

Quebec nurses: Vote No to government-backed mediator's concessionary contract proposal!

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In an act of craven submission to Quebec's right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government, the province's principal nurses' union, FIQ (the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec), has submitted a contract proposal for rank-and-file ratification that flagrantly violates all the "red lines" stipulated by its own members.

From Tuesday, Oct. 15 through Friday, Oct. 18, FIQ's 80,000 members will vote on the concessionary five-year contract proposal that was drafted by a pro-government mediator and tacitly endorsed by the FIQ leadership. It incorporates all the major demands of the government. First among these is giving health care administrators, to use the words of Premier François Legault, the power to "tell nurses to go work where they are needed"—that is, to transfer them from one department and institution to another essentially at will.

FIQ's capitulation is total. After reviewing the mediator's offer last month, FIQ President Julie Bouchard announced the lifting of "all pressure tactics." Yet only a few days before, she had conceded the negotiations were going nowhere and threatened that nurses might stop working overtime in protest.

During more than 500 days of negotiations, the FIQ leadership has steadfastly refused to initiate any serious job action, for fear that a challenge by the nurses to the calamitous state of the health care system and the government's austerity agenda would galvanize opposition throughout the working class.

In April, the FIQ leadership recommended a management offer that opened the door to "mobility," kept wage increases below inflation and perpetuated the systematic use of compulsory overtime. In defiance of the union leadership, 61 percent of nurses rejected this rotten tentative agreement.

Six months later, FIQ is using the mediator's "proposal" to push through essentially the same offer as in April, on the pretext that management's powers to impose worker "mobility" would now be better "delineated."

All the bureaucratic phrases about the new mobility guidelines ("definition of centers of activity," "notion of establishment," "limited mileage") are a deception. The mandate given by nurses to the FIQ was not to "delineate" mobility, but to reject it out of hand. And this for two reasons, because it will mean increased work and psychological stress for nurses, and, because, by treating them like replaceable machine-cogs, it will undermine hospital teams and consequently threaten patient care.

With the passage of Bill 15 last December and the creation of Santé Québec—a government agency, run by "top guns" from the private sector and tasked with managing Quebec's entire public health care system—the Legault government has put in place the administrative structure to achieve "efficiencies" and "greater productive" through privatization and by imposing increased workloads on nurses and all healthcare workers. It is only waiting for new collective agreements to be signed, especially for the chronically short-staffed nurses, to exploit this breach.

Meanwhile, anger is rapidly rising among rank-and-file FIQ members, with many bluntly accusing the union of "betrayal." As one nurse summed it up in a Facebook post: "They're keeping the same proposal and changing a few words. We're going to keep the same answer, but with bigger letters—NO!"

At the same time, many are wondering how to move forward. Frustration over the now almost two year-long negotiating process goes hand in hand with confusion over the issue of "mobility." This is fueled by the big business media outlets and by the FIQ apparatus which are touting the misleading claim that the mediator-proposed contract provides "constraints" or "limits" on management's rights to transfer nurses.

The government is also counting on intimidating nurses with the implicit threat that if they persist in their opposition it could try to short-circuit the entire process by adopting an emergency strikebreaking law, as governments have

frequently done in the past, as well as their entirely justified lack of confidence in the FIQ leadership.

To find a way out of this difficult situation, nurses must start with the recognition that they are embroiled in a class struggle. Across Canada, North America and beyond, the ruling elite is demanding that the working class—men and women and in every economic sector, public and private—bear the full brunt of the capitalist crisis through the destruction of jobs, working conditions, and public services.

While workers are told by the governments and pro-capitalist trade unions that there is no money to improve public services and protect workers from the ravages of inflation, the reality is that the immense social wealth produced by the working class—sufficient to meet the needs of all—is being squandered on swelling big business profits and financing Canadian imperialism’s predatory wars.

The watchwords of big business and governments are the same everywhere: more flexibility and productivity! Faced with a chronic shortage of personnel to meet the needs of a mass society, the ruling class refuses to hire and demands that workers do more with less.

In the healthcare sector, this translates into ever-increasing working hours, compulsory overtime, and now “mobility”—that is, the movement of staff from one establishment to another, or from one region to another, at the mere nod of the employer’s head.

In the ratification votes scheduled for October 15-17, workers must reject, with all the contempt it deserves, the mediator’s contract proposal. A proposal that Julie Bouchard—a former candidate for the anti-worker, “Quebec First” Bloc Québécois—and the FIQ leadership clearly backs, but for fear of incurring the wrath of the membership has put to a vote “without recommendation.”

It’s time to turn the tide after the decades of concessions and social spending cuts imposed by successive PQ, Liberal and CAQ governments, with the help of the union bureaucracy.

It’s time to put an end to the murderous policy of “profits before lives” that is still being pushed by all governments in Canada and around the world, while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the population.

But to move forward, workers must break with the bureaucratic union apparatuses that have torpedoed workers’ struggles for decades in the name of “social peace,” as was the case late last year with the inter-union Common Front’s betrayal of the biggest wave of Quebec public sector strikes in decades.

Nurses in particular must reject the FIQ’s disastrous strategy based on the claim that they are a “special case,” which serves only to divide them from the rest of the working class.

Contrary to what the union claims, nurses are not engaged in a simple struggle for a new collective agreement: they are challenging the class agenda of the entire ruling elite and its vast repressive arsenal, including the courts and special laws.

The recent ruling by the Quebec Administrative Labor Court that nurses cannot refuse mandatory overtime as part of a job action, even when they supposedly have a “legal right” to strike if “essential services” are provided, underscores that the judiciary is a ruthless defender of the interests of big business and the ultra-rich.

The FIQ’s submission to this anti-democratic ruling confirms the unions’ role as a force for policing the working class and suppressing rank-and-file resistance.

Nurses face an enemy with vast means at their disposal, but they can mobilize even more powerful allies: workers in all economic sectors, in Quebec, elsewhere in Canada and around the world.

A call by nurses for a mass struggle to defend public services, oppose all concessions and capitalist austerity and defy the gamut of authoritarian antistrike laws would have a resounding echo throughout the population.

But the emergence and coordination of such a movement is only possible if nurses and their healthcare colleagues organize independently of the union apparatuses and form rank-and-file committees in every workplace, which will have the task of mobilizing the powerful support that exists in the population for a working class counter-offensive to the bosses’ assault on wages and living conditions.

This mobilization must be part of the struggle to build a political movement of the whole working class to counter the capitalist elite’s program of austerity and war. We encourage all nurses and health care workers who are ready to take up this struggle to fill out the form below to contact us.



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