

Quebec adopts draconian anti-strike law with complicity of unions

Laurent Lafrance

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Shortly before rising for its annual summer break, Quebec's National Assembly adopted legislation that dramatically curtails Quebec workers' right to strike and gives the provincial government sweeping powers to impose binding arbitration.

Bill 89 constitutes a massive assault on the working class in Quebec and across Canada. Under the Orwellian-named "Act to give greater consideration to the needs of the population in the event of a strike or lock-out," the government will henceforth be able to illegalize virtually any strike. And to do so merely on the word of the labour minister, without any recourse to a National Assembly vote.

Premier François Legault, a former Air Transat CEO, and his chauvinist, national-autonomist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) pushed Bill 89 through the National Assembly May 29 with the support of the official opposition Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ). The pro-independence Parti Québécois (PQ), which has imposed huge social spending cuts and criminalized workers' struggles whenever it has held office, voted against the law for purely tactical reasons.

If Legault and his CAQ have been able to impose this sweeping anti-worker and anti-democratic measure even as they languish in the polls, it is above all due to the complacency and complicity of the bureaucratic, pro-employer trade unions. While they had to concede that Bill 89 was a "special omnibus law" given as a "gift to employers" and a "declaration of war," the heads of Quebec's major labour federations and unions did nothing to mobilize workers to oppose it, let alone link the defence of workers' rights to strike and collectively determine their terms of employment to a broader working-class challenge to capitalist austerity and war.

Instead, they pleaded to Legault for continued "social dialogue," including during the annual May Day meeting between the heads of the province's labour federations and the premier.

Bill 89 is part of the shift of the ruling class in Canada and globally toward authoritarian rule in response to the resurgence of class struggle.

Making clear that the true aim of Bill 89 is to ensure an unimpeded flow of big business profits, Labour Minister Jean Boulet has repeatedly deplored the high number of strikes in Quebec relative to other provinces and the US. He has condemned a "culture of militancy in Quebec" that has "unfortunate social and economic impacts."

Under the demagogic pretext of wanting to "ensure the social, economic, and environmental security of the population," the government has now extended the concept of "essential services" to education and the private sector. This will result in large groups of workers being stripped of the right to strike.

Employers and unions will have seven days to agree on what services will be maintained in the event of an impending job action.

Should those talks fail, the state's Administrative Labor Tribunal will decide when and how many workers are legally prohibited from walking off the job.

Health care workers are excluded from Bill 89's provisions, because they are already subject to the Essential Services Act. It greatly restricts their right to strike, reducing it in many cases to a token right. Under Administrative Labor Tribunal orders, there have been cases where during an official job action, more nurses have had to be on duty than during a normal workday.

The government can also end an ongoing private sector strike and appoint a pro-management arbitrator to dictate the terms of a "collective agreement," if the intervention of a mediator or conciliator proves unsuccessful. Until now, arbitration was a last resort and, apart from "emergency" strikebreaking laws, had to be requested by the negotiating parties on a voluntary basis.

Bill 89 represents a major escalation in the Canadian ruling class's assault on the right to strike. It follows close on the heels of the federal Liberal government's use of the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) and a cooked-up "reinterpretation" of Section 107 of the Canada Labor Code to break a series of strikes in the second half of 2024. This includes a month-long walkout by 55,000 Canada Post workers, which the CIRB illegalized on the orders of the then Liberal Labour Minister, Steven MacKinnon.

In recent years, railway workers, longshoremen, postal workers, educators, and other workers have been the target of one "emergency" strikebreaking law after another, imposed by provincial and federal governments of all political stripes.

Now this process is being "normalized," with first Ottawa and then Quebec giving themselves the power to criminalize worker job action through government-decree, bypassing parliament altogether.

The unions suppress opposition to Bill 89, while pleading for "social peace"

The unions' opposition to Bill 89 amounted to no more than hot air. They did not even make an effort to mobilize workers for the two major demonstrations they called in the name of opposing Bill 89, one in Quebec City and the other, on the occasion of May Day, in Montreal.

As always, the union bureaucracy did everything to tie workers' opposition to the Quebec political establishment and to limit their political horizons to Quebec. Although Legault and Boulet boasted

that in their attack on the right to strike they were emulating the federal Liberal government's authoritarian power grab, the unions presented Bill 89 as a single issue and a CAQ government misstep—not part of a broader ruling-class assault on the social and democratic rights of workers across Canada and internationally.

The Quebec Federation of Labour, the Confederation of National Trade Unions and the other Quebec labour organizations issued no call for workers in the rest of Canada for support in defending workers' legal right to collectively assert their class interests. Similarly, the unions in the rest of the country—including those like the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the United Steelworkers, and Unifor with a sizable presence in Quebec—did nothing to alert their members to the threat Bill 89 and the Liberal government's "reinterpretation" of Section 107 represent to workers' rights in every part of the country.

The union bureaucracy, both in Quebec and the rest of Canada, fears that a working-class mobilization against Bill 89 could become the catalyst for a broader workers' rebellion that would threaten the stability of the capitalist order on which their own privileges depend.

In a statement "denouncing" Bill 89's adoption, the leaders of Quebec's major union federations lauded the previous "framework surrounding the exercise of the right to strike, which was limited overall," saying that it "offered workers the opportunity to improve their conditions within clear guidelines."

What a distortion of reality! Far from "improving their conditions," over the past four decades workers have endured a massive erosion in their social position as the outcome of relentless big business attacks on their jobs, rights, and public services—attacks greatly facilitated by the union apparatus.

It is precisely through the system of "collective bargaining," framed by the government-designed Labor Code and rigged in favor of employers, that the unions have ensured "industrial peace" for the ruling class. They have systematically stifled workers' struggles and imposed concessions in exchange for a privileged social position, high salaries, and innumerable seats on tripartite government-employer-union committees and wealthy investment funds.

For the union bureaucracy, the previous labour-relations regime "worked" and the new sweeping restrictions on the right to strike are "unnecessary." In their statement, the unions warned the government that by further curtailing workers' rights, they risk provoking "demonstrations and chaos" that they may not be able to channel into futile protests and dissipate as they have done hitherto.

The union top brass do everything they can to avoid calling strikes. However, when forced to do so under rank-and-file pressure, the bureaucrats use them as a last-resort "safety valve," as a means to vent workers' anger, while isolating and demobilizing them, before seeking to impose concessionary contracts that ensure the employers' profits and "global competitiveness."

In guise of opposing Bill 89, unions rally behind PQ

With Bill 89 now law, Quebec's major labour organization unions have spelled out that they will not lift a finger to mobilize the working class against it.

They have announced that they intend to challenge the legislation's constitutionality on the basis of the Quebec and Canadian Charters of

Rights, a process they themselves admit could take "10 years." Second, they are vowing to make the law an "issue in the next elections" scheduled for October 2026. More specifically, they want to use the CAQ and PLQ's support for Bill 89 as a means to renew and strengthen their long-standing political alliance with the right-wing, chauvinist Parti Québécois.

Speaking about the unions' plans, Quebec Federation of Labor President Magali Picard told a television interviewer that "the next government will have to commit to repealing the law." She then added, "I can tell you that discussions with a party that is likely to govern Quebec are very positive." When the host asked her if this meant union support for the PQ, which has been leading in the polls for well over a year, Picard said, "Talk to [PQ leader] Paul Saint-Pierre Plamondon... We are discussing it."

Workers must take a serious warning from the fact that the unions' response to the passage of an authoritarian, class-war, anti-strike law is to try to boost the "pro-worker" credentials of the PQ. Not only has the PQ been one of the Quebec capitalist elite's parties of provincial government for more than a half-century. Over the past decade-and-a-half it has increasingly evolved into a far-right party that is competing with the CAQ as to which is the most strident promoter of anti-immigrant chauvinism and ethnic-linguistic exclusivism.

The PQ's opposition to Bill 89 is manifestly a fraud. It is driven by electoral considerations and the calculation that close ties with the union bureaucracy will prove useful in containing working class opposition should it return to power in 2026.

In the late 1990s and as part of its attempt to create the "winning conditions" for an independence referendum, the Bouchard-Landry PQ imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history. When nurses rebelled in 1999, it imposed a savage strikebreaking law and punishing fines. The next PQ government, that led by Pauline Marois between 2012 and 2014, slashed welfare benefits, imposed annual post-secondary tuition fee hikes, criminalized a major construction strike, and poisoned the social climate with its xenophobic "Charter of Values."

The fight against Bill 89 is not over, but to move forward, workers must understand that they are facing a political struggle. They are confronted with the capitalist state and its entire repressive arsenal at the service of big business and the financial elite. The fight against dictatorial laws must be seen as part of a broader struggle to develop a working-class political and industrial offensive in opposition to austerity, imperialist war and dictatorship and for the establishment of workers' power, the expropriation of the capitalist oligarchy, and the radical reorganization of economic life to secure social equality.

Genuine opposition to the anti-strike laws can only develop if workers wrest control of the struggle from the union bureaucracy and organize independently in new organizations: rank-and-file committees, by and for workers, guided by an international socialist perspective.



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