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to Public Sector Workers**

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and Their Right to Decide**

- Geneviève Royer -



March 30 Quebec-wide day of action "We Are Sounding the Alarm"

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The approximately 550,000 workers in the health, education and social services sectors in Quebec are still trying to renew their collective agreements on the basis of demands that improve their working conditions and the delivery of services on which the people depend, in particular in tackling the spread of COVID-19. They've had more than their fill of being humiliated at so-called bargaining tables, particularly as their demands are so critical for themselves and for the people.



One-day strike at Ahuntsic college, March 30, 2021.

On March 30, college-sector unions affiliated with the Quebec Labour Congress (CSQ) staged their first one-day strike action.

The following day, public sector union workers -- one year after the expiry of their contract -- held a national day of action with the theme "We're sounding the alarm." That same day, March 31, Sonia LeBel, the Minister responsible for Government Administration and the Treasury Board Chair, presented at a press conference what she called her new offers and said that "for the first time, the government is dedicating specific amounts to sectoral issues in its negotiations."



In fact, the press conference was another attempt to wreck public opinion, with the Minister claiming that the government is doing everything to resolve the public sector crisis and that the unions lack social solidarity.

She began her press briefing by pointing out that the 550,000 public sector workers provide essential services to the people of Quebec. In the same breath she said, "the total compensation package for government employees amounts to approximately \$40 billion, or nearly 60 per cent of government program spending. Understandably the renewal of collective agreements and the new measures set up as a result have a major impact on Quebec's budget plan." She added, "each increase of one per cent is equivalent to a recurring spending increase of \$400 million."

It's the same mantra that has been bandied about by neo-liberal governments for over 30 years, which has deepened the crisis in social programs and public services as they are regarded as a cost to society and not as an extraordinary contribution to the economy that immensely humanizes society.

In fact, the Minister has no intention of discussing the economy or public finances or of mobilizing the revenues needed to adequately invest in the services and the workers who provide them. She neither sees nor proposes any alternative to an economy that pays the rich, where the value created by social programs and public services is not repaid by the large private interests who are provided, free of charge, with a healthy and educated workforce, not to mention the billions they derive in private profits from their control of such services. Workers have many proposals, such as restricting private profit in the services that are being deprived of vital income. However, such proposals are rejected out of hand.

Talk of Quebecers' "ability to pay" happens only when workers claim wages and conditions that are acceptable to them and that improve the delivery of services.

Who knows, maybe Quebecers don't have the ability to pay for vaccines or personal protective equipment either? This "ability to pay" argument is shameful because it ignores the needs of the people and society which must be met and the public discussion on how to go about doing so. It negates the human factor/social consciousness that must be deployed to develop pro-social solutions, which begin with workers' resistance to the anti-social offensive and putting forward their claims by speaking in their own name.

The Minister's press conference saw the threat of working conditions and wages for public sector employees being decreed once again. Asked by a reporter about her "level of patience" with the unions and how far she was willing to "stretch it" before making "ultimatums," the Minister replied: "Well, you have answered your own question -- as quickly as possible. That's the message I gave to the union leaders. [...] I think, it's in everyone's interest to settle quickly, as quickly as possible [...] I still think we can have a negotiated agreement."

Governance by decree has been one of the essential features of the anti-social offensive for the last thirty years and more, and the current crisis only strengthens it, depriving in particular those who produce the goods and deliver the services of the legal space to make their voices heard.

We can only reject with contempt such ministerial arrogance and intensify our important struggle for a decisive say in determining the conditions and services that we consider acceptable to ourselves and the public.





College-sector unions first one-day strike action in (top to bottom) Sorel-Tracy, Limoilou and Valleyfield, March 30, 2021

(Article and quotations translated from original French by Workers' Forum.)

What the Government Calls "New Offers"

Wage increases that are being proposed by the government remain the same -- five per cent over three years (1.75 per cent, 1.75 per cent and 1.5 per cent). The government is adding a lump sum of up to \$400 million for recurring salary increases, providing that the inflation rate exceeds five per cent and that the government's forecast economic growth is met. This is not a wage increase and it does nothing to address the critical problem of retention and attraction of workers into the public services, therefore it does nothing to solve the crisis in the public services.

The Quebec government is attempting to divert from this central problem with a series of measures which are meant to sound good but are themselves deceptive.

As an example, as far as nurses are concerned, it is proposing to add about 5,000 full-time equivalent staff (FTEs) deployed in the network. But the conditions are not there for workers to want to take full-time positions because of the rule by decree that requires mandatory overtime and having to forego statutory holidays and other kinds of leave when working full time.

In terms of measures for elementary and secondary teachers, the government is entertaining some nice-sounding proposals such as increased autonomy for educators or implementing measures to promote educational success, but it avoids a key demand put forward by teachers to improve learning conditions, and now also to reduce the spread of COVID-19, which is the reduction of class sizes.

This is nice-sounding discourse to avoid meeting the demands and the needs of the workers and of the public, starting with a negotiated real wage increase that is included in the collective agreement, that promotes retention and attraction of personnel.



Responses from Public Sector Unions

Printed below are responses to the government offers by a number of public sector unions.

The Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) represents 160,000 public service workers. It noted that "the wage parameters remain the same as in the last offer: 1.75 per cent in 2020, 1.75 per cent in 2021 and 1.5 per cent in 2022. The lump sums for the first and second year are slightly increased [...] Short-lived measures will not attract and retain employees [...] In refusing once again to take the necessary steps to improve the networks, the Legault government is jeopardizing services to the population. We cannot accept this."



Danny Roy, Vice-President of the Federation of Professionals (FP-CSN) added: "Entire days of discussion dedicated to the implementation of solutions to counter work overload are not reflected at all in this new offer. In addition, there are too few additional resources to address attraction and retention issues. This is unacceptable."

The Union of Quebec Government Professionals (SPGQ), made up of 20,900 public sector specialists, including 3,000 in health and education, pointed out: "The government has offered an increase, which could reach a maximum of one per cent over three years, that is tied to an increase in the consumer price index. Unfortunately, this has very little chance of materializing. Quebec's economic situation in 2021, despite the variants and the restrictions and closures still in effect, would have to return to the level of 2019, before the pandemic. This in our view seems unlikely. If this condition is not met, union members will have to say goodbye to a possible increase. In short, this proposal is nothing but hot air."

SPGQ President Line Lamarre added: "In fact, the first condition in the economic clause reads as follows: 'if the gross domestic product (real GDP) of Quebec as measured by Statistics Canada for the year 2021 is equal to or greater than 98.70 per cent of Quebec's actual GDP for the year 2019.' If, and only if, this condition is met, can staff get an increase of up to one per cent if inflation exceeds five per cent."

"The Minister also proposed lump sums for union members [...] On the one hand, a sum of \$1,000 for the year 2020 alone is offered only to those at the bottom rung. Many people will therefore be deprived of it. As well, a bonus of \$0.66 has also been offered for each hour worked between April 1, 2020 and March 31, 2021. After taxes, this represents only about \$600 in members' pockets, a non-recurring amount. Plus, this amount does not apply to the pension plan."

Sonia Éthier, President of the Quebec Labour Congress (CSQ), which represents 200,000 workers in education, early childhood and health care, said: "After careful analysis, we can only conclude that the offers presented to us on Wednesday [March 31] are smoke and mirrors. This tabling is more of a media stunt on the part of the government than a real willingness to seriously negotiate. In fact, we have found nothing that even remotely resembles a real openness to improving the working conditions of our members [...] the government is inflating its offers with hypothetical and temporary sums, but refuses to grant significant financial margins to improve sectoral working conditions."

The Interprofessional Health Care Federation of Quebec (FIQ) and the Alliance of the Professional

and Technical Health and Social Services Staff (APTS), which are negotiating their salary conditions together, also affirmed that the government is maintaining the status quo.

"One thing is clear: nothing has changed in the last 10 months. The expectations of the 131,000 members of the APTS-FIQ alliance are high and, for the time being, the government's proposal does not reflect any seriousness on the part of the Treasury Board Chair or the salary recognition these people have a right to expect. Worse still, there's no willingness on the part of the Legault government to close the pay gap that puts the health and social services network workers at a disadvantage compared to other Quebec wage earners.

"These salary offers of a five per cent increase over three years, on the table today, were rejected last spring by the delegates of the two organizations."

The APTS, which also represents those employed by Youth Protection Services (DPJ), working with young people and families in great difficulty, said that the Treasury Board Chair "did not hesitate in cutting the mobile leave needed by workers who are subjected to violence and aggression on a daily basis and who are confronted with nameless tragedies. And when they say they are creating a 3.5 per cent bonus, they cleverly hide the fact that in order to take advantage of it, workers will have to give up some of the bonuses they're already receiving.

"But that's not all, when we break down this bonus, we see that it is actually comprised of a permanent part of 1.5 per cent and a temporary part of two per cent that will disappear in two years. Through such underhanded manipulations, Ms. LeBel is contributing to further devaluing the vital work that over 10,000 professionals and technicians are doing with children and their families."

(Quotations translated from original French by Workers' Forum.)

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Website: www.cpcml.ca Email: office@cpcml.ca