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**Quebec Early Childhood Centre Workers Vote for
Unlimited General Strike**

**"We Are All Essential!" Say
Daycare Workers**



Quebec City, November 23, 2021.

- **Demands of Early Childhood Centre Workers**
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Quebec Early Childhood Centre Workers Vote for Unlimited General Strike

"We Are All Essential!" Say Daycare Workers

On November 24, in general assemblies, members of the Quebec Early Childhood Workers' Federation (FIPEQ-CSQ) voted 91.2 per cent in favour of an unlimited general strike mandate. That strike mandate is to be implemented at a time deemed appropriate. Approximately 3,200 workers were eligible to vote. On November 26, the 11,000 members of the Health and Social Services Federation of Unions (FSS-CSN) working in daycare centres also voted 92.1 per cent during general assemblies in favour of an unlimited general strike, which they intend to implement on December 1 if there is no breakthrough in negotiations with the government. The Service Employees Union of Quebec (SQEES), an affiliate of the Quebec Federation of Labour, is holding a vote this week on a general strike mandate.



Organizing for the strike vote in Rouyn-Noranda.

Although workers have been holding strike days since September and are strongly supported by parents, the government has not moved satisfactorily to meet or even consider their demands. Meanwhile, a general strike has been ongoing since October 13 in two Early Childhood Centres where workers are members of the Syndicat des Métallos/United Steelworkers: one in Rouyn-Noranda in Abitibi and the other in Port-Cartier on the North Shore.

At the heart of these strike actions is the workers' claim that all those who work in daycare centres are essential and must have wages and conditions they consider acceptable and that defend the network by helping to resolve the problems of recruitment and retention of staff. This affirmation of the essential character of all staff, across all job categories, has been reinforced by what workers actually accomplished at the height of the pandemic, keeping the



daycare centres operating despite staff shortages, burnout and poor working conditions. This allowed tens of thousands of parents, the vast majority of whom were women, to continue to work with peace of mind to the extent possible during the pandemic. The strong support for a general strike if negotiations do not give rise to anything substantial demonstrates their determination to tackle the problems in the here and now, at a time when many are thinking of leaving. One of the slogans used in the demonstrations says it well: "Going to Go or Going to Stay?"

The government must satisfy the daycare workers' just demands. It must abandon its own narrow-minded denial of what the workers are affirming with their demands. The government is accusing the workers of blackmailing it and the population, of trying to gain "the upper hand" in the negotiations, and even says it is preparing for special back-to-work legislation if a general strike is called. It is trotting out its same old "ability to pay" line to reject the

demands for wage increases for non-educator employment groups, when such increases are crucial. It is doing this while happily spending millions of dollars on pay-the-rich schemes to serve foreign monopolies.

The fight of the daycare workers is part of the struggle of working people to implement the lessons learned during the pandemic, that workers are the essential force that enables the society to function.

Their just demands in defence of their rights and the rights of all must be supported by all and met. Child care services, such as daycare centres, serve society and must be defended and expanded by defending the human factor, those who deliver the services.

Workers' Forum wholeheartedly supports the struggle of the daycare workers and demands that the government abandon its narrow-minded considerations and threats and meet their just demands.

Demands of Early Childhood Centre Workers



Although they are not negotiating as a common front, unionized daycare workers have common demands for wages and conditions that they deem acceptable and that will contribute to solving the problem of workforce attraction and retention that continues to threaten the network's very existence.

Wages

The issue of wages is an important one in the current dispute. Collective agreements expired on March 31, 2020, and wages remain in dispute. The lack of agreement on wages means that no other issues have been dealt with in negotiations, even though there are many important issues to resolve.

The unions estimate that wages for workers in daycare centres are 16 per cent lower overall than wages in the same job categories for other workers in the public service. According to the unions, unacceptable wages are one of the main reasons why, between 2019 and 2020, there was a decline of nearly 25 per cent in the number of people graduating in Early Childhood Education in CEGEPs across Quebec.

One of the unions involved in the negotiation, the Quebec Early Childhood Workers' Federation (FIPEQ-CSQ) has informed that its wage demands are between 13.6 and 20.3 per cent over three

years, depending on the job category.

The unions' effort to negotiate acceptable wages for their members was not only disrupted by the government's initial refusal to acknowledge the problem, but also by its provocative move in mid-October to offer a temporary increase of around 17 per cent to educators only, an offer which included a lump sum of \$50 per week for those willing to extend their work week to 40 hours. This was announced outside of the negotiations, with workers and their unions strongly denouncing the move.



The unions have since announced that the government's offers for those educators who are responsible for groups of children in daycare centres are now closer to what the workers are demanding. These offers are said to be in the range of an 18-20 per cent increase over three years, depending on the unions. Special care educators, on the other hand, who work with children with special needs, would receive much less.

The problem is compounded when it comes to wages for workers in all the other job categories, who are as essential as educators. Entirely unacceptable offers have been made for these job groups. These include educational support workers, administrative assistants, maintenance workers and food service workers. The government is essentially offering the same increases that have been negotiated for corresponding workers in other public sector institutions, i.e. two per cent annually and therefore six per cent for a three-year contract, an offer that rises to nine per cent for certain employees working at the lowest wages.

For example, workers responsible for food services who are at the top of their pay scale, currently earn an hourly rate of \$20.67, compared to \$26.57 in the rest of the public sector. This offer, the unions are saying, is totally inadequate for retaining these employees in the child care sector, let alone attracting others.

Maintenance workers, who under pandemic conditions play a very important role in the regular disinfection of all common areas, often have a starting wage of little more than \$15, and the proposed offer will have a very minimal impact on their wage.

Daycare workers have said that they will not accept such a wage offer, and educators have shown strong solidarity with their colleagues in other job categories during strike actions over recent weeks.

Other Demands Have Yet to be Addressed

The lack of resolution on wages has meant that other important demands have not yet been addressed.

Workers are asking for more paid annual vacation leave to allow them to recuperate and spend time with their families.

They also want an affordable group insurance plan. They note that in recent years the cost of the plan has risen sharply, however the employer's contribution has not kept pace and this must be corrected.

The increase in cost is directly related to the dramatic rise in the number of members who have had

to go on disability, a consequence of their exhaustion.

Another category of demands concerns the ever-increasing workload.



For example, increased pedagogical preparation time is a major issue. The Ministry is making increasing demands on workers through the imposition of new regulations. One example is the child's portfolio. Workers are required to complete the portfolio and meet with the parent requesting it twice a year. However, preparation time for the child's file has not been increased and so workers find themselves having to accomplish this task on their personal time. The same is true for educational planning, which must be supported by observation and documented according to each child's development and needs.

Another important matter to address concerns children with special needs. Workers are asking for more support for these children. Few resources are available to support workers on a daily basis, due to a lack of funding and specialized personnel. Early Childhood Centres are welcoming more and more children with particular challenges. Unions are asking for a separate monetary allocation to better support these children so that they are offered a more welcoming environment adapted to their needs.

Quebec's child-care network has more than 50,000 names on its waiting list and a shortfall of educators that the Family Department estimates at 17,800 workers. Premier Legault has promised to add 37,000 more subsidized daycare spots by 2025. Without meeting the just demands of the child care workers, the claims of the Quebec government, to provide child care spaces for all who need them ring hollow.

For daycare workers, these demands are essential to meet the needs of workers so that the daycare centre network is protected and developed to properly serve the needs of Quebec society.

Parents Call on Legault Government to Meet Workers' Demands

Parents have also had enough of the government's refusal to negotiate new contracts with daycare workers based on their demands for wages and working conditions needed to improve the system. The working conditions of these workers are the living and learning conditions of preschool children and babies across Quebec.

An open letter signed by 278 parents and published in *La Presse* on November 24, demands that

Premier Legault recognize the important role educators play in the lives of working families.



Citing exhaustion from both the pandemic and daycare strikes the letter reads in part, "We, the families of Quebec who are exhausted from adapting, are asking you to resolve this labour dispute through a negotiated settlement in order to save our mental health and that of our children, but also to save our early childhood education system. We all collectively need the workers in the CPE network, their role is major and it is time to recognize their part in our society and the fair value of their work. Do not abandon the Quebec families who have chosen to participate in the Quebec of tomorrow, and who today are at the end of their tether. If you can't do anything about the development of the pandemic, you have all the power you need to resolve this labour dispute."

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