

Quebec construction unions shut down week-long wildcat strike by crane operators

By Laurent Lafrance
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After days of menacing government threats and frantic appeals from the trade union top brass for an immediate halt to their job action, Quebec's striking crane operators returned to work last Tuesday, ending a six-day wildcat strike.

The "illegal" strike began on June 14, when crane operators on the new Champlain Bridge project, which will link Montreal to the South Shore, walked off the job. By Monday, June 18, the strike had spread to building sites across Quebec, with some 1,500 crane operators participating. The workers were protesting against industry-backed changes to government labour regulations that slash the number of hours of training required to operate cranes, thereby threatening worker and public safety.

The crane operators' days-long defiance of the government and the FTQ-Construction and Provincial Building Trades Council union bureaucrats is part of a growing movement of the working class in Canada and internationally. Workers are not only challenging the demands of employers and big business governments for austerity and concessions. They are increasingly doing so in open conflict with the rightwing, pro-employer union apparatuses.

The crane operators' strike slowed and even paralyzed work at many of the province's major construction projects, including the CHU mega-hospital in Québec and the Turcot Interchange project in Montreal.

The Quebec Liberal Government intervened aggressively against the strike, which it denounced as "irresponsible and unacceptable." It threatened to prosecute strikers and endorsed repressive actions taken by the Quebec Construction Commission (QCC), the state agency that regulates the industry.

The day after the strike became province-wide,

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard personally threatened the striking crane operators with sanctions. Later in the week, as the strike continued, he declared menacingly: "The government will be very firm, very firm in the applications of the law. (Sanctions) will be applied. It will cost a lot."

The same day, with a view to prodding the unions to act more forcefully against the strike, the Quebec Transport Ministry sent a legal notice to the four unions that represent Quebec crane operators in which it warned that it intends to make them pay for "any damages" caused by the wildcat. "Your actions inevitably cause millions in additional costs," it declared. "The Ministry does not intend to assume those costs or to foist the bill on the taxpayers."

For its part, the QCC announced that anyone defying a Labour Council ruling ordering an end to the strike would risk contempt of court charges, "\$10,000 fines ... and even a term of imprisonment."

With the strike movement showing no sign of fading, QCC President and CEO Diane Lemieux demanded the unions assume direct responsibility for breaking it. "I saw a few months back," declared Lemieux, "the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) place the blue collar workers' union of Montreal in trusteeship for internal matters. Where is the FTQ-Construction? They have people who contravene the law by giving false information and by justifying an illegal strike."

The FTQ-Construction and Building Trades Council quickly moved to accede to the government's demands, issuing increasingly shrill demands that the crane operators get back to work, although none of the workers' demands had been realized.

If the unions bureaucrats, working as veritable policemen for the government and the construction

bosses, ultimately did succeed in corralling the workers back to work, it was because the crane-operators had no strategy to link their struggle to a broader working-class counter-offensive and political struggle.

To dissipate workers' anger, the FTQ-Construction bureaucrats are now promoting a government pledge to set up an "independent" committee to review the new training rules and related safety issues. Yet government officials, including Premier Couillard himself, have said there is no question of the government backtracking on the pro-employer changes. "We won't alter the (new) regulations," said Florent Tanlet, aide to Labour Minister Dominique Vien.

The unions' connivance in shutting down the crane operators struggle is in line with the role the unions have played for decades in suppressing the class struggle in Quebec and across Canada. This includes their sabotage of the mass opposition to the Couillard government's austerity measures and repeated enforcement of federal and provincial strikebreaking laws.

The government and the corporate media made much of the fact that the crane operators' strike was "illegal," because Quebec construction workers have "collective agreements" until 2021. In reality, there is no "free bargaining" in Quebec's construction industry, like that of numerous other sectors across the country, and not only because the employers have access to vast financial resources.

The so-called "collective agreements" in Quebec's construction industry were only negotiated after the Couillard government criminalized the May 2017 strike by 175,000 construction workers and the unions ordered their members to comply with the government back-to-work order.

The crane operators' strike was triggered by opposition to the new trade-specific regulations the government has imposed at the employers' behest. But more fundamentally, it expresses growing anger among all construction workers over years of concessions, government-back-to-work laws, and government-imposed contracts.

Meanwhile, the big contractors continue to pocket massive profits and to push for further concessions and speed-up, putting workers' safety at risk.

Under the new regulations governing crane operators, companies will be able to deliver a 150-hour fast-track

training program. Also, those who are not crane operators, but who have completed 80 hours of training, will be allowed to operate small-boom trucks.

In media interviews workers explained that they were fighting to defend safety. Crane operators often work in densely populated areas and the consequences of crane accidents can be fatal.

In an article published in French during the strike, the World Socialist Web Site, called on the entire working class to "come to the defence of crane operators and oppose the state repression of their struggle." "These workers," it explained, "are only the latest target of an all-out offensive by the ruling class to destroy all workers' social benefits and their most fundamental rights such as the right to strike.

"In Canada, this right has virtually been abolished. Postal workers, Air Canada and CP Rail workers, and teachers have all been victims of these anti-democratic measures in recent years.

"In order to take their struggle forward, which pits them against the bosses, the government and the courts, crane operators should broaden their fight by appealing to all construction workers to join them in challenging the latest concession-laden, government-imposed contract. Such a struggle must be linked to the development of a counter-offensive of the entire working class in Quebec and across Canada against austerity and all concessions. ... But to achieve this, workers have to break organizationally and politically from the pro-capitalist unions, which time and again have capitulated to big business, its governments and anti-worker 'special' laws."

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