

Quebec government targets construction workers' jobs and working conditions

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The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government has tabled legislation to “modernize” the province’s construction industry that under the pretext of providing greater “flexibility” will impose speed-up and jeopardize workers’ jobs and safety.

Acting as a henchman for the building contractors and the banks and other large financial institutions that profit from their projects, Prime Minister François Legault is determined to impose sweeping changes in the rules governing the industry prior to the next collective bargaining round in 2025.

This legislative attack follows on from changes made in 2018-19 that slashed the training requirements for crane operators, and is a further step in deregulating the entire building industry.

Bill 51 is a key part of the government’s economic strategy, which seeks to exploit the profit-making potential of Quebec’s massive hydro-electric reserves and lower electricity rates. The construction sector accounts for 6.9 percent of the province’s GDP, with annual investments of \$73 billion in 2023, and employs nearly 300,000 workers, representing 1 in every 15 Quebec jobs.

Legault is counting on his new law to guarantee fat profits for his corporate cronies in the implementation of his flagship projects, in particular Hydro-Québec’s new power projects and the controversial Northvolt project to develop a Quebec-based EV battery industry.

The bill is primarily focused on increasing “productivity” and “flexibility.” Labor Minister Jean Boulet wants, for example, to “decompartmentalize” several construction trades to enable workers to perform “related” and “short-term” tasks that are currently exclusive to specific trades.

The bill would allow contractors to employ their workers anywhere in the province as of May 1, 2025,

by banning regional protection clauses that require local workers to be employed on projects in the regions. It would reduce from 1,500 to 750 the number of hours required for a worker to obtain “preferential employee” status, i.e., to be able to work throughout the province. Under the guise of “inclusion,” the requirement would drop to 400 hours for women, indigenous people, immigrants and people with disabilities.

For those with more than 15,000 hours’ experience, i.e., half of the 300,000 workers, the bill’s “full flexibility” clause would give employers full latitude to ship workers from one end of the province to the other.

Having essentially dictated its content, business circles warmly welcomed the tabling of Bill 51 in February. For them, the legislation represents a golden opportunity to cut costs while gaining greater control over their workforce.

However, for some, such as the Association de la construction du Québec (ACQ), the project does not go far enough because it did not include the elimination of construction regions. Others, like the Association des professionnels de la construction et de l’habitation du Québec (APCHQ), expressed “doubt” that the measures will have a “great effect on productivity,” particularly given the housing situation in Quebec.

These comments underscore that big business is intent on keeping pressure on the CAQ government not to deviate from its right-wing line.

With the housing crisis currently gripping the country, there is a desperate need for construction workers. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), 860,000 housing units will need to be built by 2030 in Quebec alone.

But far from investing massively in the building of affordable housing, the Legault government wants

instead to accelerate the deregulation of the industry to make it an even more lucrative source of profits for big business.

Faced with the scale of the attack on workers' rights and the threat to their jobs and safety, the construction unions have been forced to adopt a pose of opposition to avoid losing what remains of their credibility with their members.

On the first day of parliamentary hearings on Bill 51, the FTQ-Construction organized a protest demonstration in front of the National Assembly. Carl Dufour, president of the CSD-Construction, promised "a solid rendez-vous in 2025 for the renewal of collective agreements."

These are empty words. In Quebec, as elsewhere in Canada and internationally, unions today act as a veritable police force for the employers, nipping in the bud worker resistance movements and, when that proves impossible, rapidly isolating any struggle that erupts against employer and government attacks.

This is clearly evident from the experience of Quebec construction workers over the past decade.

During negotiations in 2013 and again in 2017, the province's construction unions imposed concessions, in addition to bowing to the Liberal government's 2017 draconian anti-strike legislation.

In 2018, they sabotaged the struggle of 2,000 crane operators, who paralyzed major construction sites for 8 days, bravely defying a back-to-work injunction. The Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ) and FTQ-Construction, working in close concert with the then Liberal government of Philippe Couillard, responded by threatening to put Local 791g under trusteeship if it did not immediately end the walkout.

In 2021, during the last collective bargaining round, the construction unions once again waged a demobilization campaign and used government threats that any strike would be met with a back-to-work law to push through sellout agreements.

To defend their rights and their living and working conditions, construction workers must break with the bureaucratic, pro-capitalist union apparatuses and turn to their working-class brothers and sisters who are facing the same attacks.

As a first step in this direction, new organs of struggle, rank-and-file committees completely independent of the unions, are needed to organize the

struggle in Quebec's construction sector, linking it with other workers' struggles across North America.



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