Quebec tries to extort concessions from health care and other public sector workers

By Laurent Lafrance
1 April 2020

As the coronavirus pandemic surges across Canada, Quebec’s CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government is seeking to impose still further concessions on the province’s 550,000 nurses, hospital orderlies, teachers, civil servants, and other public sector workers.

Over the course of the past week, the leaders of Quebec’s principal trade union federations and public sector unions conducted closed-door negotiations with the CAQ government in an effort to reach “accelerated” contract settlements for workers whose collective agreements expired March 31.

According to the unions, the government is no longer even offering, as it indicated it would several weeks ago, wage increases tied to the inflation rate. Instead, it has reverted to its original concessionary wage-offer, while proposing no new investments in public services and no changes to work rules and work-regimes that are so onerous they have led large numbers of nurses and teachers to quit their respective professions.

Under the government’s offer, the province’s 550,000 public sector workers would receive wage increases of 1.75 percent for the first two years and 1.5 percent in the third year of three-year contracts, for a total increase of 5 percent. This would mean the further impoverishment of workers, who have already been the target of years of “wage restraint.” The government itself predicts that inflation will rise 6.4 percent between now and 2023.

The unions have unanimously rejected the government’s contract offers, knowing full well that they could not get their members to accept them. But if the CAQ government can be so intransigent and arrogant toward public sector workers, including workers in the health sector who are risking their lives every day as the pandemic intensifies, it is precisely because of the unions’ subservience.

Quebec Premier Francois Legault took the unions’ measure when they responded to his March 13 proposal that contract negotiations be indefinitely suspended due to the coronavirus emergency, by offering the government their full collaboration. The union leaders thus signaled that they would do everything in their power to block a working class rebellion against years of austerity that would threaten the big business CAQ government and the class war agenda of the entire ruling elite in the midst of an unprecedented health and economic crisis that has exposed the manifest failure of capitalism.

When, a few days later, the Treasury Board reversed its position and instead invited the unions to a “bargaining blitz” to quickly reach “interim agreements,” all the unions rushed to give their assent. The president of the Fédération interprofessionnel de la santé du Québec (FIQ) went so far as to say that “everything is on the table,” while the president of the Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ—Quebec Federation of Labour), Daniel Boyer, barely concealed his readiness to impose concessions on workers. “We are ready to hear the government’s concerns,” he wrote in a press release.

Now the unions are feigning astonishment and indignation, as if this new attempt to extort concessions, coming from a party that for years has advocated social spending cuts, privatization, and lavish tax cuts for the rich and corporations, was unexpected. Apparently, the discussions are still ongoing and the government hopes to conclude agreements in the coming days.

However, most unions are now demanding a postponement of negotiations, although some, including the CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec) and the CNTU (Confederation of National Trade Unions), have submitted counter-offers that fully conform with the government’s austerity framework.

The CNTU has proposed 24-month contracts with a meagre 4.4 percent in wage increases, plus C$3-per-hour bonuses for all health sector workers and other workers drafted into assisting the fight against the coronavirus. Its offer accepts that none of workers’ long-standing demands for a reduction in workload and massive reinvestment in services will be addressed. The CSQ has tabled a similar offer.

The union leaders’ hollow criticisms of the government’s proposals notwithstanding, they are determined, as during the 2015-2016 public sector struggle, to prevent any working-class challenge to the austerity agenda of the bourgeoisie and the battery of anti-strike laws through which it has been imposed.

If most unions now appear to favour scrapping the attempt to reach interim agreements and instead want to revert at some future date to negotiating on the basis of the government’s original five-year contract offers, it is because they fear losing control over any increasingly restless rank-and-file. By walking
away from the bargaining table, they hope to be able to drag
out negotiations, as they have frequently done in the past, with
the aim of demobilizing and dividing workers and then using
the government’s threat of anti-strike legislation and contracts
imposed by decree to bully workers into accepting
“negotiated” concessionary agreements.

The unions’ subservience has already encouraged the
government to issue, under the pretext of the health emergency,
two ministerial decrees that give it the power to set aside at will
the terms of the current contracts covering health care and
education sector workers. In justifying these decrees,
government officials have specifically mentioned needing the
power to impose 12-hour shifts, assign employees to any task
and location, and to suspend vacations and holidays. According
to the unions, these measures will undoubtedly result in wage
losses for workers.

Like governments around the world, Justin Trudeau’s federal
government, Legault’s CAQ, Ontario’s Doug Ford-led
Progressive Conservative government and their counterparts
across Canada have come to the rescue of the banks and big
business with unlimited bailouts, while offering workers who
have lost their jobs ration-style relief. As after the financial
crash of 2008, the ruling elite will subsequently seek to extract
from working people through even more savage austerity, the
hundreds of billions of dollars funneled to the banks and
corporations. Such a program is incompatible with democratic
forms of rule.

Without the independent political intervention of the working
class in the current crisis, the ruling elite will attempt to make
“temporary” anti-democratic measures such as the suspension
of workers’ contractual rights, the increasing deployment of
police—and even the military—in the streets, tougher border
controls, etc., “permanent.” In fact, for years the federal and
provincial governments have been trampling on workers’
rights such as the right to strike.

The unions’ treacherous maneuvers with the CAQ
government are part of their long-standing corporatist
 collaboration with the employers and their growing integration
into the capitalist state. For decades, the union apparatuses
have suppressed the class struggle, sabotaging one workers’
struggle after another in order to enable Québec big business to
satisfy investor demands for ever bigger profits.

These organizations continue to reach out to Legault and sow
the lie that the CAQ can be pressured to meet workers’ needs
at a time when it is becoming increasingly clear that the
Québec government, like governments around the world, was
criminally negligent in the face of the looming coronavirus
threat. Nothing was done to mobilize society’s resources to
obtain ventilators, masks, and other essential medical
equipment, or to take other preventive measures, so as not to
impinge on the profits of the financial elite. This failure is all
the more striking now that the pandemic is surging, with
Québec the province hardest hit by the coronavirus with more
than 4,160 confirmed cases and 31 deaths. More than 80 health
care workers have contracted COVID-19.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the entire establishment,
including the ostensibly left-wing Québec Solidaire, has sided
with Legault, whom the media has portrayed as a quasi-“national hero,” because he ordered shutdowns a day or
at most two days before other governments across the country.
Yet he long resisted the pressing demands from workers in
non-essential sectors such as construction to close workplaces.
Even now, the CAQ premier is insisting that mining companies
like Rio Tinto and ArcelorMittal maintain production, even if
this places workers at grave risk of catching and transmitting
the disease.

Meanwhile, reports continue to emerge daily about the lack
of essential equipment in the province’s hospitals, such as N95
protective masks.

The growing working class counter-offensive against
austerity and social inequality that swept the globe in 2018 and
2019 is now finding expression in a wave of strikes—including
by US autoworkers and Amazon and other logistics workers,
Italian textile workers, and French transport workers—against
being forced to work in unsafe conditions.

More than ever, it is urgent for workers to take matters into
their own hands. In the face of the attempt by the elite, with the
complicity of the trade unions and the official left, to use the
pandemic to turn politics even further to the right, workers
must form independent committees in workplaces and
neighbourhoods in order to develop their own solution to the
crisis; one that must be based on human needs and not on what
the wealthy financial elite claims we can afford, and that
counterposes to capitalism the international struggle of the
working class for the socialist reorganization of society.

This author also recommends:
Canada ‘s parliament approves coronavirus bailout for
corporations and austerity for workers
Canada: Quebec establishment hails inadequate response of
Legault government

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org

© World Socialist Web Site