

Quebec unions and government conspire behind the backs of health and education workers

By Laurent Lafrance and Richard Dufour
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In Quebec, the Canadian province most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, anger is running high among the approximately 550,000 public sector workers whose collective agreements expired March 31. Health care and education workers and other public employees have suffered years of real wage cuts, while their workloads have continued to grow as the result of an unending series of budget cuts and concession contracts.

Conditions are now driving the public sector workers into a head-on collision with the province's right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government.

There is the grave danger of coronavirus infection because of the government's failure to procure and provide personal protective equipment; more than 5,000 health care workers have already been infected and four orderlies have died. There are the ministerial orders that force health care workers, and potentially teachers, to work longer hours, cancel their summer holidays, and override their work schedules and assignments. And to top it all off, there is the intense campaign—led jointly by Premier François Legault and his CAQ and the public sector unions—to quickly impose new contracts, in the name of focusing on the health emergency, containing major givebacks in wages and working conditions.

Anger is raging on social media where nurses, teachers, orderlies and other public sector employees are voicing their frustration. Feeling the heat coming from the rank-and-file, union bureaucrats—who have rallied behind Premier Legault especially since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis—have organized a few token protests in recent days.

On May 27, dozens of nurses were called upon by their union, the FIQ (Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé), to demonstrate in front of a nursing home in the Montreal neighborhood of Ahuntsic-Cartierville against government threats to cancel their summer holidays, or limit them to two weeks. The following day, about 100 members of the CNTU (Confederation of National Trade Unions), working in the health, social services and education sectors, protested in front of Premier Legault's Montreal offices. The same day, dozens of workers from the Montérégie-Ouest Health Centre took part in a rally organized by the four unions at the facility to demand an easing of their onerous working conditions.

Union leaders, however, have no intention of mobilizing public sector workers in Quebec, nor calling upon all sections of the

working class in Canada to join their class brothers and sisters in the United States in a common counteroffensive against capitalist austerity. Rather, their goal is to help the ruling class make workers pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars handed out to big business by Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government—policies which the trade unions fully endorsed at the federal level. (See: Canadian unions cement anti-worker corporatist alliance with government and big business)

The public sector “negotiations” have been exposed as a fraud with Legault refusing to budge one iota from his original concessionary “offers.” Quebec's CAQ government is determined to limit wage increases for all public sector workers to 5 percent over three years—a decrease in real wages when inflation is taken into account—with a few hundred dollars in lump-sum payments thrown in.

Nothing will be done about working conditions—chronic under-staffing in hospitals and schools, mandatory overtime for nurses, excessively high patient-to-caregiver and student-to-teacher ratios, etc. The continuous deterioration of working conditions over many years has caused burnout and chronic health issues among public sector workers. For the population, it has meant a massive erosion in the quality of public services. By mutual agreement between the government and unions, all of these crucial and contentious issues have been excluded from the current blitz of “negotiations” and relegated to future discussion forums—that is, to oblivion.

Moreover, the government has already taken advantage of the coronavirus crisis to arrogate to itself the power to arbitrarily assign public sector employees to any task, which will worsen already unbearable working conditions.

All this does not prevent the unions from “negotiating” behind closed doors with the Legault government and preparing to sign sellout agreements. The unions fully accept the austerity fiscal framework dictated by Legault and the ruling class' demand that sellout contracts be quickly adopted in this time of crisis to ensure “social peace”—that is, the increased and unbridled exploitation of workers for the benefit of the super-rich and the financial markets. (See: Unions to work with Quebec's new right-wing populist government)

In a communiqué sent to its members, the CNTU justified its abandonment of a few demagogic demands it made last December.

Echoing the government's arguments, the union bureaucrats pointed to "uncertainty about the evolution of the health crisis," an expected deficit in "public finances, an unemployment rate of 17 per cent, and social-distancing 'rules that prohibit gatherings.'"

Union demands for the current round of "negotiations" are essentially in line with the government's offers. The government is not budging from its offer of a 1.75 percent wage increase for each of the first two years, and 1.5 percent in the third year of a three-year contract. The QFL (Quebec Federation of Labor) is asking for 2 percent in each of the three years and a few more crumbs for the "lowest paid." The CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec) is asking for 1.75 percent in the first year, 2.05 percent in the second year, and 2.20 percent in the third year. For the CNTU, it's roughly 2.2 percent the first two years and 3 percent the third year. The FIQ has not disclosed its wage proposals.

The position of all the unions is aptly summarized by this CSQ statement: "The CSQ recalls that, in response to the Treasury Board's disappointing offer on May 6, it submitted a counter-proposal to the government that respected the negotiating framework demanded by the government." In other words, there is a tripartite agreement between government, management and unions on the essential issue of maintaining austerity and making public sector workers—and the working class as a whole—pay for the capitalist crisis.

The union leaders are only begging the government to throw them a bone to help them ram through labor contracts that will do nothing to redress, and in fact will exacerbate, the longstanding decline in real wages and working conditions. They feign "shock" when their government partner does not hesitate to complicate their task by turning every promise of a few crumbs into a new mechanism to increase the exploitation of the workers. Thus, a promise to boost teachers' entry-level pay was suddenly accompanied by a new government demand—an increase in the number of compulsory working hours from 32 to 40 hours per week for all teachers, with no increase in pay.

Another widely touted government promise is an increase in the hourly wage for orderlies from \$20.55 to \$25 or \$26. This measure is intended to divide public sector workers by targeting a single category, or even a subcategory, of employees: orderlies working in nursing homes. It would not apply to the thousands of orderlies who work in hospitals, nor to those in the private sector who earn little more than the minimum wage. Moreover, the pay raises are to be in the form of bonuses or lump sums, separate from the regular salary scales, meaning they could be easily abolished in the future and will not be included in the calculation of pensions. Faced with Legault's concern that nurses or other workers could demand similar wage increases, QFL President Daniel Boyer rushed to reassure the Premier that the unions will ensure there is no "domino effect."

The role the unions have been playing for decades in imposing the cutbacks demanded by the ruling class emerges clearly from a letter addressed to Premier Legault by the presidents of Quebec's major union federations, including Daniel Boyer of the QFL, Jacques Létourneau of the CNTU and Sonia Ethier of the CSQ. Under the title "Let's sit and talk" ("*Faut qu'on s'on se parle*"), this letter is a candid admission by these loyal servants of the

ruling class that they stand fully behind the brutal big business offensive on jobs, wages, pensions and public services.

"It is sadly obvious to us," wrote these union bureaucrats with their usual indifference to the plight of their members, "that thousands of workers will not get back the jobs they held two months ago." Issuing a call for "social dialogue," they offered their services to the ruling class in restoring the competitiveness of Quebec Inc. and stifling the immense social opposition that this job massacre will provoke.

Even before the pandemic, the health and education sectors had been bled dry by decades of budget cuts in the name of capitalist austerity. The subordination of all society's resources to the profits of big business today means that millions of jobs are being eliminated, and those who still have a job are being forced, under threat of dismissal, to return to work without any real protection from the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is needed is not "social dialogue" with a financial aristocracy that is completely indifferent to the fate and lives of millions of workers, but a direct challenge to the existing capitalist order. The working class must, through its independent political mobilization, advance its own solution to the current crisis, based on the complete reorganization of the economy to satisfy human needs.

This means, for public sector employees, the rejection not only of the bogus offers being negotiated between the government and the unions, but of the entire ideological framework of the negotiations. The claim that workers must do "their part" in the midst of the immense health and socioeconomic crisis created by the criminal negligence of the ruling class must be rejected. Resources exist in abundance to meet vital social needs, but they are being hijacked by a profit-obsessed financial and corporate oligarchy.

Workers must take the struggle into their own hands and establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions. The task of these committees will be to mobilize the social power of the working class to fight for the following demands: an emergency program for the construction of hospitals and schools; the hiring of tens of thousands of new employees and a vast expansion of public services; mass coronavirus testing and personal protective equipment for all public sector workers; the abolition of compulsory overtime; and a real wage catch-up of 15 percent per year, and 20 percent for low-wage earners, every year of the contract.

The fight for these demands can be taken forward only by waging a political struggle against capitalism in the closest unity with workers in the rest of Canada, the US and internationally.

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