

# 500,000 Quebec public sector workers vote massively in favor of unlimited, province-wide strike

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Half a million Quebec public sector workers have voted overwhelmingly in favour of an “unlimited strike” in response to the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) provincial government’s demands for huge real wage cuts, cuts to pensions, and increased workloads. And in coming days, tens of thousands of Quebec nurses will do likewise.

The strikes votes and the hardline response of Quebec Premier François Legault underscore that a head-on clash between a decisive battalion of the working class and the CAQ government is fast approaching. Its outcome will be of major consequence for workers, public and private sector alike, in Quebec and across Canada.

On Tuesday, the Common Front—an inter-union alliance that is the bargaining representative for 425,000 hospital orderlies, healthcare professionals, public school teachers, school board employees and CEGEP (junior college) personnel—announced that the rank and file have voted 95 percent in favour of authorizing an “unlimited strike.”

In a separate vote concluded at the end of last month, the 65,000 members of the *Fédération autonome de l’enseignement* (FAE-Autonomous Education Federation) also voted overwhelmingly to walk out indefinitely. The FAE negotiates on behalf of 65,000 primary and high school teachers, including a majority of those in the Montreal and Quebec City regions.

The province’s principal nurses’ union, the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé* (FIQ), has called an online referendum of its 80,000 members on Oct. 24-25 seeking authorization for an “unlimited” strike. According to FIQ, the referendum on an all-out strike will be the first such vote in “almost a generation.”

As in the past, the FIQ leadership has divided nurses from other public sector workers on the false grounds nurses are a “special case” and sought to cut a separate deal with a right-wing Quebec government determined to impose social spending cuts and contract concessions. On Oct. 11, in an implicit admission of the failure of this strategy, some 500 FIQ delegates voted by more than 99 percent to ask the rank and file for a strike mandate.

The avowedly pro-big business, “Quebec First” CAQ government has responded to the increasingly militant mood among public sector workers by doubling down on its concession demands.

In her first remarks after 100,000 Common Front members and supporters demonstrated in Montreal last month, Treasury Board President Sonia LeBel demanded the unions dramatically pare down their demands at the province-wide central bargaining tables to “five or six.” LeBel claimed the government would do the same and all with the aim of accelerating negotiations. In fact, this is a stratagem Quebec governments have repeatedly used to sideline workers’ grievances over the ruinous impact decades of austerity have had on their working conditions.

Soon after, FIQ officials revealed that while they had withdrawn many demands, the government had introduced new ones, including the abolition of overtime pay for nurses working less than a 37.5 hour workweek. The CAQ government is also insisting that to plug staffing shortages, health authorities need the “flexibility” to redeploy nurses at will from one institution to another, irrespective of professional experience and seniority. This will both disrupt workers’ lives and put patients at risk.

Legault responded to the release of the Common Front strike vote results with arrogance and lies. He claimed that the government is offering public sector workers a wage increase of 13 percent over five years, when in fact it is offering just 9 percent.

Even were Legault not misrepresenting the government’s wage offer and it was proposing a general wage increase of 13 percent, this would amount to a large real terms pay cut. Between September 2020 and September 2023 prices in Quebec rose by 17.3 percent. Even before the recent price spiral, due to decades of government austerity, wages for public sector workers were significantly lower than those for private sector workers with equivalent education and experience.

“We are offering a 13 percent increase,” Legault told a press conference Tuesday. “We think this is reasonable. We think that this respects Quebecers’ ability to pay.”

With the full-throated support of big business, Legault, Lebel and CAQ Finance Minister Eric Girard are insisting that Canada's second most populous province has no "financial room to maneuver" and a full-throttle austerity drive must again be the order of the day. This under conditions where the public healthcare and education systems have been ravaged since the 1980s by round after round of cuts and further battered during the past three and a half years by the ruling elite's profits-before-life COVID-19 pandemic policy. According to a study conducted for the provincial public health agency, l'Institut national de santé publique du Québec, up to 10 percent of Quebec healthcare workers have been stricken with Long COVID. Thousands of others have been left with burnout by punishing working conditions, including forced overtime imposed by government decree.

The reality is there are ample resources to fund quality public services for all and to provide decent wages and working conditions for the workers who administer them. But those resources are being squandered to swell the fortunes of the financial elite, provide massive subsidies to big business and finance Canadian imperialism's war with Russia and preparations for war with China.

There is enormous public sympathy for the public sector workers. Under conditions where Legault and the ruling class are seeking to exploit the anger and frustration caused by the crumbling of public services to push for privatization, workers and large sections of middle-class people recognize the organic link between improving the working conditions of public sector workers and defending public health care and education.

However, the pro-capitalist trade unions are adamantly opposed to mobilizing this support by making the Quebec public sector workers' struggle the spearhead of a working-class political struggle against austerity and war.

Instead they are doing everything to isolate and run the Quebec public sector workers' struggle into the ground. This is as true for the union organizations that comprise the Common Front—the FTQ, CSN, CSQ, and APTS—as the FIQ and FAE.

As they have done in previous bargaining rounds, including those in 2015 and 2020, the unions are seeking to trap workers in a protracted negotiating process and multi-stage campaign of "pressure tactics" with the aim of dissipating worker anger and derailing their struggle.

Thus, even as the Common Front leaders hailed the 95 percent strike vote as "historic," they reiterated that they view the province-wide "unlimited" strike mandate as a last resort, one that they would only deploy, if ever, after weeks of smaller-scale regional walkouts limited to at most 24 or 48 hours, and in the beginning likely far less.

"A strike mandate is itself a pressure tactic," said CSN Vice-President François Énault. "At 95 per cent, I hope the government pays attention to the scale (of support)."

The reality is the union bureaucrats—who time and again have preserved, to use their words, "social peace" by suppressing the

class struggle—are striving might and main to prevent a province-wide public sector strike for fear it could escape their political control and threaten the "competitive" position of Quebec and Canadian capital.

Significantly, they are either totally silent on or downplay the threat the CAQ government will criminalize a public sector strike with an emergency back-to-work law. Yet Legault has repeatedly brandished the threat of anti-strike legislation to threaten construction and other workers and supported the Trudeau government outlawing a strike by Port of Montreal longshore workers in 2021.

Meanwhile, the unions in the rest of the country are working to keep their members in the dark about the developing class confrontation in Quebec, for they are no less frightened of its implications or determined to quarantine and suppress the Quebec public sector workers' struggle.

In a statement distributed in the hundreds at last month's Common Front demonstration in Montreal, the Socialist Equality Party advanced a strategy for public sector workers to defeat the government's class war assault. It explained the need for workers to repudiate the union bureaucracy's futile strategy of pleading to the government to "see reason" and its nationalist-corporatist program of "social dialogue," and to take the struggle into their own hands and make it the spearhead of a working class industrial and political offensive against austerity and war. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the union apparatuses.

"These committees," the statement explained, "will be able to mobilize the 600,000 public sector workers and the active support of all workers—provincially, nationally and across North America ... (They) will elaborate worker demands, based on their real needs and not what the government claims it can afford. Demands that will be won not through futile 'negotiations,' based on acceptance of the government's reactionary fiscal framework, but through class struggle, including the preparation of a general strike.

"This requires a vast political campaign among the population to explain that the cause of public sector workers is the cause of all workers: the rejection of capitalist austerity; the abolition of anti-strike laws; the defense of public services and the working conditions of those who provide them.

"Such a campaign will put public sector workers in a strong position to challenge any special legislation and mobilize the whole working class in their defense."



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