

Vote “No” to Quebec unions’ sellout deals as first step in preventing the scuttling of the public sector workers’ struggle

Laurent Lafrance, (Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee Spokesperson)
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Initial votes on the tentative agreements between Quebec’s public sector unions and the right-wing, “Quebec First” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government show strong opposition among rank-and-file workers.

In the education sector, several locals have rejected the five-year sell-out agreements. Members of SERL—the Fédération autonome de l’enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Teachers Federation) affiliated union that represents teachers in Laval, Quebec’s third largest city—rejected the proposed agreement by 68 percent. In the Lanaudière region, teachers affiliated to the CSQ, a member of the Common Front inter-union alliance, have rejected their proposed agreement by 62 percent.

The Common Front represents some 420,000 public and para-public workers, including hospital workers, healthcare professionals, teachers, school support staff, and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) personnel; while the FAE is comprised of 65,000 teachers, principally in the Montreal and Quebec City regions.

In the healthcare sector, delegates from the FSQ-CSQ, which represents 5,000 nurses and respiratory therapists, voted by 98 percent not to present the agreement to the membership for ratification because it is so poor.

In general, workers recognize that these agreements will not improve their daily lives, nor those of the students and patients they serve. Should they be ratified, workers will struggle to keep pace with the rising cost-of-living and their working conditions, whether they are employed in the health or education sector, will continue to deteriorate.

None of the essential demands of rank-and-file workers have been met: a sizeable wage catch-up, an end to compulsory overtime, a reduction in teacher-student and staff-patient ratios, a major hiring program to deal with staff

shortages, and better health and education services for the population.

Where agreements have been accepted, the vote totals underscore the depth of worker opposition and disaffection. In many places the “Yes” votes have barely surpassed 50 percent, indicating that many workers voted in favour only because they saw no way forward.

In their efforts to push through the sell-out agreements, the union apparatuses are using their usual bureaucratic maneuvers.

They tout wage increases of 17.4 percent stretched over 5 years as “historic,” without mentioning that this is less than the government’s own inflation estimate of 18 percent over the same period. They gloss over or outright conceal the many concessions on working conditions they have made to the government, which, in the name of “flexibility,” has pressed for a major expansion of managerial rights and cuts to overtime pay.

The Common Front unions have drawn out the ratification votes over five weeks, ending only Feb. 19, to demobilize and discourage workers, and are manipulating the process to ensure workers have little time to peruse and discuss the agreements that will govern their working lives for the next five years.

For example, the Alliance des professeures et professeurs de Montréal (APPM), the largest FAE affiliate, held a vote immediately after the union general assembly where the offers were presented. This online meeting lasted over 9 hours, ending around 2 a.m., after many workers had understandably been forced to go to bed. APPM leaders refused to hold the vote on another day, despite repeated requests from members. The agreement was finally ratified by just 52 percent in a vote that will weigh heavily in the balance, since the FAE constitution requires that an agreement be supported by 5 out of its 9 locals and 50 percent of all votes cast to be ratified.

To intimidate workers opposed to or reluctant to approve

these concession-laden agreements, the Common Front leaders, like those of the FAE and FIQ (the principal nurses union), have made it clear that there will be no further strikes. The union leaderships are effectively saying to the workers: accept these offers, because you won't get anything better, and if you don't, we won't organize any further job action.

If a defeat is to be prevented, rank-and-file workers must take immediate action to countermand the unions' sabotage of their struggle. Public sector workers must reject these rotten deals and relaunch their strike movement, but on a completely different basis.

The issue is not to put pressure on the avowedly pro-big business CAQ government, but to mobilize the immense working class popular support that our struggle to defend public services enjoys. We need to appeal to and fight to mobilize all workers—in the province, across Canada, and beyond—in a working class political and industrial counter-offensive against capitalist austerity. This includes preparations to defy the back-to-work legislation that the government would surely seek to implement if the strike movement resumes.

Fundamentally opposed to this perspective, the pro-capitalist unions have run our struggle into the ground. Although the CAQ government's assault on public services and our living standards is part of an anti-worker offensive being waged by the ruling classes in every country, the unions have quarantined our struggle within the narrow confines of a provincial "collective bargaining" dispute. They have divided workers within the public sector and even along profession-based lines within their own workplaces and done nothing to mobilize broader working class support. As for the unions in the rest of Canada, like Unifor, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), they have not lifted a finger to mobilize their hundreds of thousands of members to come to the defense of their class brothers and sisters in Quebec.

Throughout the struggle, the unions have sought to tie workers to the political representatives of the ruling elite. They paraded in front of striking workers representatives of the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party, the two big-business parties that prior to the CAQ's election in 2018 had spent the previous four decades imposing brutal social cuts on the working class, with the unions' complicity. This included on numerous occasions using draconian back-to-work laws to break strikes.

The union bureaucracy serves as a police force for the employers in the workplace, dedicated to suppressing the class struggle and imposing the dictates of the state and big business. Terrified that our struggle could become the

catalyst for a broader working class struggle that would threaten the profitability of Quebec and Canada capital, they have systematically sabotaged our struggle and are now intent on imposing sellout contracts that would legally tie our hands by rendering all job action illegal until 2028. Premier Francois Legault and his government would thus enjoy five years of "social peace" to intensify their program of capitalist austerity and support for the imperialist wars waged by Washington with the backing of Ottawa and NATO.

Legault's ultra-right-wing government has already gone on the offensive. After adopting late last year Bill 15, which creates a new health agency run by big business "top guns" to accelerate the privatization of healthcare, it has served notice that it plans deregulate the construction industry and trample on workers' rights in the name of "productivity."

Public sector workers must develop a new strategy based on the mobilization of the entire working class in Quebec, across Canada and North America as an independent social and political force.

The resources exist to ensure quality jobs and public services for all, but they are monopolized by the financial aristocracy. To ensure an equitable distribution of social wealth, we need to develop an independent political movement of the working class animated by a socialist perspective to reorganize the economy to meet social needs, not the profits of a tiny minority.

The recent wave of Quebec public sector strikes has exposed the inadequacy of mere union militancy. The notion shared by militant workers—notably those within the FAE who pushed for an indefinite general strike—that gains could be made by putting pressure on the union bureaucracy, and through it on the Legault government and ruling elite, has led to an impasse.

The struggle cannot move forward without a political and organizational break with the bureaucratic trade union apparatuses and the whole perspective of trade unionism.

We need to form rank-and-file committees in every workplace to unite public sector employees and mobilize all workers, in the province and across North America, in a political struggle to defend jobs, wages and working conditions for all.

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