

After unions betray Quebec public sector workers' struggle: Workers must draw the political lessons

Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee
23 February 2024

The Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee urges hospital orderlies, nurses and technicians, teachers, school support staff and all other public and para-public sector workers to draw a critical balance sheet of the unions' sabotage of our struggle—one of the largest worker mobilizations in recent decades.

Despite the militancy of the rank and file, immense popular support, and widespread opposition to the union-negotiated agreements, these bureaucratic apparatuses succeeded in running our struggle into the ground.

Only by learning from this defeat can we prepare for the next stage of our struggle, which is already at hand as the government intensifies its privatization and austerity drives.

Quebec Premier François Legault got what he wanted: five-year collective agreements that include wage increases of 17.4 percent (well below the real-terms increase in the cost of living) and no improvement in our already intolerable working conditions.

The vague promises of investment in education and health care—totally inadequate after decades of budget cuts—are subject to a series of criteria that guarantee their non-implementation. For example, primary school teachers will only be able to receive help in their classrooms if 60 percent of the pupils in their cohort are recognized as being “in difficulty.” Once the agreements were signed, Education Minister Bernard Drainville admitted that, due to staff shortages, even this assistance will never see the light of day.

The unions' sabotage has undermined workers' confidence in their social power, sowing confusion and discouragement in the short term. The Legault government is counting on this to go on the offensive. It has already passed Bill 15 to press ahead with health care privatization and signaled its intention to attack the rights of construction workers with a new “reform” of industry work rules.

Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government and the entire Canadian ruling elite will also use this as an opportunity to

escalate their attack on workers' rights, privatize what's left of public services, and divert still more resources into financing Canadian imperialism's military wars and war preparations against Russia and China in close alliance with Washington.

But workers are not going to stand idly by while the various levels of government slash social spending for the benefit of private profit and imperialist aggression.

Bitter struggles will erupt in the period ahead, including among Quebec's 600,000 public sector workers. As elsewhere in the world, Quebec and Canada are experiencing an upsurge in class struggle in the face of rampant social inequality, the growing danger of world war, the climate crisis, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and other public health emergencies.

The key issue is to start preparing for these struggles now, by learning from our struggle and acting accordingly.

Our fight for quality jobs and public services was first and foremost a political struggle that could not progress without breaking out of the straitjacket of a “provincial collective bargaining” dispute and the entire Quebec nationalist framework in which the unions sought to constrain it. As our Committee explained in its founding statement issued last December 20:

“Objectively (the strike) 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.”

The central task was to expand the struggle by mobilizing workers across the province who strongly supported us in our fight to defend public services, and by appealing to our class brothers and sisters across North America who face the same big business-government assault on jobs, wages and social programs.

But the entire pro-capitalist trade union apparatus was determined to stifle our resistance and cede before the government's concessions demands.

Throughout the more than year-long contract negotiations, the four unions in the Common Front, the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE, Autonomous Teachers Federation) and the nurses' union (FIQ) did everything to divide and demobilize us. They maintained total silence surrounding their closed-door negotiations with the government, and when after months of foot-dragging they were compelled to sanction worker job action they did everything to limit and isolate it.

The inter-union Common Front refused to act on the rank and file's massive mandate for an all-out strike, even improvising a further stage in their program of "escalating" job action to prevent an "unlimited" strike. As we forewarned, they used the holiday period to ambush workers with tentative agreements whose full contents they refused to divulge in a timely fashion, and then rammed through using anti-democratic maneuvers.

The same is true of the FAE leadership, which was forced, under rank-and-file pressure, to call an unlimited general strike that lasted 22 days. Like the FIQ, which has isolated the nurses and other health professionals on the spurious grounds that they constitute a "special case," the FAE refused to make any appeal to the workers enrolled in the Common Front or the working class as a whole for a joint struggle against capitalist austerity.

The union bureaucrats' treacherous role was rooted in their fear that a province-wide general strike of all public sector workers would mean a head-on collision with the avowedly pro-big business, Quebec chauvinist CAQ government. Such a confrontation, they recognized, could quickly escape their control and spark a broader working class challenge that would threaten the "competitive position" of Quebec and Canadian big business and the entire capitalist order that guarantees their privileged social position.

As François Enault, vice-president of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CNTU), admitted in December as workers were pressing for an all-out strike: "Workers are ready to walk out tomorrow morning, but we [union leaders] don't want that." As for Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) President Éric Gingras he described the protracted contract dispute—and the risk of a clash between the government and public sector workers that it entailed—as a "psychodrama" that should be avoided at all costs in the future.

In their campaign of sabotage, the Quebec unions were assisted by their counterparts in the rest of Canada. The Canadian Labour Congress, and unions like CUPE, the

United Steelworkers and Unifor that together represent hundreds of thousands of Quebec workers did nothing to inform their members of the class battle raging in Quebec, let alone mobilize them in support.

If workers are to prevail, they need a radically different perspective and new organizations of struggle.

As our Committee has explained from the outset of the struggle, it is not by putting pressure on the union apparatuses that we'll be able to improve our working conditions and defend public services. Rather, our struggle can only advance insofar as we take it into our own hands, by opposing the unions' nationalist, pro-capitalist policies and mobilizing workers independently of and against them.

The unions cannot be reformed. They are run by a privileged bureaucracy, backed by the capitalist state, which has stifled and sabotaged the class struggle for decades, and whose interests are completely alien and hostile to those of the workers they claim to represent. This is true not only in Quebec and Canada, but throughout the world.

To take the offensive against the onslaught of the ruling class and their union accomplices, it is vital for workers to mobilize the immense social power of the working class in a political struggle against the entire reactionary program of the financial and business elite.

Building rank-and-file committees in all hospitals, schools and other workplaces is a central element in the struggle to mobilize the working class to defend public services and workers' living standards and social rights, and thereby thwart the maneuvers of the union bureaucracy.

Only then will it be possible for workers to put forward their own demands, while uniting the various contingents of the working class across sectors, provinces and national borders in a counteroffensive against austerity, war and the entire moribund capitalist system, which subordinates crying social needs to the profits of a tiny elite bloated on its own wealth and privileges.

We urge all workers ready to fight for this program to join the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee. Contact us at cbsectpub@gmail.com or by filling out the form at the bottom of this article.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact