

Quebec unions refuse to mobilize workers against proposed strike-ban law they call a “declaration of war”

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11 April 2025

Bill 89, tabled at the end of February by the “Quebec First” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government and supported by the Parti Québécois and the provincial Liberal Party, represents a major new attack on the working class—not just in Quebec, but across Canada. Under the Orwellian pretext of ensuring “the well-being of the population,” Premier François Legault and his CAQ are seeking to massively restrict the right to strike, reducing it to a symbolic right and one that the state can take away at will.

With its “Act to give greater consideration to the needs of the population in the event of a strike or lockout,” the government is arrogating the power to put an end to any work stoppage, as well as massively expanding the definition used to determine which workers are legally forbidden from ever striking.

This constitutes a major escalation in the attack on the right to strike that federal and provincial governments have mounted for decades, whatever the political party in power.

Demonstrating that the real interests being served are not those of the “population” and “vulnerable people” as the government claims, but those of big business, Bill 89 has been enthusiastically welcomed by the Conseil de Patronat (Quebec Business Council), Quebec Chamber of Commerce and the other employer federations. They have termed it a necessary response to the sharp rise in the number of strikes since 2021.

The unions have been forced to acknowledge that Bill 89 is an “all-out anti-strike law,” a “gift to management,” and a “declaration of war.”

The mainstream media, which systematically accuses striking workers of taking the population “hostage,” has joined the business lobby groups in lauding the Legault government for its efforts to “restore balance” in labour relations. When a handful of union members, whistles in hand, peacefully disrupted a speech that Labour Minister Jean Boulet was about to give to employer representatives, *La Presse* smeared them as “violent” rioters.

As across Canada, Quebec’s capitalist ruling elite is attempting to muzzle growing social opposition to capitalist austerity and war with increasingly undemocratic methods. In this, it is being emboldened by President Donald Trump’s fascist-style attacks on immigrants and workers in the United States.

Dictatorial legislation to ensure profits flow through increased worker exploitation

Under Bill 89, the notion of “essential services,” which already limits the right to strike in many sectors, particularly health care, would be extended to virtually all sectors of the economy, including education. Using the bill’s vague, catch-all stipulation that a labour dispute must not unduly impact the population’s “well-being,” the government and employers will be able to prevail upon the Tribunal Administratif du Travail (TAL, Administrative Labour Tribunal) to pre-emptively strip large numbers of workers of the right to strike, disempowering any worker job action even before it begins.

Secondly, the government is trying to give itself the legal power to end any strike and to appoint an arbitrator to dictate the terms of the new contract, if it deems efforts to end a dispute by mediation and conciliation have failed. All the Labour Minister need do is issue an order to this effect.

Certain sectors, notably public health care and construction, are excluded from this latter provision. However, via Bill 89, the government is for the first time giving itself the right to impose lockouts in the public sector.

In its attack on the right to strike, the CAQ is taking direct inspiration from former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government. In the space of a few months in 2024, Trudeau’s Liberals used the unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board and a cooked-up “reinterpretation” of Section 107 of the Canadian Labour Code to break a series of strikes: those of WestJet mechanics; CPKC and CN railway workers; and British Columbia and Quebec longshore workers. The Legault government tabled its Bill 89 shortly after Trudeau had once again used Section 107 in mid-December to outlaw a month-long strike by 55,000 Canada Post workers.

Legault is paving the way for all provincial governments in Canada to adopt similar anti-democratic legislation. In response, the working class must be mobilized in Quebec and across Canada to defend workers’ right to collectively struggle and determine their conditions of employment and to oppose the entire austerity program of the ruling class, of which Bill 89 is a part. Mass action must be taken, including strikes uniting all workers, private and public sector alike.

The unions huff and puff

Such an independent working class industrial and political struggle will only be mounted if rank-and-file workers take the struggle into

their own hands, in direct opposition to the pro-capitalist union apparatuses that have been working for decades to stifle or torpedo any resistance movement from below.

Workers must not be fooled by the union leaders' verbal declamations against Bill 89 and pledges to organize angry protests. Through such theatrics they seek to maintain their control over an increasingly restless rank and file and divert workers' opposition to the assault on their right to strike into an impotent protest campaign.

The union bureaucracy—beginning with the heads of the three main labour federations, the FTQ/QFL, CSN/CNTU and CSQ—are utterly opposed to mobilizing the social power of the working class. Any protests they do sanction are animated by a protest perspective, focussed on vain appeals to Legault and his reactionary, avowedly pro-big business CAQ government “to see reason” and “preserve social peace.” As with every workers' struggle, they seek to confine it within a provincialist and nationalist framework, and the boundaries of Quebec establishment politics.

As for the unions that claim to represent workers across the country—such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Unifor and the United Steelworkers— they are doing nothing to alert their members in other provinces of the implications of the Quebec strike ban, let alone lifting a finger to mobilize them in support of the struggle against Bill 89.

Significantly, but altogether unsurprisingly, the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), an ally of the union bureaucracy and a close collaborator of the federal Liberals, is totally silent on the Legault government's attack.

Despite the obvious parallels between Bill 89 in Quebec and the federal invocation of Section 107 of the Labour Code to suppress the right to strike across Canada, the unions continue to present Bill 89 as a separate issue, limited to Quebec and unconnected to the ruling elite's broader attacks on the wages and jobs of all Canadian workers. They are acting in accordance with their long-standing nationalist orientation to foster division and block the unity of the predominantly French-speaking workers in Quebec with their class brothers and sisters throughout Canada.

The unions' corporatist partnership with the ruling elite

The real motivations for the unions' “opposition” to Bill 89 were revealed by Éric Gingras, the president of the Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ). He has denounced the legislation, which the government intends to adopt by no later than the end of the spring, as “a useless provocation, at the very moment when the government is calling for the greatest possible social cohesion in the face of the Trump administration's tariff threats.” He added that “the balance of labour relations that has been built up over more than twenty years and which, moreover, guarantees social peace” is in danger of being disrupted.

In reality, for the working class, this period of so-called “social peace” has been characterized by a massive ruling class assault on its social position—the dismantling of public services, sweeping attacks on jobs and wages, unprecedented growth in social inequality, a catastrophic response to the COVID-19 pandemic that prioritized profits over lives, etc.

Those who have reaped the rewards of the “social peace” extolled

by the union bureaucrats is the capitalist ruling class, whose profits have massively increased. This process of transferring wealth from the bottom to the top has been orchestrated with the complicity of the union bureaucrats, who have systematically suppressed the class struggle.

The caste of well-paid functionaries that comprise the union apparatus seek to uphold the traditional collective bargaining system, founded on the state-designed anti-worker Labour Code, because it underpins their privileges. In return, they police the working class, sabotaging its resistance and working hand-in-glove with the employers and governments to impose concession contracts. Through this tripartite (union/employer/government) mechanism, now expanded to include a vast network of committees and union-led investment funds, the unions have integrated themselves ever more completely into management and the state.

In an open letter to the CAQ government, the unions boasted that “over 95% of negotiations are settled without strikes or lockouts.” By changing the rules of the game, the government, they warned, is “playing with fire,” and risks “burning its fingers.” In other words, the union bureaucrats fear that by fanning workers' anger the government risks sparking social opposition that they will be unable to smother.

Workers must take the struggle into their own hands

Workers should have no illusions. The threat by union leaders to challenge Bill 89 in the same courts that criminalize strikes and side with management and government is nothing but smoke and mirrors.

Workers must immediately take the struggle into their own hands and prepare a counter-offensive to anti-strike laws and the ruling oligarchy's entire program of austerity and imperialist war. They will find no allies in the National Assembly or the Canadian Parliament. Instead, they must forge the closest unity in struggle with their class brothers and sisters across Canada, who face similar attacks on their democratic and social rights.

The struggle in defense of jobs, wages, public services and democratic rights can only be victorious if workers organize themselves through rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. Against the unions' attempts to divide workers along sectional, regional, and ethnic-linguistic lines, rank-and-file committees will fight to unite all workers in Quebec and Canada and turn them to their true allies—workers in North America, Europe and worldwide who are likewise being thrust into struggle. By unifying their struggles, workers will be able to answer the ever widening big business-state assault on their social and democratic rights and develop a counter-offensive against capitalist exploitation and for social equality.



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