

600,000 strikers - 13% of employed Quebecers - against the boss state

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Will their determination defeat the CAQ and the bureaucratic union caste?

From December 11 to 14, all public sector workers, except for a few civil servants, will be on strike: the 420,000 of the Common Front, the 80,000 of the Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé (FIQ), i.e. most nurses, and the 65,000 of the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE), i.e. 40% of primary and secondary school teachers. The strikers march partly separately but hit together. As 78% of the strikers are women, fighting both for better working conditions and for the socialization of "caring", this strike is also a feminist struggle, more precisely an ecofeminist one. Public services run mainly on human energy, with marginal recourse to fossil fuels. Above all, they are creators of rich human links that are obstacles to consumerist or miserabilist solitude.

The determination of the strikers, not to say their anger - who wouldn't be when the members of the National Assembly voted themselves a 30% pay rise and the police were offered 21%... which they refused - was felt by a 95% vote for a strike that could go as far as an unlimited general strike (UGS). Popular support is there, both in the polls and on the picket lines, even if it is not organized, any more than the trade union left is organized within the trade union movement. While the Common Front and the FIQ have called a second and third warning strike ending December 14, putting off the UGS until after the holidays if need be, the FAE is already in UGS... with no strike fund. This pseudo-avant-garde donquichottism makes it the weak link, but it could become the spearhead if the current Common Front strike turns into a UGS on December 15. The result is financial difficulties for many, alleviated by donations via social networks and odd jobs. This second phase of the strike movement began to force the hand of the hitherto intransigent CAQ government. The CAQ has forgotten all about the pandemic's "guardian angels" but doesn't (yet) dare threaten them with a special law, as this could cause the pot to boil over.

Except for its autonomist nationalism and identity politics, the CAQ is a copy-paste of the Ontario Ford government, especially its policy of privatizing public services. The result is a policy of austerity that is creating a permanent crisis in health, education and social services, making working conditions unbearable and their quality problematic. Fortunately, the strike comes at a time when the popularity of the CAQ, unstoppable since 2018, is plummeting, starting with that of the Prime Minister. His paternalistic style of calling for an end to the FAE strike for the "good of the children" ignores the high proportion of problem children and students concentrated in the public-regular segment of Quebec's three-tier system. His call for "flexibility" makes a mockery of nurses' "compulsory overtime" (CO). In the words of the Prime Minister, who is not afraid to negotiate in the public arena: "It's not normal for our network to be managed by unions rather than by managers. [...] It's going to be a bumpy ride". In return, the CAQ is improving on a wage increase that does not, however, match the rate of inflation. Tax cuts, gift vouchers and gargantuan subsidies for the battery industry have been expensive. Nevertheless, Quebec's net debt-to-GDP ratio has fallen by over 20% in the last six years.

This bad compromise is accentuated by Bills 23 and 15, the latter passed under a gag order, centralizing the management of education and health while facilitating their privatization. Ignoring its new unpopularity, the CAQ is trying to override the determination of the strikers, giving impetus to the union leaders. Just yesterday, they were no longer talking about catching up with the average total compensation of other salaried employees in Quebec, which is 7.4% higher (and 22.7% higher for employees in other public sectors, which the CAQ considers abusive). However, union leaders would concede the traditional long five-year contract instead of three years if an anti-inflation clause was added to the last two years.

And then there are the improvements in working conditions, often expressed in better ratios, which automatically improve public services. On this matter the CAQ is completely closed, not even agreeing to negotiate. Very precise for the FIQ and FAE, who popularize and insist on them, they are more nebulous on the Common Front side, who make them a secret reserved for sectoral tables. For the public, it's working conditions rather than wages that are at stake. The strike is set to become the longest in the public sector in half a century. The desire of both parties to end the strike before the holidays, without UGS, does not augur well for a 180-degree turnaround to prevent the collapse of public services in favor of privatization. On the part of both the CAQ and the union bureaucracy, which has little grassroots control except through intermediary structures that meet occasionally, it is Machiavellian to use the holiday deadline, which everyone would like to be cloudless. As if genocidal wars and the sixth collapse of the earth system would allow it.

We have to say no to a half-baked outcome that prolongs the agony of public services. Instead, we should promote a hasty UGS that seeks the pro-active support of the population. Ending the secrecy of negotiations would help. Frequent reporting to the union rank and file would be a step forward. Organizing blockades with allies would give the strike a distinctly political character. It would be a great challenge for Québec Solidaire to get on the ice instead of just following the parade. Wouldn't it be a good opportunity to beat the PQ to the punch, just as they beat the CAQ to the punch, to demonstrate that independence is a left-wing issue?

Marc Bonhomme, December 10, 2023
www.marcbonhomme.com ; bonmarc videotron.ca
