

Montreal transit unions capitulate before ruling-class campaign of intimidation and repression

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23 November 2025

Capitulating to a ruling-class campaign of intimidation and repression, the leaders of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) ended walkouts by two separate groups of Société de transport de Montréal (STM) workers earlier this month.

For weeks, employers, the corporate media and the political establishment—federalist and Quebec sovereignist alike—joined forces to demonize the Montreal transit workers, accusing bus and subway (Metro) drivers and maintenance workers of “holding the population hostage.”

This campaign was led by Quebec Labor Minister Jean Boulet, the right-wing populist tabloid *Le Journal de Montréal*, Parti Québécois (PQ) leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, and the newly elected mayor of Montreal, former Trudeau Liberal government minister Soraya Martinez Ferrada.

After denouncing the Administrative Labor Tribunal (TAT, Tribunal administratif du travail) for not being strict enough in limiting STM workers’ right to strike, Boulet and Quebec Premier François Legault introduced Bill 8 into the National Assembly on November 12 with the aim of advancing the entry into force of their draconian Law 14, originally scheduled for November 30.

This law (formerly Bill 89) is widely despised among workers because it imposes severe limitations on the right to strike in both the public and private sectors. It dramatically broadens the concept of “essential services,” and gives the Quebec labour minister the power to illegalize strikes on his say-so and impose contracts through binding arbitration.

Bill 8 had two objectives. First, it provided a quicker way for Legault and his Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government to criminalize the STM strike than adopting an emergency back-to-work law. Second, it was meant to force all of the CAQ’s rivals in the National Assembly to publicly back Law 14, and thereby help legitimize it in the eyes of the public.

Law 14 is part of an all-out assault in Quebec and across Canada on workers’ right to strike—that is, on their right to collectively assert their class interests. As around the globe, the Canadian ruling class is responding to an historic crisis of world capitalism by turning to authoritarian methods of rule to impose the dictates of the financial oligarchy: the dismantling of public services, privatization, massive military spending hikes and increased worker exploitation.

In recent years, the federal Liberal government under Justin Trudeau, and now his successor Mark Carney, has repeatedly intervened to criminalize strikes using a fraudulent reinterpretation of

Section 107 of the Canadian Labor Code. Those directly targeted include Canada Post workers, railway workers, port workers, and Air Canada flight attendants. Last month, Alberta’s far-right United Conservative Party provincial government criminalized a strike by more than 50,000 teachers.

Governments have been able to systematically intervene in labor disputes to break strikes with special laws and authoritarian back-to-work orders because the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Unifor, CUPE and the other unions have not lifted a finger to oppose them, even when workers were pressing for defiance despite the threat of fines and other reprisals.

When the Air Canada flight attendants defied the Carney government and its minions on the Canada Industrial Relations Board, the CUPE leadership quickly ended their “illegal” walkout and accepted a sellout agreement that was subsequently rejected by more than 99 percent of the rank and file.

In Quebec, the major union federations—the CSN, the Quebec Federation of Labour and the Conseil des syndicats du Québec (CSQ)—denounced Bill 89 as a “declaration of war,” but did nothing to mobilize workers against it. In all, they organized a grand total of two token demonstrations, neither of which was widely publicized. Instead, the union top brass pleaded for “social dialogue” with ex-big-business CEO Legault, and joined the unions in the rest of Canada in supporting “Team Canada,” the Canadian bourgeoisie’s alliance to defend its profits, markets, and global imperialist interests in the face of US President Donald Trump’s trade-war tariffs and annexation threats.

The STM unions’ surrender is only the logical continuation of the unions’ systematic suppression of the class struggle, which is rooted in their nationalist and pro-capitalist orientation. CUPE and the CSN did nothing to counter the capitalist elite’s campaign of lies and smears against the transit workers. They launched no mass campaign to explain that the public transit system is in crisis, not because of workers’ supposedly “too generous” conditions, but because successive PQ, Liberal and CAQ governments have imposed decades of social spending cuts. Raising this issue would have immediately highlighted the need to mobilize other sections of the working class behind the strikers in their fight against capitalist austerity and anti-strike laws.

As junior partners of the ruling elite, the union apparatuses have, from the outset, feared that the militant strike movement among the STM workers could spark a broader mobilization of the working class against the assault on public services and jobs. Such a struggle has the

potential to spiral out of their control and could quickly pose a challenge to the capitalist edifice and the material interests of the ruling class that they are busy preserving, and on which their own privileges deperened.

On Tuesday, November 11, as the government was poised to introduce Bill 8 in the National Assembly, the CSN announced it was “suspending” the partial strike of the 2,400 CTM maintenance workers. It justified this by saying that it wanted to avoid Law 14’s coming into force two weeks early, and with it the possibility the government would immediately impose binding arbitration.

This only emboldened Legault and Boulet. They responded by tabling Bill 8 in the National Assembly the very next morning. Two days later, CUPE, Canada’s largest union, with over 700,000 members nationwide, followed suit. It announced the signing of a tentative agreement and the cancellation of a planned November 15-16 strike by 4,500 bus and Metro drivers, which would have paralyzed all public transportation in Canada’s second-largest city. Another agreement was signed on November 19 for the 1,300 administrative and technical employees who were also preparing to strike.

Whether Law 14 is brought forward or only comes into force at the end of this month is not the real issue for workers. The unions have effectively sabotaged their struggle, and the law still hangs like a sword of Damocles over their heads. The unions are advising Legault to use their services to impose concessions-laden agreements, but they will submit to binding arbitration should the government impose it.

Workers must vigorously oppose either alternative by developing a new strategy based on making their struggle the spearhead of a broader working class industrial and political struggle.

The PQ’s support for the assault on the STM workers, which included helping lead the chorus of denunciations and backing Bill 8, lays bare the utter hypocrisy of its purported opposition to Bill 89 and Law 14. The unions have used this grandstanding to resurrect their longstanding alliance with this right-wing capitalist party, which promotes anti-immigrant chauvinism typical of the far right. The unions have been careful to gloss over the fact that the PQ itself has imposed savage austerity and anti-worker laws whenever it has held office.

Workers in Quebec and across Canada must draw critical lessons from the transit workers’ struggle. It has exposed the class divisions that run through society and determine the conduct of all the political actors. In the face of a challenge from below, all the squabbling factions of the ruling elite—federalists (PLQ), sovereignists (PQ, Québec Solidaire) and Quebec national-autonomists (CAQ), from the hard right to the so-called “left”—quickly put aside their tactical differences to attack their real common enemy: the working class.

Québec Solidaire (QS), a party of the privileged middle classes that falsely presents itself as “progressive,” made no call to support and expand the STM workers’ struggle, just as it colluded with the union bureaucracy to block any working class challenge to Bill 89. QS called for a “negotiated” solution to the conflict at the STM. That is, it favoured the imposition of concessionary contracts with the help of the unions, as has happened for decades, rather than a back-to-work law. Their greatest fear is that workers could conclude they need to break out of the rigged, pro-employer collective bargaining system.

Workers must recognize that the austerity policies of the Legault government, and the business elite behind it, target not only public transportation but all public services. Hospitals, schools, social programs, infrastructure—everything is falling apart, and the new

round of cuts being imposed at both the federal and provincial levels will only exacerbate the crisis. While slashing social spending, governments are providing billions in tax cuts to big business and massively increasing military budgets on behalf of Canadian imperialism.

The STM workers must develop their struggle as a political class struggle. They must break out of a “collective bargaining” framework in which the financial parameters, set by employers and the state and accepted by the unions, are based on the false premise that there is “no money” for decent jobs and quality services.

The main obstacle to mounting such a struggle is the union bureaucracy, which time and again isolates different sections of workers, disarms them politically, and imposes concessions-laden contracts.

The union bureaucracy is organizing a “Grand public and inter-union rally” on November 29. They aim not to launch an offensive against austerity and the anti-strike laws, but to prepare the union bureaucracy’s intervention in next year’s provincial elections. The unions intend to use the elections to divert and channel workers’ anger over the CAQ’s cuts and Bill 14 behind the establishment opposition parties, principally the Parti Québécois, which they tacitly support.

In opposition to the efforts of the union apparatuses to divide workers from their class brothers and sisters in Canada, the United States and around the world, Quebec workers should seize upon the November 29 demonstration as an opportunity to make an appeal for a cross-Canada and international mobilization of the working class against capitalist austerity, authoritarianism and war.

Such a movement will only be possible if workers take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file committees independent of the nationalist, pro-capitalist union apparatuses. Through such committees workers will give themselves the means to mobilize their social power; unify their struggles, cutting across all the attempts of the ruling class to divide them along national, racial and ethno-linguistic lines; and to develop an independent industrial and political offensive in opposition to austerity and war and for the socialist reorganization of society, so that human needs are prioritized, not enriching the few.



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