

As anger grows among Quebec public sector workers over sellout agreements, unions silent on key issue of working conditions

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More than two weeks after most of Quebec's public sector unions reached agreements with the anti-worker Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, anger is growing among the 420,000 members of the Common Front union alliance, who have received only a few snippets of information about the tentative deals.

The leaders of the Common Front are doing everything that they can to quell this anger and manipulate the contract ratification process. On Sunday, January 7, they announced that general assemblies would be held over a five-week period, from January 15 to February 19. Their aim is to drag out the ratification process so as to dissipate the growing opposition to the secret agreements, which are incompatible with workers' key demands for inflation-busting wage increases, an end to punishing working conditions and massive reinvestment in the province's crumbling public services.

At the assemblies, the unions will reveal only the "highlights" of the agreements, presenting some of the concessions they have agreed to as "advances," while making no mention of others. They will hold ratification votes either on the day of the meeting or shortly afterward, leaving workers no time to analyze the contents of the agreements, discuss them among themselves and question union leaders.

At the January 7 press briefing, the leaders of the Common Front (FTQ, CSN, CSQ and APTS) gave some details of the proposed five-year total wage increase of 17.4 percent that had leaked out a few days earlier. But they remained silent on the central issue: the major concessions they have accepted in working conditions, in the name of the "flexibility" demanded by Premier François Legault and his right-wing CAQ government.

Marc Ranger, former president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees-Quebec, told Radio-Canada in an interview: "It's funny, we didn't hear much about flexibility in that press briefing, but that's what's going to cause the biggest reaction at the general assemblies." Ranger knows what he's talking about, having himself facilitated the imposition of massive pension cuts on municipal workers when he was head of CUPE's Quebec region.

Intolerable working conditions were one of the main factors that prompted the 420,000 public sector workers affiliated to the Common Front unions to vote 95 percent in favour of an indefinite general strike. However, all the indications are that the agreements reached by the unions will make these conditions even worse,

causing still more workers to quit the public sector and exacerbate staff shortages, and this in a context where emergency room occupancy rates are near record highs, the result of decades of budget cuts by previous Parti Québécois and Liberal governments, and the Legault government's "profits before life" pandemic policy.

Even the wage increases the unions have signed up for represent a major retreat from their original (and clearly insufficient) demand of a 21 percent pay hike over three years. The proposed 17.4 percent increase over five years is actually lower than the government's inflation forecast of more than 18 percent. Moreover, it in no way constitutes the "catch-up" that the union bureaucrats claimed they were fighting for to offset decades of increasing worker impoverishment.

The unions boast that they have secured "the biggest annual pay rise in decades," but fail to mention that workers have suffered a continuous decline in real wages over decades, and that recent years have seen record increases in inflation and interest rates.

As for the Common Front leaders' claim to have secured protection of purchasing power through the indexation of workers' wages to the consumer price index (CPI), this is just more smoke and mirrors. Under the proposed agreements, there would be no indexation for the first two years of the contract, and it would be capped at 1 percent per annum for the last 3 years. So, if inflation rises to just over 3.5 percent, depending on the year, workers will immediately experience more real-wage losses.

The other limited—and generally vague—contract changes that the unions are touting do not represent real "gains." There would, for example, be "attraction bonuses" for certain job categories, such as building trade workers and psychologists, but these are conditional on certain criteria. Without really improving services, this measure is in fact the bare minimum the government could do if it is to stem the exodus of these workers to the private sector, which offers more competitive wages and working conditions.

As for the bonus for "employer contributions to health insurance," it represents no substantive improvement given that, according to the unions themselves, insurance premiums are set to rise massively over the next few years. Finally, with regard to pensions, the unions are joining with the government in its efforts to entice workers to keep working after they reach retirement age to counter labour shortages, by allowing those that do to contribute

to the RREGOP pension plan until the age of 71.

The reactionary nature of the agreements is confirmed by the government itself. It has enthused over their contents, including declaring its satisfaction with the increased “flexibility” they will provide management. “The agreements in principle we have reached are responsible, balanced and in line with the will of Quebecers,” declared Treasury President Sonia Lebel.

The government is eager to put an end to the public sector contract dispute so it can move ahead with its program of social cuts and the ransacking of public services. In December, in the midst of the biggest public sector strike wave in a half-century, Legault pushed through Bill 15, a major restructuring of the healthcare system, which is henceforth to be led by big business “top guns.” The adoption of PL15, which aims to further privatize healthcare and attack workers’ rights, was made possible thanks to the complicity of the unions, who deliberately separated this issue from collective bargaining and are determined to lock workers in a five-year contract during which they will have no legal right to strike.

The unions are well aware that the agreements are bad and will be strongly resisted by workers. As Éric Gingras, president of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), acknowledged: “Is everything perfect? The answer is no.” Gingras said he supported the offer, but did not dare publicly go on record as “recommending” it. For her part, the president of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), Magali Picard, said she and the FTQ do recommend it.

There is thus a certain division of labor among the union top brass to push through the agreements in the face of widespread worker skepticism and opposition. Some will praise them loud and clear, while others, like Gingras, will keep a certain distance, so as not to lose face and leave themselves room to maneuver should they be rejected by the rank and file. In all cases, they are banking on the divisions they have sown among the public sector workers, their campaign of deception and half-truths about the details of the proposed contracts and the threat of a government strikebreaking law, should the strike movement resume, to force workers to accept the sellout agreements.

Asked by a reporter whether the unions would launch an indefinite general strike if workers rejected the offers, the union leaders said it was “unlikely.”

While union leaders talk of the struggle as a thing of the past in order to demobilize and demoralize the rank and file, opposition is growing among workers.

The Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee held a successful meeting on January 7 to mobilize workers opposed to the sellout deals. A resolution, which calls for public sector workers to repudiate the concession contracts, relaunch their struggle as a working class political struggle and fight for the mobilization of the entire working class in defence of public services, was adopted by a strong majority. It reads in part:

This meeting demands immediate and full disclosure of the agreements to give rank-and-file members enough time to analyze and discuss them and ask questions prior to any

ratification vote.

Above all, this meeting pledges to do everything in its power to mobilize the massive popular support enjoyed by public sector workers over the heads of the union bureaucrats, who are colluding with the government.

The threat of a back-to-work law underlines the need to wage our struggle on a radically different basis, as a working class political struggle.

It must be broadened and extended to the rest of the working class—not just in Quebec, but across Canada—to make it an explicit challenge to the ruling class’ program of austerity and war.

To achieve this, we need to step up the work of the Coordinating Committee to build a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatuses. Their task will be to prepare a worker-led counteroffensive in defence of working conditions and public services for all.



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