

Oppose the unions' attempt to short-circuit the Quebec public sector workers' struggle!

Reject the sell-out agreements! For an all-out strike to defend public services and working conditions!

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The following statement was written by an educator, who is a member of the CSQ, one of the unions that comprise the Common Front. He is also a founding member of the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee.

As the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee warned in its founding statement, the leaders of the Common Front inter-union alliance, the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Teachers Federation), and the nurses' union FIQ are seeking to use the holiday season to short-circuit the largest public sector strike wave in a half-century and impose sell-out contracts.

If we rank-and-file workers do not organize to defeat this betrayal, public sector workers will suffer a further deterioration in their wages and working conditions, and the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government will accelerate its privatization plans.

On December 22, the FSE-CSQ, the Common Front union that bargains on behalf of more than 90,000 public school teachers, announced that an all-night bargaining “blitz” had resulted in a “sectoral agreement” covering working conditions. In the days that followed, both before and after Christmas, one Common Front union after another announced similar sectoral agreements, while refusing to divulge any information whatsoever as to their contents.

On December 27, it was the FAE's turn. Only it announced that it had concluded both a sectoral and a global agreement (covering wages and pensions). The following day, after a small gathering of union delegates endorsed the two agreements, the FAE ordered an immediate end to the courageous unlimited strike that the 66,000 FAE-affiliated elementary and high school teachers had mounted since November 23.

Also on Thursday, the Common Front announced that it had reached agreement with the government on wages and pensions and other “central bargaining table” issues. This means “tentative” contracts are now in place for all 420,000 hospital workers, medical technicians, teachers, school support staff,

CEGEP personnel and other public sector workers represented by the Common Front.

During a full-year year of negotiations, Premier François Legault and Treasury Board President Board Sonia LeBel arrogantly dismissed our demands for an end to punishing working conditions and a massive reinvestment in public services.

If there are now suddenly “tentative agreements” in place, it is because the unions—which time and again over the past four decades have accepted concessions contracts and capitulated to anti-strike laws—have callously abandoned our demands. This includes, accepting a 5-year agreement amid the enormous economic and political uncertainty caused by an unprecedented crisis of global capitalism.

In a sure sign that these agreements are full of concessions, Treasury Board President LeBel's press secretary has boasted that they will provide “greater flexibility” in managing the public sector. In other words, there will be further rollbacks in workers' working conditions and greater government and managerial control over our work-lives.

In the name of “flexibility,” the government intends to augment the back-breaking workloads of educators and healthcare workers—many thousands of whom have already fled the public sector due to overwork, resulting in severe staffing shortages. It also intends to deny overtime pay to non-full-time nurses, regardless of the length of their shift, and to perpetuate a punitive system of forced overtime for nurses and certain other healthcare professionals. In education, the government wants, among other things, to force staff to accept the first contracts offered under the threat of losing seniority rights.

Legault and Health Minister Christian Dubé have tied their push for contract “flexibility” to their placing, under the recently adopted Bill 15, the entire public health system under the control of Santé Québec, a new agency to be run by “top guns” from big business and on corporate principles.

As always, the privileged union bureaucrats are keeping us divided from each other and entirely in the dark about what has

happened in the negotiations.

If they are refusing to say anything about the tentative agreements, it is because they fear the rank-and-file's response and are intent on manipulating the ratification process.

Even before the Christmas period negotiating blitz, the Common Front leaders publicly stated that they had made major concessions to the government. These included slashing workers' wage demands and agreeing to a five-year contract and to negotiate over the government's "flexibility" demands.

If the union bureaucrats get their way, little or nothing about the tentative agreements will be disclosed to rank-and-file workers prior to their being convened in "general assemblies" sometime in January, at which time they will be immediately summoned to vote on them.

While FAE members have circulated a petition calling for the immediate release of the proposed contract, an FAE spokesperson told *La Presse* this will not happen. No details will be disclosed until the general assemblies.

Moreover, as has long been the practice in Quebec as across Canada, at these meetings workers will only be provided self-serving, union-selected "highlights" that either exclude mention of rollbacks or are repackaged as "advances."

All public sector workers should demand the immediate release of all the tentative agreements and the convening of emergency general assemblies at which workers can question union officials about their contents and discuss among themselves their independent evaluation of what has been proposed. Only after an open and exhaustive days-long discussion within the rank and file should any votes be held.

That said, no one should be under any illusion. The proposed agreements are sellout contracts which must be voted down by the rank and file.

By their actions, the unions have shown that they will not call an all-out public sector strike, nor take any steps to mobilize the broad support that exists for our struggle to defend public services within the working class.

From the start, the Quebec public sector workers' struggle has had, and still has, the potential to unleash a powerful working class movement against the ruling class's program of austerity and war in Quebec and across Canada.

But the union bureaucrats fear above all an explosion of class struggle. As defenders of the failed capitalist system, they are determined to smother the anger of the workers they claim to "represent," so as to shore up the "global competitiveness" and predatory geo-strategic interests of Quebec and Canadian big business.

Public sector workers must take the struggle into their own hands, through the building of a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist union apparatuses. This will enable workers to unite across all sectoral divides and launch an unlimited province-wide public sector strike.

This must be coupled with a turn to our true allies: the other sections of workers—public and private, not just in Quebec but

across Canada—who all have a stake in the fight to secure quality public services and to beat back the big business-state drive to impose inflation-driven, real wage cuts.

It is only by mobilizing the full political and social power of the working class that we'll be able to counter the emergency anti-strike law that Legault will no doubt use to try to break our struggle if the unions fail to keep us in check.

On December 20, workers in the education and healthcare sectors established the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee to fight for this perspective. In its founding statement, the Committee explained:

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 counteroffensive against austerity and war.

Workers opposed to the unions' attempts to smother our struggle should contact the Coordinating Committee and join the fight to build rank-and-file committees in every hospital, school and workplace. We can be reached by filling out the form below or by emailing: cbsectpub@gmail.com



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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