

As Quebec public sector workers press for a broadening of the struggle, unions conspire to scuttle strike movement

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The confrontation between the working class and Premier François Legault and his avowedly pro-big business, “Quebec First” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government is intensifying.

Since November, Canada’s second-largest and only majority French-speaking province has been convulsed by the largest wave of public sector strikes in a half century.

The more than 600,000 Quebec teachers, healthcare workers, school support staff, CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) personnel and other state employees are determined to improve their working conditions and defend public services, which have been ravaged by four decades of austerity measures imposed by successive Parti Québécois, Liberal and CAQ governments.

Among rank-and-file workers there is growing anger at the intransigence of the government, which is pressing for real-wage cuts and sweeping changes in work rules to strengthen managerial rights, increase workloads, and slash overtime pay.

But even as workers press for a broadening of the struggle, the unions are conspiring with the government to reach sellout agreements and scuttle the strike movement. In this the union top brass in Quebec are receiving crucial support from the corporatist union apparatuses across Canada, who are maintaining a deafening silence on the class struggle raging in Quebec.

Earlier this week, the leaders of the education component of the CSQ, the FSE-CSQ, which is part of the Common Front, and of the Fédération autonome de l’enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Teachers’ Federation), whose 65,000 members have been on strike since November 23, were forced to reject new concession-filled government “sectoral” offers. Sectoral negotiations deal with working conditions in public school systems, healthcare, the CEGEPs etc., as opposed to wages and pensions which are negotiated at a “central” bargaining table. The FSE called the government offer a “setback” while the FAE described it as a “discount offer.”

Yet on Thursday evening, the FSE-CSQ announced it had agreed to a “bargaining blitz” and would be negotiating with the government throughout the night. On Friday morning, it

announced a tentative sectoral agreement, which it is now trying to have quickly approved by union delegates.

Workers must beware. The unions, which for decades have suppressed the class struggle and enforced the government’s ruinous profits-before-lives pandemic policy, are clearly hoping to use the approaching holidays to wear down workers’ resolve and scuttle the strike movement.

Earlier this week, Common Front leaders threatened to implement the its mandate for an indefinite general strike, which was supported by 95 percent of workers in a vote last October. However, they refused to give any precise date, contenting themselves with saying that it will be launched “at the time deemed appropriate” in January.

In reality, the leaders of the Common Front have no intention of launching an indefinite strike. They see the threat of an indefinite strike as a means of keeping control over the rank-and-file and pressing Legault for a few more crumbs so they can cast their acceptance of concession contracts in a slightly better light.

At a press conference Wednesday, the Common Front leaders said that after a year of negotiations, 60 percent of the “progress” for satisfactory settlements had been realized, only in the next breath to claim that everything could be settled “in 48 hours.”

Subsequently, François Enault, the vice-president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), another major Common Front component, conceded that workers are ready to walk off the job “tomorrow morning” but that this is “not what we [the union leaders] want.”

Meanwhile, pressure is mounting among the FAE’s 65,000 teacher members, who have been on strike for four weeks without any strike pay. In recent days, an increasing number of teachers have called on social media for action to extend the strike movement to the broader population, among whom there is widespread support for the teachers’ struggle, and for action that would hit sensitive economic sectors.

In response, the FAE organized the blocking of the Port of Montreal’s principal entrance between 5:45 am and 8:20 am on Thursday morning, preventing more than 500 trucks from

entering and leaving Canada's second largest port. In Quebec City, teachers also blocked one of the entrances to the city's port, while in Gatineau teachers blocked access to the government-owned Casino du Lac-Leamy.

These actions demonstrate the combativeness of the workers and their desire to broaden the struggle. On the part of the union leaders, however, these brief "disruptive" protests have nothing to do with a real turn towards mobilizing the social power of the working class and developing a working-class counter offensive against the Legault government and the entire ruling class program of austerity and war. It is rather a way of defusing workers' anger while sowing illusions in their policy of trying to pressure Legault.

In a Radio-Canada interview, the vice president for political affairs of the FAE, Patrick Bydal, explained that "the only language that the government of François Legault understands is that of money." "The boat in which François Legault and the government are taking us," Bydal continued, "is rocking. It is time for François Legault to take his responsibilities as a concerned head of state and bring this boat to port."

Since the negotiations began last March, the unions have insisted that workers must orient to pressuring the Premier, a former CEO and ruthless servant of big business, to listen to workers' demands. In reality, Legault and his CAQ have never intended to negotiate.

Following on from and intensifying the work of previous PQ and Liberal governments, Legault is determined to slash jobs, wages and working conditions as part of a program of vicious austerity and privatization for public services. These cuts will then be used to fund generous tax cuts for big businesses and the rich. This anti-worker agenda is enforced by all capitalist governments in Canada and internationally, regardless of whether the ruling party claims to be left or right.

The attack on public services and the workers who provide them is of vital concern to all working people. This is why the ongoing strike by FAE teachers and the limited strikes mounted by other public sector workers have enjoyed strong popular support, even while they cause considerable inconvenience. However, the unions are doing nothing to mobilize that support.

Their fear is that the Quebec public sector workers' struggle could trigger a broader movement of the working class in Quebec and across Canada and an explicit challenge to the capitalist elite's class war agenda of austerity and war. This is why they have confined the public sector workers' struggle within the government-regulated, anti-worker collective bargaining system and the nationalist politics of the Quebec establishment.

Any agreement between the union bureaucrats and the government will be at the workers' expense and filled with rollbacks. The unions have already abandoned key worker demands, including by signaling their readiness to accept a five-year agreement and to negotiate with the government over its

demands for greater "flexibility" in scheduling and staffing.

Should the unions prove unable to impose the dictates of the ruling elite, Legault will not hesitate for a moment to impose a back-to-work law to criminalize strike action. Indeed, he probably already has the law at the ready in draft form.

To counter the efforts of the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses to scuttle the strike movement, mobilize support throughout the working class in Quebec and Canada, and prepare defiance of any anti-strike laws, workers have formed the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee. The Committee is spearheading the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace to seize control of the contract struggle from the union bureaucrats. It has advanced a series of demands, including an immediate 20 percent increase in wages for all workers, a cost-of-living (COLA) clause, an end to all privatization, the training and hiring of tens of thousands of new workers, and an end to forced overtime.

The Coordinating Committee's founding statement declares: "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."



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