

Quebec educator speaks out on unions' demobilization of public sector workers

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We strongly urge all Quebec public sector workers to oppose the trade unions' sabotage of their struggle and attempt to impose sellout contracts. Fill out the form at the end of this article to contact the Quebec Public Sector Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee, which is fighting to mobilize workers independently of the union apparatuses.

My local union held a general assembly (GA) last week to discuss the agreements in principle reached by the Common Front alliance of trade unions—which represents some 420,000 public sector workers, including hospital and school board employees—and the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government.

According to workers' comments on social media, both from the Common Front and the separately organized Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) teacher union, the GAs were held with a common objective: to encourage a vote in favor of the agreements and discourage workers opposed to them from continuing the struggle.

My own experience reflects what many have experienced in one way or another across the province.

The meeting began with an unabashed attempt to demoralize and demobilize us. In his opening speech, union president Jean-François Guilbault declared that “there are concessions in all negotiations,” while seeking to minimize their scope in our agreement by describing them as “marginal.”

He then used a series of pretexts identical to those used during the 2015 negotiations to justify the union leaders' capitulation and intimidate workers who would vote against the agreements.

“If we refuse, the government could offer worse,” he claimed. Guilbault then asked: “If we vote against, will public opinion follow suit? The media are already

fueling the debate on the government side.”

Guilbault went on to explain the Common Front's divisive strategy. “What will become of the Common Front?” he asked. “Considering that some local unions have voted in favor, if you vote against, the strength of numbers won't be the same.”

Guilbault concluded by unconvincingly trying to deny the whole purpose of his speech. “I'm not trying to discourage you,” he declared.

Having started at 6:30 p.m., the information and questions portion of the meeting went on until after 11:30 p.m., by which time a significant number of workers had left, so as to prepare for another grueling day's work, including by going to sleep.

This meant that we had to wait more than five hours before the meeting's “deliberative” phase, during which time the workers were finally able to give their opinion on the contents of the agreements and explain to their colleagues why they should accept or reject them.

By this time, two-thirds of the workers had already left. From 600 at the start of the meeting, we were down to barely 200 participants by the time the deliberative session began.

Only two workers spoke, as most of the attendees were tired and dazed by the bombardment of bureaucratic details they'd been confronted with for long hours. At the end of this article is the short text I barely had time to read in the two minutes I was given before my microphone would be cut off.

The meeting was divided into several sections dealing with the minutiae of the tentative agreements. In short, the agreements were presented essentially as a fait accompli, without the slightest opportunity for workers to express their opinions, but only to question this or that aspect, to which the leaders responded more as

government spokespeople than as workers' representatives.

None of the real issues we face were addressed, for the simple reason that these agreements represent no progress for workers. In the best-case scenario, workers will get wage increases close to inflation and the status quo on their already unbearable working conditions. But the major cuts in jobs and public services that the government is preparing will have a major negative impact on all workers in Quebec, and indeed across Canada.

In the end, my education assistant colleagues, like thousands of other education and health care workers, voted 52 percent against the offers. The 36 percent turnout is just one expression of a broader opposition to the deals and the alienation of workers from the treacherous union apparatuses.

The anti-democratic methods I witnessed are just one example of what we've seen elsewhere, including at the Alliance des professeures et professeurs de Montréal (APPM), Montreal's largest teachers' union and FAE affiliate.

The APPM held a vote immediately after the GA at which the tentative agreement was presented. This online meeting lasted over nine hours and ended at around 2 a.m. when many workers had already gone to bed. APPM leaders refused to hold the vote on another day, despite repeated requests from members. The agreement was finally ratified by only 52 percent.

The manoeuvres of the union apparatuses to impose these treasonous agreements are a continuation of the policy they have followed from the outset. They refused to mobilize the powerful popular support enjoyed by public sector workers to make their struggle the beginning of a workers' counter-offensive against capitalist austerity. And they have kept this struggle within the limits of the state-designed, pro-employer collective bargaining system and the provincial borders of Quebec, when the issues at stake concern all workers in Canada, the US and overseas: the defense of wages, working conditions and public services for all.

With these agreements, the government sees us as cheap, replaceable labor, to be disposed of as it sees fit.

The real issues we face are: lousy wages, staff shortages, work overload, job instability, and in general, a lack of respect for our skills and autonomy.

In addition to perpetuating our poor working conditions and further impoverishing us with wage increases below inflation, these agreements address none of the systemic problems we face due to staff shortages and decades of underfunding.

We love our jobs, but we can't accept being modern-day slaves. I call on all my colleagues to reject the proposed agreements with a resounding No.

If we vote Yes, our hands will be tied for five years, while (Quebec Premier Fancois) Legault will be able to continue ransacking public services and privatizing them, as he is doing with Bill 15 in health care.

The rejection of these deals must be seen as the first step in relaunching the struggle on a new basis, i.e., to unite all public sector workers and mobilize the entire working class in a political struggle to defend public services.



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