

Quebec Public Sector workers: Build rank-and-file committees to mobilize working class power against Legault, counter unions' sabotage!

Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee

19 December 2023

We teachers, educational assistants, health care and other provincial public and para-public workers have come together to form the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee. It is aimed at wresting control of our struggle from the corporatist trade union apparatuses and placing it where it belongs. That is, in the hands of workers in the schools, hospitals, CLSCs (public health clinics), CEGEPs, and Service Québec offices and provincial departments.

Left to their own devices, the union bureaucrats will either conclude sellout agreements with the right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, or they will surrender to an authoritarian anti-strike law. Just as they have done for decades, including in the most recent contract negotiations in 2015-16 and 2020-21.

The greatest fear of the union bureaucrats is that a unified strike of public sector workers will trigger an eruption of working class opposition to austerity and social inequality that will threaten the global competitive and geostrategic position of Quebec and Canadian capital.

We urge workers in every hospital, school, and other workplace to form rank-and-file committees, uniting all workers irrespective of occupation and union jurisdiction, to fight for a united, all-out strike of all 620,000 Quebec public sector workers and for the mobilization of the entire working class in support of our struggle to defend public services.

We can prevail because we enjoy massive popular support. Even the right-wing corporate media has grudgingly conceded that working people recognize that our struggle for better pay and working conditions is crucial to the defence of public services, which have been ravaged by decades of cuts and the ruling class' ruinous "profits-before-lives" response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, our struggle is part of a growing working class upsurge across Canada, North America and around the world against wage cuts and austerity. This includes the recent strikes of Ontario education support workers and British Columbia

dockers, autoworkers in the United States and British postal, health and railway workers and the mass movement against French President Macron's pension cuts.

The central task of our Coordinating Committee and of the network for rank-and-file committees we aim to inspire and build is the fight to mobilize workers in Quebec, across Canada, and internationally in support of our struggle. We can and must make it the catalyst for the development of a working-class counter-offensive against public spending cuts, privatization, the gutting of workers' living standards and rights, and anti-strike laws.

From the outset the unions have dragged their feet in calling job action, divided us, and not lifted a finger to prepare mass defiance of an antistrike law.

Under pressure from exasperated rank-and-file teachers, the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) has alone called an indefinite strike. But it no more than any other of the unions is challenging the government's reactionary fiscal framework, for to do so would require a fight to mobilize the full power of the working class. Rather, like the FIQ leaders who plead nurses are "a special case," the FAE bureaucrats are pursuing a bankrupt and divisive strategy that isolates the workers they purport to represent from the broader struggle, in the hope Legault will reward them with a few extra crumbs.

Although there is massive popular support for our struggle, the unions have and will do nothing to mobilize it. They have refused, for example, to link our struggle to the fight against Bill 15, the government's scheme to slash health care spending and accelerate privatization.

Nor have the unions made any appeal to workers in the rest of Canada to support us, although they confront the same state-big business drive to use inflation to slash workers' real wages and dismantle and privatize public services. For their part, the Canadian Labour Congress and the unions in English Canada, including those with mass memberships in Quebec like CUPE, the Steelworkers, and Unifor, have reinforced these efforts to

isolate our struggle by remaining all but completely silent about it.

Workers must be on their guard. The union leaders intend to use the Dec. 14 end of the seven-day Common Front strike, the approach of the holidays, and workers' increasing financial hardship (especially those of us who have no strike pay) to try to push through sellout agreements in the coming days. Already, they have made major concessions to the government. This includes the Common Front unions publicly announcing they have slashed their wage demand from a 21 percent pay increase in a three-year contract, to an even more meager 25 percent pay rise spread over five years.

Our answer must be the fight to expand the strike. This requires not only the broadest appeals for support from working people in Quebec, across Canada and beyond. We must wage our struggle as a working class political struggle against the entire austerity and war agenda of the ruling class.

The right-wing "Quebec First" CAQ government, a loyal servant of the banks and large corporations, is leading the charge against public services and the workers who provide them. But it is doing so with the full backing of the entire Canadian ruling elite, led by the Trudeau federal government and supported by provincial governments of all political stripes from coast to coast. The Trudeau Liberals have declared a period of "post-pandemic" austerity in which fiscal discipline for social spending is enforced to pay for massive increases in military spending to wage war abroad and government handouts to the super-rich. When Quebec Premier Francois Legault demands more "flexibility" from already overworked and underpaid public sector workers, he merely articulates for Quebec what Prime Minister Trudeau, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, and the banks and corporations who stand behind them demand for Canada as a whole.

The public sector strike wave of the past month, notwithstanding the bureaucrats' best efforts to divide us and limit our job action, has demonstrated the social power of the working class and encouraged support throughout broad layers of the population.

Objectively this movement represents a challenge not just to Legault, but to the entire ruling elite's class war agenda and its systematic drive to transfer social wealth from the bottom to the top. We must now make this implicit challenge a conscious strategy, by making it the spearhead of a working-class industrial and political counter-offensive against austerity and war.

Only through the building of rank-and-file committees, entirely independent of the corporatist union apparatuses, can and will the widespread popular demand for an unlimited province-wide public sector strike, uniting all workers irrespective of union affiliation, be realized.

Launching an indefinite general strike will mean a direct clash with the Legault government. It will undoubtedly respond, as its PQ and Liberal predecessors have done so many

times in the past, by criminalizing our job action. We must therefore begin now to make preparations to answer a back-to-work law with a political general strike. This can only be done through the active mobilization of the widespread support we enjoy throughout the population, including by fighting to establish rank-and-file solidarity strike committees throughout the private sector so the full power of the working class can be brought to bear in the struggle.

It also imperatively raises the need for us to break out of the provincial, Quebec nationalist straitjacket imposed upon us by the union apparatuses. We must appeal for and secure the support of public and private sector workers across Canada, who face similar attacks from governments at all levels and profit-hungry employers.

The mass movement of workers we are fighting to build by creating rank-and-file committees in every workplace should take up the following demands:

1. An immediate 20 percent wage increase for all public sector workers to make up for decades of real wage cuts and concessions!
2. An inflation clause to ensure that our wages increase in line with inflation for every year of our new contract!
3. A halt to all privatization of public services and the reversal of all existing privatization programs! Hire tens of thousands of new workers to ensure high-quality public services for all!
4. An end to forced overtime and "flexible" work schedules that place the burden of decades of cuts on the backs of overworked workers!

The ruling class and their defenders will say that there is "no money" to fulfill these demands. We reply that the problem is not a lack of money, but how society's wealth is distributed.

The Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee is affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The IWA-RFC is founded on the recognition that the nationally-based, pro-capitalist unions have failed the working class and that workers need new organizations of class struggle, led and democratically controlled by the rank-and-file.

We call on all our class brothers and sisters to join us in this struggle. Contact the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee at cbsectpub@gmail.com to discuss how to take forward our struggle through the building of rank-and-file committees, the mobilization of working-class industrial and political power, and the formation of fighting links with all workers over the heads of the union bureaucrats.



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