

Despite strong opposition from Quebec's nurses, the FIQ trade union pushes through concessionary contract

Laurent Lafrance
1 November 2024

The Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ) has announced that its 80,000 members—mainly nurses and nursing assistants, but also respiratory therapists and clinical perfusionists—have grudgingly approved a contract proposal made by a provincial government-appointed mediator.

The now ratified five-year contract is concessions-filled. Its imposition marks the final act in the union's suppression and betrayal of the contract struggle of the 600,000 Quebec public sector workers. At its height last December, more than a half-million workers were off the job in the largest strike movement in Canada in decades. But the unions short-circuited the strike movement out of fear that would it spark a broader working class challenge to the Quebec and Canadian capitalist elite's agenda of austerity and war.

Seventy-five percent of FIQ members participated in the vote on the mediator's proposal, which the union leadership in an act of cowardice presented to the membership "without recommendation." Of these, 66.3 percent voted to accept it.

Coming more than 18 months after the previous contract expired, this result is more a vote of non-confidence in the FIQ leadership than a vote in favour of the concessions-laden contract.

In April, rank-and-file nurses had strongly repudiated a similar contract proposal endorsed by the FIQ leadership.

If a half-year later the nurses approved an offer that was little different, it was because they had no faith that the FIQ leadership would mount a struggle against the province's avowedly right-wing "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government.

The FIQ underscored its opposition to leading any serious struggle, when it immediately bowed to a blatantly anti-democratic Administrative Labour Court order outlawing an overtime boycott that had been scheduled to start on September 19. Almost immediately thereafter, it presented the conciliator's offer to the membership for a ratification vote "without recommendation." This was clearly designed to demoralize and disorient members, while avoiding too directly associating the union bureaucracy with the imposition of a sellout contract.

Effectively admitting the union's complicity, FIQ President Julie Bouchard told a post-ratification press conference that FIQ "members decided to accept [the mediator's proposal], even though it did not address all their concerns." Bouchard also acknowledged that the thousands of nurses who forsook public sector jobs to work at private sector agencies, so they could have less onerous workloads and better work-life balance, would continue to enjoy better working conditions than their colleagues in the public system.

In a sign of the extent of FIQ's surrender, Treasury Board President Sonia Label declared her delight at the "increased flexibility in the agreement" and "greater availability of professionals." In other words, the

FIQ has fulfilled the wishes of Quebec Premier François Legault, who stated bluntly a few months ago that the government wants the power to order "nurses to go where they are needed."

The government-appointed mediator's proposal contained no major differences from the rotten April agreement and maintained the employer's key regressive demands. These include opening the door to staff "mobility" and maintaining management's unfettered power to use compulsory overtime (TSO) to deal with chronic staffing shortages.

After the rejection of the April offer, FIQ spent months in closed door negotiations with the government trying to find a way of sugar coating the concessionary pill to coax nurses into swallowing it. At general meetings prior to the ratification vote, union leaders told a series of lies and half-truths, including that "mobility" was already enshrined in the previous local agreements, and that there will be contractually stipulated "limits" on management's power to transfer nurses from one job or institution to another.

This is all a sham. Under the new contract, healthcare managers will be able to systematically move staff as they please from one facility to another and from one region to another, within a radius that varies from region to region but can be as much as 40 km (25 miles) or more. Among other things, "mobility" will be facilitated by the "merging" of "activity centers" (health care institutions).

As with the systematic use of compulsory overtime and the forced conversion of part-time positions into full-time ones, nursing staff "mobility" is designed to make workers bear the full brunt of the healthcare crisis and workforce shortages caused by chronic underfunding and poor working conditions. There is no doubt that these changes will have a significant impact on the stability of work environments and, therefore, on the quality of patient care.

A political struggle

Throughout the Quebec public sector workers' struggle, which began with the expiry of their collective agreements in March 2023, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that if workers were to prevent the union bureaucracy from sabotaging their fight to win improved working conditions and defend public services, they had to organize on an independent basis and turn to the rest of the working class.

The WSW and the rank-and-file Public Sector Workers' Coordinating Committee, which it helped found, explained that the struggle went far beyond a simple "negotiation" for a new labor contract. It was fundamentally a political struggle in which workers were in conflict with

the entire capitalist ruling elite and its program of austerity and war.

In a September statement calling on the nurses to reject the conciliator's proposal, the WSWS wrote:

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.

The statement went on to explain that Premier François Legault and his CAQ government are intensifying this agenda after decades of social cuts imposed by Liberal and Parti Québécois governments at the provincial level and Liberal and Conservative ones federally. Like its provincial and federal counterparts across Canada, the big business CAQ government is now moving to implement, with the full collaboration of the corporatist trade union apparatuses, an even more savage program of austerity and privatization against the working class.

By pushing through the government's proposals dressed up in the form of the mediator's "offer," the FIQ leadership has put the final nail in the coffin of the struggle by 600,000 workers in education, health and social services. However, it would be illusory to believe that these 5-year contracts will preserve "social peace," as the union leaders piously claim and hope. On the contrary, they amount to placing a lid on a boiling cauldron.

Under conditions of profound global capitalist crisis, marked by rising social inequality and an accelerating march towards a Third World War, explosive workers' struggles can erupt at any moment in Quebec, as in Canada and internationally. This will be the case in healthcare, where the signing of new contracts clears the way for the government to proceed as planned, and hand over the reins of managing the province's entire public health care network to Santé Québec. This new government agency, run by a handful of "top guns from big business," to use the expression of the health minister, is tasked with "increasing productivity" through greater control of the workforce and the wholesale privatization of care.

The lessons of the public sector struggle and the way forward

The crucial and urgent question for the working class is to prepare for the struggles ahead by learning the lessons of recent and past experiences.

Throughout the conflict, the leaders of the inter-union Common Front (CSN, CSQ, FTQ, APTS), like those of the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE) and the FIQ, had one objective in mind: to prevent the public sector workers' struggle from spreading throughout the working class and becoming an explicit challenge to the profit system.

The unions first refused to implement the unlimited general strike mandate voted for by 95 percent of their members then channeled workers' anger into a few days of limited strike action, while promoting the fraudulent idea that the government would back down. At the time, CSN Vice President François Enault declared that "workers are ready to strike tomorrow morning, but we [union leaders] don't want that."

The day after the agreements were ratified by the Common Front leaders, CSQ President Éric Gingras described the negotiation process as having been a "psychodrama" to be avoided at all costs in the future. He thereby gave voice to the union bureaucrats' mortal fear of the eruption of an all-out confrontation between the right-wing government and the public

sector workers.

The union leaders were keenly aware of the fact that working people overwhelmingly supported the public sector workers—because they recognized that in fighting for better working conditions and increased funding for public services they were fighting for the entire working class—and that conditions were ripe to mobilize this support in mass protests and strikes.

It was precisely to preserve "social peace," i.e., the capitalist order, that they systematically refused to mobilize this support. Instead, they bogged workers down in an interminable process of negotiations whose financial parameters were decided in advance by the government.

The struggle was confined within Quebec's borders, with the unions refusing to issue any calls for workers in the rest of Canada to support it. Similarly, the unions in English Canada lifted not a finger to mobilize their members in support of the Quebec public sector workers, even if many of them, like those in CUPE, are members of the same union.

Reprising its role during the 2012 student strike in Quebec, the New Democratic Party (NDP) entirely ignored the swelling strike movement in Quebec. The unions, it should be recalled, were a pillar of the Liberal-NDP deal that kept the federal Liberals in power to implement their pro-business, pro-war agenda over the past two-and-a-half years.

With their support, Justin Trudeau's Liberals were able to bolster Canadian imperialism's involvement in the NATO-instigated war against Russia and give full-throated support to Israel's genocidal assault on the Gaza Palestinians and its aggression against Iran.

At a demonstration in November 2023, again with the aim of subordinating workers to the capitalist establishment, union leaders paraded representatives of the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party in front of striking workers, even though it is precisely these parties that have been trashing public services for the past 40 years. Representatives of Québec Solidaire (QS) were also promoted at the event. While urging Legault to "listen" to workers, this party of the privileged middle class declared its "solidarity" with the union bureaucrats and insisted workers must respect the reactionary laws that severely limit their right to strike.

Through months of "negotiations," Legault stuck to his guns and the unions predictably caved. The union bureaucrats then dangled the threat of the government resorting to a strikebreaking law and imposing new contracts by decree to bully workers into accepting the rotten, concessionary tentative agreements they had negotiated, as the "lesser evil."

The signing of the Common Front agreements last February, without any of workers' basic demands being met (massive re-investment in public services, wage catch-up for all, lower class sizes, end to TSP, etc.), further isolated the workers "represented" or rather misrepresented by the FIQ.

For its part, the FIQ pursued the same disastrous strategy that it has pursued for decades, based on the claim that nurses are a "special case" and must fight separately. This strategy, which went hand in hand with FIQ's refusal to make any broader appeal for working class support in fighting to defend public healthcare, only served to isolate and weaken nurses in the face of state repression and intimidation and thus paved the way for the Legault government to impose the "mobility" it sought.

These union betrayals are not the fruit of a few rotten apples atop the union apparatuses but of the nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective shared by, and embodied in, the union bureaucracy as a whole. The unions and the privileged bureaucrats who run them, in Quebec and Canada as around the world, function today as instruments of big business and the state and have developed class interests hostile to the workers they claim to represent.

Immense social struggles will emerge in the coming period. In opposition to the unions' attempt to subordinate the working class to the

capitalist elite, its parties and reactionary nationalist ideology, workers must mobilize to defend their social and democratic rights on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

As a critical first step in this fight, workers must build independent organs of class struggle: rank-and-file committees in all workplaces, unified in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), a global network to unite all workers' struggles and prepare a working class offensive against the profit system, which is at the root of war, social inequality and the ruling elite's turn towards fascism.

We call on all those interested in fighting for such a perspective to fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact