

Quebec's CAQ government makes further massive cuts to public education

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Quebec's avowedly right-wing and pro-big business, "national autonomist" Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government announced further savage cuts to public education last month, just before the end of the school year.

Citing a supposed \$1 billion "shortfall" in the education budget, Premier François Legault's government has demanded that the province's school service centers slash \$570 million in the coming year, in an initial round of "belt-tightening." The CAQ government previously replaced elected school boards with regional "school service centres" to give it greater control over the province's public schools.

The more than half-a-billion in cuts will ravage a public school system that has already been brought to the point of collapse by decades of austerity under Parti Québécois, Liberal and CAQ provincial governments. Admitting that services to students will be directly affected, Education Minister Bernard Drainville said he could not "guarantee that every student will have everything they need."

In messages sent to teachers and education support staff, school service center administrators have indicated that the cuts will potentially impact all the services that schools provide. Under active consideration are cuts in the number of full-time teachers and to speech therapy, psychology, and special education programs, as well as to remedial classes, food assistance for needy students, book purchases and field trips.

The impacts will be felt as early as late August, when the next school year begins. Teachers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that cuts will be in the order of 5% of a school's total budget, or nearly \$100,000 for a neighborhood school with 300 students. Special education teachers with several years of experience have already learned that their positions will be eliminated due to reductions to the number of hours allotted to serving special education students.

Petitions calling for the cuts to be withdrawn or demanding the resignation of Education Minister Drainville have begun circulating on social media, gathering tens of thousands of signatures in a matter of days. Protests, apparently organized spontaneously by parents and educators, have already taken place. Some waved pots and pans in a nod to the militant province-wide student strike that convulsed the province in 2012. Further actions are planned across Quebec in coming weeks.

While insufficient to reverse the cuts, these protests reflect widespread and growing opposition to the Legault government and more generally the ruling class assault on public services. The government's fresh push to slash social spending comes amid revelations that it has lost billions of dollars in disastrous economic

"development" projects, including the SAAQClic computer system fiasco, the bankruptcy of the Northvolt battery company and that of the Lion Electric bus manufacturer.

Ultimately, all the money "saved" through cuts to education, health care and other public services will be funneled into the pockets of big business and the rich and towards equipping Canadian imperialism to wage wars round the world. Mark Carney's federal Liberal government has already announced massive increases in military spending—including a \$9.3 billion increase in the current fiscal year—with the aim of raising military expenditures to 5% of GDP (about \$150 billion per year in current dollars) by 2035.

Quebec Premier Legault is promoting Canada's crash rearmament program and that of its European NATO allies as a golden opportunity to "strengthen" Quebec's economy. In recent weeks, he has made multiple trips to Europe to discuss and sign weapons contracts with government officials and arms and military transport manufacturers.

All of this is taking place in the context of a dangerous escalation toward a third World War, which has intensified since Donald Trump became US president. In addition to NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel's imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza, Trump and Israel waged a massive, illegal, 12-day aerial bombardment of Iran last month, with Ottawa's full support.

As the Legault government dismantles and privatizes what remains of public services, it has been mounting a vicious, weeks-long campaign against the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE), a self-proclaimed militant union representing some 60,000 teachers, mostly from the cosmopolitan Montreal area. In contrast with virtually all other unions in Quebec, the FAE has vocally opposed the CAQ's chauvinist Bill 21, which, under the guise of "secularism," attacks the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Muslim women.

Legault's ultimate target is not the union bureaucracy, which systematically sabotages workers' struggles and imposes sell-out rotten contracts, but rather education workers opposed to social cuts and the CAQ's anti-immigrant and Quebec chauvinism.

During the struggle of 600,000 Quebec public sector workers in 2023-24, the FAE was forced, under pressure from militant teachers to launch an all-out strike that ultimately lasted 22 days. However, the union leadership refused to make the strike the spearhead of a broader working-class mobilization in defence of education and all public services. It claimed that teachers acting alone and without challenging the refusal of the other public sector unions to call a general strike would be able to pressure Legault into making concessions. As result of the joint efforts of the FAE and inter-union Common Front bureaucrats, the public sector workers' struggle was derailed and concessionary contracts imposed.

With their witch hunt of the FAE, the CAQ government, the *Journal de Montréal*, and other right-wing nationalists are trying to intimidate rank and file teachers and discipline the union bureaucrats to fall even more slavishly into line.

When FAE president Mélanie Hubert endorsed the petition calling for Drainville's resignation, he responded: "I have no lessons to learn from a union that deprived our children of school for five weeks of strike action and that uses its members' money to challenge the secularism law."

The baiting of the FAE is part of an authoritarian turn against the working class as a whole. At the end of May, the CAQ, with the support of the Quebec Liberal Party, passed Bill 89, which dramatically limits workers' right to strike and gives the Labour Minister the power to illegalize any worker job action and impose binding arbitration. Under its provisions, education workers will for the first time be subject to "essential services" requirements that effectively prevent all but token walkouts.

It is in this context that the true significance of the CAQ government's campaign to restore "discipline" in the schools emerges. Under the pretext of countering "violence" and "incivility" in schools, the government has made the use of titles and other hierarchical language mandatory, ordered schools to update their disciplinary codes, and imposed a blanket ban on students using cellphones while on school property. These measures, combined with the CAQ's savage cuts, will only intensify the social tensions and pedagogical challenges in Quebec's public schools.

To defend their jobs and working conditions and oppose the dismantling of public education, teachers and school support staff must fight to mobilize the social power of the working class in an industrial and political offensive against the Legault government and the entire Canadian ruling class and its agenda of austerity and war.

Such a struggle can only be developed through a rank-and-file rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses, which for decades have systematically demobilized the working class and, responded to Legault's sweeping assault on the right to strike with appeals for "social dialogue."

Directly tied to the employers and the state through investment funds and a vast network of corporatist committees and agencies, the unions function as an integral part of the Quebec political establishment to suppress the class struggle, confine the growing opposition of their members within the framework of Quebec bourgeois politics, and divide workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada. In so far as they feel compelled to speak out against Legault's actions and on occasion organize feeble protests against them, it is all within a Quebec nationalist framework aimed at dividing opposition to Legault's austerity measures and workers rights from a broader struggle against the social cuts being implemented by Mark Carney's federal Liberal government and the entire Canadian ruling class. This helps perpetuate the division between workers in Quebec and their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada that is pivotal to the maintenance of capitalist rule.

It was the unions' betrayal of the powerful public sector strike movement in 2023 and their acquiescence, in Quebec as across Canada, to the federal Liberal government's arrogation of the power to break strikes using a cooked-up reinterpretation of the Canada Labour Code that has emboldened the CAQ government to impose its own sweeping antistrike law and launch a new austerity drive.

The newly-formed, union-promoted coalition "Ensemble, unis pour

l'école" (Together, United for Schools), which brings together the education unions, school administrators, and parent committees, is advancing a perspective that is a dead end. Essentially, the union bureaucracy is telling workers to stay on the sidelines and that with a little pressure, exerted alongside school administrators (the employer's representatives on the ground), they will be able to persuade Legault and the big business CAQ government to "see reason."

At the same time, the union bureaucrats are reviving their traditional political alliance with the Parti Québécois, with the intention of promoting its return to power in the provincial election slated for October 2026 as the means to oppose the CAQ's attacks. No matter that the PQ has come into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing brutal austerity measures and antistrike laws, whenever in office, and competes with the CAQ in the promotion of far-right attacks on immigrants and Quebec chauvinism.

Workers must not allow their opposition to be derailed. They must take matters into their own hands, through the building in every workplace of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in political opposition to the trade union apparatuses.

Through such committees workers can formulate and fight for their own demands, countermand the sabotage of the union bureaucrats, popularize and broaden the struggle to defend public education, and fight for the development of a cross-Canada working-class industrial and political counter-offensive.

To develop such a struggle, Quebec workers must consciously repudiate the nationalist perspective and political framework of the union bureaucracy, which serves only to bind them to the ruling class and divide them from their class brothers and sisters across Canada and internationally. Instead they must orient to the global upsurge of the working class that is being impelled by capitalism's systemic crisis and the ruling class' embrace of war and reaction.

More than ever workers face a political struggle over the question of how society's wealth should be utilized: should it be used to finance the imperialist war machine and enrich a minority of super-rich, or to meet the social needs of all?

Only through the establishment of workers' political power can the massive transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top, at the expense of workers and for the benefit of the oligarchy, be stopped and human needs placed before capitalist profit.



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