. The government's strategy is clearly to divide the movement and exhaust the teachers.

“Don't ride François Legault's roller coaster,” the FAE statement continued. “Stand tall, stand tall, stand proud and stand together.”

The leaders of FIQ, which represents 80,000 nurses and nurses' aides, also reacted angrily to Legault's comments after he attacked them for not showing them the same "flexibility" as the teacher union leaders. For her part, LeBel said FIQ's stance was "unrealistic."

On Wednesday FIQ members were in the third day of a 4-day strike, although most nurses and nurses' aides, like many other health care workers, are either prohibited from striking or can only strike for a portion of the day under the province's anti-worker "essential services" legislation.

The union bureaucracies are determined to prevent an indefinite strike by all public sector workers because this could act as a catalyst for a broader movement of the working class in Quebec and across Canada against capitalist austerity. Their aim is to keep the striking public sector workers subordinated to the political establishment, as shown by their continued parading of Parti Québécois and Quebec Liberal Party members of the National Assembly in front of strikers' picket lines.

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on picket lines and at demonstrations over recent days underscored that they expect little from the negotiations and the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. Mégane, a social worker at CHUM Hospital, Montreal's largest, told the WSWS, "Of course we are paid less than we should be paid. At work, it is always more and more heavy cases and we lack resources. Cases are increasingly complex, in geriatrics, the pandemic has had a big impact. Diagnoses have been delayed."

A colleague added, "With the pandemic, many people retired, so there are fewer people on the ground, bigger caseloads."

Referring to the critical role played by public services, they continued, "Education, social services, health—that's what society is all about. Food banks are full. There is a lot of homelessness and these people receive nothing."

Louise, who works in administration, commented, "Our tasks are always increasing. People are getting sicker and sicker, the cases are complex. Wages don't keep up with inflation. We are behind last year because of high inflation and what they want to offer us does not keep up."

"Inflation is a global problem. Before, we didn't go to food banks, it was associated with being on social assistance. But now even if we're working, we can't make ends meet."

Asked about his experiences, an immigrant worker, Jean-Francois, responded simply, "Rents are expensive, groceries are expensive."

Gabriel, a biomedical technician, commented on the threat Legault will use a back-to-work law to criminalize the strike and impose concession contracts. "The spectre is still there...Unions will say it's unconstitutional, but that hasn't stopped governments doing it anyway."

David, an Elementary Music Teacher who described himself as a "socialist," said, "This is a capitalist government that just wants to dismantle the (education) system so that they then can privatize it. That's also what they're doing in health care—they cut, they cut, they cut, and then they say, 'Look, the system isn't working.' They are no different from the Republicans in the US."

"They don't want to offer quality teaching in the public school,

because if they offer too much good teaching, they won't have anyone to exploit afterwards."

David also addressed the deterioration of working conditions produced by decades of austerity implemented by successive governments. "I am a music teacher in primary school. Before, I had a room, a classroom, but now I no longer have a room. I don't blame anyone for that. It's not the manager's fault, it's the system that's like that."

"They want to reduce pay scales," continued David, "but basically there shouldn't be pay scales. It doesn't make sense for the person in the class next door, who has less experience, to make half of my salary."

"Teachers are not satisfied with the health insurance provided under their contract. We have private insurance that does not reimburse us much, that does not cover several things. The basic problem is the obligation to have private insurance. What's that? Part of my paycheck goes to a private company. It should be Medicare, the government that pays."

David went on to speak about the growing frustration among rank-and-file teachers with the union leadership. "Teachers in my school say, 'They are negotiating, but we don't know what progress has been made.' It's closed-door, so we can't know, but we want to know." "Basically," David concluded, "they should be consulting all members."

A meeting attended by teachers, education assistants, and health care workers last Sunday adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every workplace to seize control of the contract struggle from the union bureaucrats and unify Quebec public sector workers with their colleagues across Canada.

The resolution declared, "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."



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