

The Quebec public sector workers' struggle and the fight against imperialist war

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The strikes mounted last week by well over half-a-million Quebec public sector workers provided an impressive demonstration of the immense social power of the working class. The healthcare, education and other provincial public and para-public workers enjoy massive public support as they confront the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government in their fight to defend public services, secure significant wage increases, and end punishing work schedules.

The union bureaucracy—whether in the form of the Common Front inter-union alliance, the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ), which bargained on behalf of 80,000 nurses, or the independent teachers' union, the Fédération autonome de l'Enseignement (FAE)—has endeavoured to limit the strike a provincial “collective bargaining” dispute and the reactionary framework of Quebec establishment politics.

But the workers face a political struggle, against not just a particularly right-wing government, but the entire Canadian ruling elite and its class war agenda of austerity for workers to pay for massive bailouts, subsidies and tax cuts for big business at home and imperialist war around the world. To prevail, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the Quebec public sector workers must link their struggle with workers across Canada facing similar attacks on their wages and conditions, and with the hundreds of thousands who have participated in mass protests against Israel's genocide on the Palestinians in Gaza. Canadian imperialism, like its US ally, is backing the genocide to the hilt.

CAQ Premier François Legault and his right-wing, “Quebec First” government have been insisting for the past year that workers must endure substantial real wage cuts in a five-year agreement. At the same time, they are pressing for enhanced “managerial rights” to achieve greater “efficiency” and “flexibility,” i.e., a further worsening of the punishing workplace regime that has seen thousands leave the public sector since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This drive to slash government spending is inseparable from the Canadian ruling elite's determination to enforce “post-

pandemic” austerity to pay for the explosion in military spending implemented over the past six years by the union-backed Trudeau Liberal government and the billions it is currently squandering to fund its major role in the US-led imperialist war on Russia in Ukraine.

In 2017, the Liberal government committed to a more than 70 percent increase in defence spending, equating to over \$13 billion annually in additional funds for the military by 2026. These enormous sums are on top of the more than \$2 billion in military aid and \$9 billion in total financial support provided by Ottawa to the far-right Zelensky regime in Kiev, which in collaboration with fascist forces is sending hundreds of thousands of young Ukrainians to their death on behalf of imperialism. Nor does it include the \$40 billion pledged by the Trudeau Liberal government over the next two decades to “modernize” the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD). The “modernization” aims to put American and Canadian imperialism in a position to wage a “winnable” nuclear war and control the raw materials and trade routes becoming accessible in the Arctic region due to climate change.

The unflinching support given by the Trudeau government, all parties in the federal parliament, and the parties in Quebec's National Assembly for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza demonstrates that the Canadian ruling class, like its American ally, is prepared to resort to any means necessary to defend its interests. Ottawa hopes that with its backing of the Zionist state and Washington's escalating campaign of economic and military pressure on Iran, to help shore up American imperialist dominance over the energy-rich and geostrategically important Middle East against their common rivals, principally Russia and China.

Earlier this month, when Israel's assault on the population of Gaza was already more than nine weeks old, the Trudeau government cynically called for a “humanitarian ceasefire,” to provide some cover for its backing of the Zionist regime and Washington's plans to expand the war. But even this nominal call for an end to Israel's terrorizing of the Gaza population was too much for the right-wing CAQ. It publicly

declared that it stood with Washington and the Netanyahu regime in opposing the “ceasefire resolution” overwhelmingly adopted by the UN General Assembly on Dec. 12.

All factions of the Canada’s ruling elite and political establishment—federalist and Quebec sovereigntist, from the avowedly right-wing Conservatives and the Bloc Québécois through Trudeau’s Liberals, and trade union-sponsored NDP—agree that the vast sums of money being squandered on imperialist war must be squeezed out of the working class. The Trudeau government has followed in the footsteps of its Harper predecessor by imposing stringent controls on healthcare and social transfer payments to the provinces, ensuring that the funds fail to keep pace with inflation and added costs generated by a growing and aging population. Governments of all political stripes, from Legault’s CAQ, to British Columbia’s NDP, the far-right Danielle Smith-led UCP regime in Alberta, and Doug Ford’s right-wing Progressive Conservative government in Ontario, have responded by instituting their own programs of ruthless cost cutting and privatization.

The recent experience of public sector workers in Ontario underscores how the subordination of society’s resources to the pursuit of war and provision of subsidies to the super-rich is having the same impact everywhere. The Ford government has announced billions of dollars in cuts for the education system over the next decade, even as the school-age population and teacher shortages grow. He has also implemented significant steps towards privatizing much of the healthcare system. If the government can push forward with this anti-worker agenda it is only because CUPE, the Ontario Federation of Labour and other major unions derailed a movement for a province-wide general strike in November 2022 that was precipitated by 55,000 education support workers’ courageous defiance of a savage anti-strike law.

The legitimate demands raised by Quebec public sector workers in their struggle for inflation-busting pay increases, an end to punishing work schedules, and a stop to the CAQ’s privatization drive are incompatible, whether workers are yet aware of it or not, with the ruling elite’s insistence that society’s resources be massively diverted to fund Canada’s war machine. The ruling class’s policy offers nothing but deepening misery and social breakdown for the working class.

Meanwhile, the corporate elite attempts in an ever more unrestrained manner to secure new raw materials, markets, and spheres of influence around the globe in a new redivision of the world between the imperialists. Workers in Quebec and the rest of Canada have no interest in being used as cannon fodder to boost the profit margins of Canadian

banks and strengthen corporate Canada’s position against its rivals on the global stage.

This is why workers must link the struggle for their demands with opposition to imperialist war if they are to secure victory. The fight for high-quality public services delivered by a well-paid and adequately staffed workforce enjoying job security and decent benefits is incompatible with a social order that prioritizes imperialist plunder on a world scale. Likewise, those workers and young people who have taken to the streets to demonstrate their hostility to the imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza cannot take a single step forward without the active support of the working class, of which public sector workers are a key component.

The conception that it is possible to compel ruling class representatives like Trudeau in Canada and Biden in the US to see the light and campaign for a “ceasefire” in the Middle East has proven disastrous. It has facilitated the continuation of Israel’s onslaught for over two months, killing well over 20,000 Palestinians, injuring over 50,000, and forcibly displacing close to 2 million from their homes. What is urgently required is the mobilization of workers internationally to stop the supply and production of all conceivable military equipment to Israel and prepare for an international political general strike to stop the genocide and the imperialist governments backing it in their tracks.

Quebec public sector workers can provide a powerful impulse for such a struggle, which would simultaneously vastly strengthen their position in their own contract fight. This requires the rejection of the suffocating “collective bargaining” framework imposed upon their struggle by the union bureaucracy. They must instead demand that the billions earmarked for the military and imperialist war around the world be redirected towards social programs, including education, healthcare, and social services accessible to all at the point of need. This necessitates a conscious break with the provincialist, Quebec nationalist perspective inculcated by the union apparatuses to bolster their corporatist ties with the government and keep Quebec workers divided from their colleagues across Canada and beyond. In its place, the guiding strategy of the Quebec public sector workers’ struggle must be a socialist and internationalist program.



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