

Quebec nurses reject union-backed concessions contract

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In a vote held over three days last week, the 80,000 nurses, nursing assistants, respiratory therapists and perfusionists affiliated with the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ) decisively rejected a concessions-filled agreement negotiated and recommended by their union.

Of the 60,000 workers who voted (a 77 percent turnout), 61 percent voted “No.” In so doing, they defied not only a hostile government and media campaign aimed at presenting them as “pig-headed” and “ungrateful,” but also intense pressure from their own union.

Opposition to the sellout agreement was especially high in the Montreal region. FIQ members employed at the giant, multi-hospital McGill University Health Centre voted 89 percent to reject. The vote was 81 percent “No” among members of the Syndicat des professionnelles en soins de l’Est-de-l’Île-de-Montréal.

The rejection of the sellout agreement is a sign both of nurses’ determination to defend their conditions and a slap in the face for the union apparatus. The FIQ leadership had hoped that 15 months of negotiations, punctuated by futile partial strikes held in strict accordance with Quebec’s anti-worker “essential services” legislation, would have sufficiently demobilized and discouraged the rank and file to make them ready to resign themselves to further givebacks.

Sonia Lebel, Quebec’s Treasury Board President and the governing Coalition Avenir Québec’s head of negotiations, immediately made it clear that the government would maintain its hardline stance. She arrogantly declared on X, “The context and our objectives will remain the same, particularly in terms of flexibility.”

FIQ President Julie Bouchard responded to this provocation by saying that she had no choice but to return to the negotiating table. She dismissed out of hand any idea of launching a genuine struggle for nurses’ demands. Speaking of the membership, Bouchard said, “If they tell

us to go on strike, we’ll go that far, but for the moment we’re not at all into those pressure tactics.”

In other words, the union leadership is persisting in stifling members’ anger in order to impose the government’s concession demands.

Hundreds of nurses took to social media to denounce the FIQ’s cowardly, collaborationist attitude, with many going so far as to call for Bouchard’s resignation. One nurse summed up the general indignation as follows: “You recommended that we accept an agreement that would have had a crucial **NEGATIVE** impact, not only on us, but also on our families and the nursing **RELIEF!** (That is the hiring of additional nurses to fill chronic staffing shortages) We felt betrayed by the union and by **YOU!**”

The agreement FIQ reached with the right-wing populist CAQ government was a stab in the back for the nurses and other health care professionals. They have endured decades of budget cuts and wage “restraint,” in addition to being among the primary victims of the ruling class’ ruinous “profits before lives” response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The defeated agreement called for wage increases, like those accepted by other Quebec public sector unions, of 17.4 percent spread over five years, falling well short of inflation forecasts. It also would have eliminated the right of part-time nurses to draw certain bonuses so as to pressure them into accepting full-time positions. Added to this was the absence of any serious steps to eliminate management’s systematic recourse to compulsory overtime (TSO) to fill staff shortages—a practice which has wreaked havoc on the personal lives, families and mental and physical health of many nurses.

FIQ also bowed to the government’s demand for greater “flexibility,” paving the way for nurses to be redeployed at will by management as happened on an emergency basis at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The

sellout agreement stipulated that nurses would henceforth be liable to be both temporarily and permanently reassigned against their wishes within newly amalgamated regionally based “centers of activity” within a radius of 25 to 35 km (roughly 15 to 22 miles).

The François Legault-led CAQ government’s frontal attack on public sector workers and the services they provide the population is part of its drive to transfer an ever greater share of the social wealth produced by the working class upward, to the capitalist elite and the most privileged sections of the middle class.

Like capitalist governments across Canada and around the world, the Legault government wants to reduce real wages, cut social spending and privatize public services in order to finance generous tax cuts for big business and the war plans of Canadian imperialism and NATO.

Toward this end, last December at the very height of the public sector strike movement, the CAQ government pushed through legislation, Bill 15, that creates a new agency, “Santé Québec,” to administer the province’s entire healthcare system. Under the mandate given it by Health Minister Christian Dubé, Santé Quebec will be run by “top guns” from the corporate sector and charged with finding efficiencies through competitive financing, the contracting out of services and privatization.

To move forward in their struggle to end punishing working conditions and defend the public health system, nurses and their colleagues must draw the lessons of the many recent bitter workers’ struggles, particularly the struggle of the 500,000 Quebec public sector workers, who were betrayed by the inter-union Common Front and the Fédération autonome de l’enseignement (Autonomous Teachers’ Federation), only a few months ago.

Nurses and public sector workers cannot take a single step forward based on a strategy of pressuring the unions and the government. Rather, they must turn to the rest of the working class and mobilize its immense social power in a counter-offensive against the entire austerity program of the ruling class.

In particular, nurses must reject the FIQ leadership’s bankrupt, sectional claims that they constitute a “special case” because theirs is a largely female profession. This only serves to isolate the nurses and divide them from the rest of the working class. In reality, FIQ members are facing the same big business-state class-war assault as all workers, and their struggle is part of a rising tide of working class resistance in Canada and around the world.

Conditions are more than favourable for nurses to rally support from their class brothers and sisters in Quebec

and across Canada. As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently wrote: “To expand their struggle,” nurses “must break out of the straitjacket of a state-designed Quebec ‘collective bargaining’ system, in which the financial parameters are set in advance by the government and meekly accepted by the union apparatuses.”

To do this, nurses and healthcare workers must build their own organs of struggle: rank-and-file committees in every institution, completely independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. The main task of these committees will be to mobilize the vast popular support enjoyed by nurses and draw the entire working class into the struggle to defend and expand healthcare and other vital public services.

Through a network of such committees, extended to all public sector workers, it will become possible for rank-and-file nurses and other workers to mount a unified struggle, based on their own demands for quality jobs and public services—not on what the ruling elite and privileged union bureaucracy deem “acceptable.”

This mobilization of working class power must be conceived first and foremost as a political struggle. The vast resources of society, which are more than ample to fulfill the needs of workers and ordinary people, must not be subordinated to the drive for profit and the profit-driven wars of the super-rich, but put at the service of the majority in establishing social equality.

We call on nurses and all workers interested in this perspective to join the Quebec Public Sector Workers Rank-and-File Coordinating Committee. Contact us at cbsectpub@gmail.com or by filling in the form below.



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