

Sellout agreements in Quebec public sector: Workers demand to see their contents in full

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Are you a Quebec public sector worker? We strongly encourage you to participate in the online meeting the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee is holding this Sunday, Jan. 7, at 1 p.m. Register to attend here.

Since the announcement late last month of tentative agreements between the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government and, respectively, the leaders of the unions that comprise the Common Front and the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Teachers Federation), the unions have been doing everything in their power to keep the nearly 500,000 Quebec public sector workers they claim to represent entirely in the dark as to their contents.

Until Wednesday, no information, apart from the fact that the proposed agreements will last for five years, was provided to rank-and-file workers. On Wednesday, the Common Front was compelled to issue a brief, almost entirely vacuous press release after an error in the management of its website led to the leaking of one critical detail.

As a result, it is now known the proposed agreements will provide for wage increases of 17.4 percent, spread over five years. This is under conditions where prices, according to the official inflation rate, rose 17.3 percent just in the three years between September 2020 and September 2023, and workers' real-wages have been eroded by decades of concessionary contracts. In any event a, 17.4 percent increase over five years is a far cry from the unions' initial demand of a 21 percent pay hike over three years.

The corporatist union apparatuses' silence on the content of the agreements they have made with the avowedly pro-big business, "Quebec First" CAQ government follows on from their systematic efforts to exclude rank-and-file workers from the negotiating process. They have discouraged any rank-and-file initiative and, ultimately, smothered a burgeoning strike movement that included some of the largest job actions in Quebec and Canadian history. Now, they are moving to impose sellout agreements.

The government, as would be expected, is fully on board with the unions' attempt to limit and manipulate discussion of the proposed agreements. But in a very brief press release, the press attaché of Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel let slip that the proposed agreements will provide "greater flexibility."

In other words, they include major concessions to the government, which, in the name of "greater flexibility," has demanded further increases in the punishing workloads of health and education workers, the gutting of seniority rights, and other regressive changes to overtime pay and work rules.

Expressing what many workers are bitterly realizing, one teacher said on social media: "I may be extreme, but ... it smacks of collusion between our dear unions and the government."

Indeed, throughout the year-long negotiations the unions have worked to isolate the public sector workers. They have opposed any attempt to mobilize the vast popular support for the public sector workers' struggle to defend public services—a struggle which, if the workers can break free of the stranglehold of the pro-capitalist unions, still has the potential to become the spearhead of a powerful working class movement across Canada against capitalist austerity.

For months, workers were given virtually no details of the negotiations, whether it be over the issues relating to wages and pensions negotiated at the "central bargaining table" or those dealt with in the "sectoral agreements" that cover working conditions. The privileged bureaucrats justified this blackout with the claim that they wanted to keep their strategy hidden from the government. This argument, which has always been fraudulent, no longer holds water now that agreements have been reached. But still the unions are determined to keep workers in the dark.

In recent days, many workers have taken to social media to denounce the unions' undemocratic actions.

One of them, who works in administration, wrote on Facebook: "I don't understand why the rank-and-file shouldn't have the right to know what is being considered (by union delegates at meetings being held this week and next), and this at the same time as the union executives!!!! DISCLOSE THE OFFER, IT'S URGENT!!!!"

Another, who works in the health sector, said: "I think it's ridiculous that we're not being told what's on offer now so that we can analyze it and reflect on it ... There's going to be another catch, I'm sure, and we're going to be even poorer."

One hospital orderly wrote ironically of the unions: "Saying so many things and mentioning nothing at the same time."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the recently formed province-wide public sector strike. Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee warned, the unions used the holiday season to demobilize workers and finalize sellout tentative agreements with the aim of short-circuiting their struggle.

The FAE ended its unlimited general strike on December 28, without consulting its 66,000 members, the majority of whom are teachers in the province's major urban centers and all of whom had been on strike without pay for 22 days. The FAE is now insisting, in the face of rank-and-file demands for the immediate release of the proposed agreement, that no details will be disclosed prior to ratification meetings later this month.

As for the Common Front, which represents some 420,000 workers, one of its leaders, CSQ President Éric Gingras, showed just how arrogant the union bureaucracy is towards workers when he declared on his X/Twitter account on December 28: "It's done! We'll talk soon! But for now, the proposal will be presented to our (leadership) bodies."

Barely a week earlier, his FTQ colleague, Magali Picard, had insisted that the Common Front's threats of an indefinite general strike after the holidays were "no bluff," and that there was still much to be settled at the bargaining table.

By anti-democratically ending the strike movement, keeping workers in the dark and delaying general assemblies until the second half of January, the unions are manipulating the negotiation/ratification process so as to create conditions in which the rank and file see no choice but to rubber-stamp the sell-out agreements. In such a context, it is imperative that workers take matters into their own hands.

As an educator and member of the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee recently wrote:

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. ...

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. ...

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

On Instagram, a video of a teacher demanding the immediate disclosure of the proposed agreements has been viewed over 62,000 times and "liked" by almost 1,000 people. The comments are largely favorable. One of them said: "I so agree with you. It hadn't even been 24 hours and already the media were talking as if everything had been signed-sealed-and delivered. Many like me are anxious to know the outcomes and consequences of what has been agreed to."

Others encouraged their colleagues to be wary, study the agreements carefully and not hesitate to vote against them if they do not meet workers' demands for better wages and working conditions.

One of them said: "Now is not the time to give in to the government. Just because an agreement has been reached doesn't mean it's necessarily good for workers ... I hope people won't give in so easily when the time comes to vote. We need to vote bearing in mind our job description, our working conditions, and our quality of life both on and off the job. In short, our overall well-being must be satisfied. I'd rather go back on strike than accept something that ruins or harms me again. We mustn't be taken for fools!!!"

Another, Sylvie, said: "If it's not suitable, we should reject it at all costs. The last two agreements set us back enormously. At the last one, we were offered \$3/hour plus 3% for the first year. As a result, we got a total of \$1.80 for three years. We have the right to reject. I hope this time I won't be the only one to do so."

Erik, for his part, wrote: "I smell a botched settlement! There's no hurry, we've got to get what we want! No more accepting anything!"

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages all those who fear and oppose a sellout to demand the immediate release of all the proposed agreements in full, so that they can be properly studied and debated well in advance of any ratification vote. This must be part of a campaign to broaden the struggle of public sector workers so it becomes the spearhead of a struggle of the entire working class, in Quebec and across Canada, against capitalist austerity. Those who agree with this perspective should join the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee and attend the online meeting it is holding this Sunday, Jan. 7, at 1 p.m. Register to attend here.

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