

December 3, 2021 - No. 115

**Eleven Thousand Quebec Daycare Centre
Workers on General Strike**

**By Fighting for Our Workers, We're
Fighting for Sustainable Childcare**

- Interview, Lucie Longchamps -



Striking Workers at an Early Childhood Centre in Gaspé, December 1, 2021.

Alberta Meatpacking Workers Fight for Their Rights

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On December 1, after months of unsuccessful attempts to obtain satisfaction for their demands for wages and working conditions they consider acceptable and that defend services, workers employed at Quebec's Early Childhood Centres (ECCs), members of the Health and Social Services Federation of Unions (FSSS-CSN), went on unlimited general strike. Workers' Forum is posting below an interview with FSSS-CSN Vice-President Lucie Longchamps.

Workers' Forum: How many ECC workers are on general strike and what work are they doing in the centres?

Lucie Longchamps: There are 11,000 CSN workers in childcare centres on unlimited general strike. They are employed in 400 ECCs, which include 700 facilities, as a centre can include more than one facility. These ECCs are spread out throughout Quebec.

We have several job titles in ECCs. There's the educator and the special care educator, who are with the children on a daily basis. These are women with a college education, who applied for an educational program. The program's ultimate goal is that each child according to his or her abilities, be able to develop their full potential so that they can enter kindergarten at five years old with as many skills as possible, without lagging behind the other children in any aspect. The educator must also identify children with developmental challenges. This may be in the area of language, motor skills, or at the cognitive level, where it is detected that certain children may have additional needs, and the educators do everything possible to ensure that they are provided everything they need to develop their potential.

Educators work in close collaboration with educational consultants, who themselves are educators who often have additional training and experience and specialize in identifying problems and establishing intervention plans with the required tools.

This is a very important trio in the ECCs.

There's the person in charge of food who is not only a cook, as the government claims, but who is also responsible for the management of the kitchen, purchases, who ensures that all children with food allergies or intolerances do not receive the same food as the others. We must also not forget all the kitchen clean-up after a long day's work.

There's the worker who disinfects and cleans the facility, as well as administrative assistants who deal with parent files, various documents, payroll, etc.

WF: What are your main demands in this strike?

LL: The main thing at the moment is a wage catch-up because childcare workers were totally ignored by the previous Liberal government during the last two negotiations. This time, they are saying it's their turn and they do not want to miss the opportunity. They're calling for a wage hike increase now. During the last negotiations, they received increases of 1.5 and sometimes two per cent, they lost statutory holidays, all they got were setbacks and their workload was also increased.

There's a shortage of educators. The government has recognized this. Wage increases for educators and special care educators have pretty much been sorted out at present. They were given an 18 per cent increase over three years, which will bring them up to around the same level as workers with the same job titles in child care settings in schools.

What remains to be sorted out, in terms of wages, are the other job groups. They are being offered between six and 9.3 per cent. This is far from a wage increase, as they already have catching up to do from the last two negotiations. This time around they want to earn wages comparable to what exists elsewhere for the same job categories. For example, the food service workers earn about \$4 to \$5 less per hour than someone doing the same job in a residential and long-term care centre. If we are unable to close that gap, they'll go elsewhere.

That's the stumbling block at the moment and that's why we're on an unlimited general strike. Workers are showing a great deal of solidarity with each other. In this negotiation, the wages of approximately 85 per cent of child care workers have been brought on par. We still have to settle the case of around 15 per cent of workers. But what the 85 per cent told us in general assemblies

throughout Quebec in a 91.2 per cent vote in favour of a strike is that there is no way they are going to accept this collective agreement if all our colleagues do not obtain the wage increase that they are entitled to.

One of our main demands is a reduction of the work overload. During the last few years under the Liberal government, a lot of financial cuts were made in daycare centres. In order to comply with the budget allocated to them, ECC administrators made changes that have resulted in work overloads. Take, for example, the issue of educator/child ratios. According to the Ministry of Families' regulation, there are a certain number of children per educator, depending on the child's age. However, what is often applied in daycare centres is a ratio for the building. This means that the employer applies a global ratio for the facility, based on a calculation that includes all the employees inside, without taking into account whether or not they are in the presence of children. This often results in educators having more children than the number required by regulation. The ratios are inflated. For example, they may say the regulatory standard is exceeded because there is an extra person on site, but this person may not even have contact with the children. The Minister has done nothing to prevent the ratio from being inflated. Failure to respect the ratios creates an overload and a health and safety problem for children and educators. We are requesting that the ratios be applied as per the regulation.

Another important concern is that of children with special needs. Our workers need help with these children. Pedagogical counselors have very little time. They are requesting time for planning, for help with these children, including outside help so that there are more hours with educators to accompany these children. If the special educator is only there for two hours during the day, there is still the rest of the day of work with the child with specific needs, so the educator in charge of the group is constantly overworked.

An unlimited general strike in the daycare centres is unprecedented and the solidarity amongst the workers themselves is remarkable. We are asking that the workers be respected, that the ratios be met, that the value of all workers be acknowledged, that their training be recognized, and that they be provided assistance for children with particular needs. All workers are important. All the Premier wants are centres with rooms and children put into these rooms. That's not the way to develop or even maintain these ECCs.

WF: Do you want to add something in conclusion?

LL: What the workers of the ECCs are doing at the moment is historic, it shows extraordinary solidarity. This strike is aimed at saving Quebec's educational childcare services network. Without these workers, who in the main are women even though there are a few men among us, there's no way this network would be what it is. One thing is for sure: without this action they're taking, in a few years the network would no longer be in place. These workers are assisting Quebec overall by what they are presently doing. We continue to be strongly supported by parents despite the difficulties this strike is causing them. We're receiving messages of support from parents who are telling us that we are fighting for them. By fighting for our workers, we are fighting for the sustainability of child care in Quebec.





First day of the general strike at Early Childhood Centres across Quebec, December 1, 2021.

(Translated from original French by Workers' Forum. Photos: FSSS-CSN.)



Alberta Meatpacking Workers Fight for Their Rights

Tentative Agreement Reached at Cargill after Overwhelming Strike Vote



Workers at the High River Cargill meatpacking plant hold strike vote, November 24, 2021.

On December 1, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401 announced that the Cargill Bargaining Committee had reached a proposed agreement that would be put to the members for ratification. "The Company's new offer is a dramatic improvement from the offer that union members saw last week and will significantly improve Cargill workers' lives. If ratified, the offer would be the best food processing contract in Canada, thanks entirely to the strength and determination of Cargill union members in seeking justice," the statement said.

The proposed settlement follows an overwhelming rejection of the company's previous offer. On November 24, Local 401 announced that the workers had rejected Cargill's offer by a 98 per cent margin, with more than 80 per cent of the workers voting. Local 401 then set a strike deadline of December 6 at 12:01 am.

Cargill responded by issuing a lockout notice, also effective December 6 at 12:01 am. The company then started advertising for scab replacement workers and began erecting fences around the plant to limit access. The union announced on November 24 that negotiations would continue on November 30, and reported on December 1 that a tentative agreement had been reached after a marathon session.

There are about 2,200 workers at the Cargill High River plant, located about 70 kilometres from Calgary, which processes 4,700 head of cattle per day, or about one third of total Canadian beef processed. Cargill Inc. had revenues of U.S.\$134.4 billion in fiscal 2021, and net earnings of \$4.93 billion in fiscal 2021, up 64 per cent from 2020. Cargill Inc. is owned by the Cargill-MacMillan family, which has an estimated worth of U.S.\$47 billion. This vast fortune was amassed by these oligarchs from the labour of the Cargill workers without regard for their safety or well-being or that of their community. The Cargill workers' experience has taught them that it is their unity and collective strength which is decisive in their fight to defend their rights and dignity.

Major concerns in negotiations are wages and improved benefits, and matters of health and safety.

The Cargill workers are known for the courage and determination they have shown in defending their right to a safe workplace and safe communities. Three lives were lost and 949 workers were infected with COVID-19 in the first wave alone. Cargill did everything it could to ignore the solutions proposed by Local 401 and the right of the workers to participate in investigations and decision-making, but the workers finally forced the company to take action, including closure of the plant.

The union's statement says the tentative agreement includes retroactive pay, a \$1,000 signing bonus and a \$1,000 COVID-19 bonus, and for many workers an increase of \$5.00 an hour (21 per cent over the life of the contract) and more than \$6,000 in total bonuses. The proposed agreement also provides for "significant contract provisions to facilitate a new culture of health, safety, dignity, and respect in the workplace," and improved health benefits for Cargill workers and their families.

Local 401 President Thomas Hesse and Secretary-Treasurer Richelle Stewart both stressed that the union would stand with the members at Cargill, whether they decide to accept the proposed agreement or reject it.

(Photo: UFCW Local 401)

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