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All Out to Support the Just Demands of
Seaway Workers

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Seaway workers picket at the Saint-Lambert's lock on October 23, 2023

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An indefinite general strike was called at midnight Sunday, October 22 by St. Lawrence Seaway workers represented by Unifor Locals 4319 and 4320 in Quebec and Unifor Locals 4211, 4212 and 4323 in Ontario. They include 361 workers in maintenance, supervision, engineering and various navigation operations on the Seaway, which stretches from the Jacques Cartier Bridge in Montreal to the city of Niagara, Ontario.

To understand the important work they do, in 2022, their work enabled more than 200 million tons of goods worth about \$16.7 billion -- nearly half of it grain and iron ore -- to pass through the Seaway. Key cargo includes grain, iron ore, petroleum products, stone and coal.

A 2018 study by Martin Associates found that goods moving through the system supported more than 78,000 direct jobs and \$35 billion in revenue in both Canada and the U.S. That's how much the workers in this sector add to Canada's economy. Instead of recognizing this immense contribution by workers, and considering how to respond to their demands, narrow private interests are quick to raise hysteria blaming the workers.

The port workers are clearly saying that their working conditions are in dire need of being humanized and their pay is also in need of being raised. Determined to get justice for their cause, they voted 99 per cent in favour of the strike.

Daniel Cloutier, Unifor's Quebec Director, said: "These are jobs that require intensive training, a high level of understanding of health and safety risks, and carry enormous responsibility for the well-being of sailors and their cargo. They are irreplaceable. In addition, wages and job insecurity are among (the workers') demands for wage increases similar to those offered to auto workers." Cloutier added: "We negotiated in good faith right up to the last moment, but we cannot allow workers' rights to be compromised. We remain open to discussion and hope that the employer will reconsider its position for the good of all."

The St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corp. (SLSMC) which manages the Port of Montreal says it is dedicated to finding a solution, but that union members are pushing for wage increases "inspired" by the negotiations in the auto industry, where Unifor has made substantial gains,

Canadian Press (CP) reports. The SLSMC says that unlike in the auto industry, seaway worker wage gains over the past 20 years have exceeded inflation and are still close to 10 per cent ahead. It says it's working to reach an agreement that balances wage demands and market realities. All of this is a self-serving use of incomplete information for purposes of arousing anti-worker sentiments. In the last round of negotiations also, the same scenario presented itself and the workers have lifetimes of experience in standing their ground.

Just one day after the strike began, the Montreal Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) called for special back-to-work legislation as quickly as possible. This is required, they say, to avoid a prolonged conflict that could impact the entire economy as the holiday season approaches. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce says the Seaway supports more than 66,000 Canadian jobs and is responsible for \$34 million in economic activity a day.

Mathieu St-Pierre, CEO of the Société de développement économique du Saint-Laurent, told TVA nouvelles that "this is a strike that will cost a fortune in terms of the value of goods transiting and circulating, but it will have consequences even after the strike, because the maritime sector is often upstream or downstream of the logistics chain. This is a strike where every hour can have consequences for the Canadian economy."

The SLSMC also says it is waiting for a response to its application under the *Canada Labour Code* for the union to provide workers during the strike to ensure grain shipments can continue.

It says it carried out an orderly full shutdown of the system during the 72-hour notice period. No vessels are waiting to exit the system, but more than 100 are waiting outside of it that are impacted by the strike.

Traumatized by the militant 13-day strike this summer by British Columbia port workers which paralyzed shipping traffic on the country's west coast, they say a second strike at a Canadian port this year "could cause major disruption to the supply chain," CP says. Again, not a word about the justice of the workers' cause. They hope that by blaming the port workers for whatever problems the supply chain faces, it serves to take attention away from the failure of the employers to negotiate in good faith because otherwise the workers would not have been forced to go on strike.

According to the SLSMC, "In these times of economic and geopolitical crisis, it is important that the seaway remains a reliable transportation route for efficient transport between North America and the rest of the world."

Workers are used to the pressure of being accused of obstructing the smooth running of the economy when they put forward their demands. The workers are fully aware of the vital role they play in the economy and oppose those who use threats of back to work legislation and their criminalization should they defy it, as "tools of negotiation." It is an unacceptable power structure which is why their demands uphold the dignity of labour by upholding the human right to have a say in their working conditions and wages.

This strike is now not only presented as a threat to Canada's economy and security but as exacerbating "the geopolitical crisis" for which it is certainly not Canada's port workers who are responsible. Does this mean that future special laws will consider the geopolitical crisis as a factor in criminalizing workers who exercise their right to strike? That's to be expected. Trade corridors and transportation routes in the U.S. economy which has integrated that of Canada and is now called the "North American economy" are being rapidly transformed to serve the needs of U.S. imperialism's war machine. Transportation workers everywhere are thinking carefully about these upheavals. Their demands are just and must be fulfilled through negotiations, not criminalization.

Given that the seaway is under federal jurisdiction, the François Legault government, which wants to make Quebec the hub of trade between the U.S. and Europe, is likely to put a lot of pressure on the federal government to pass back-to-work legislation as quickly as possible. Unifor announced

on Tuesday, October 24 that the federal government is calling for a mediation meeting between the union and the employer in Toronto on Friday, October 27.



Striking Seaway workers in St. Catharines, October 24, 2023

For Your Information

The St. Lawrence Seaway is a marine shipping route that links the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes through a system of 15 locks between Lake Erie and Montreal.

The seaway is co-managed by the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation, a not-for-profit established by the Canadian government, and the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, a U.S. federal agency. When combined with the Soo Locks at Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario -- managed separately by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers -- the transit system stretches about 3,700 kilometres from Lake Superior to the Atlantic.

The full Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway system, also known as "Highway H2O," serves over 100 ports and commercial docks and helps Canada's Prairie provinces and the U.S. Midwest export goods. Key cargo includes grain, iron ore, petroleum products, stone and coal.

(Unifor, CP, Radio Canada, TVA nouvelles)

Quebec Public Sector to Hold Strikes in November

Workers Determined to Fight Until They Achieve Acceptable Working Conditions and Wages

– Geneviève Royer –



On Thursday October 26, the Common Front representing 420,000 public sector workers in Quebec announced the holding of a first one-day province-wide strike on November 6. It will include more than 500 walkouts across the province and picket lines at health care facilities, schools and other places. "With its attitude at the (negotiating) tables, with its offer of nine per cent over five years, which has not budged since the beginning, with its dubious media operations, in short, with its contempt, [the Legault government] is forcing us to go on strike," reads the Common Front press release.

The Common Front includes the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), the Quebec Labour Federation (FTQ) and the Quebec Labour Congress (CSQ).

The previous day, on October 25, the Interprofessional Federation of Quebec Health Care (FIQ) announced that it received a mandate to strike from 95 per cent of its 80,000 members, which include nurses, nursing assistants, respiratory therapists and clinical perfusionists. In the same press release the FIQ announced that it will be holding its first strike on November 8 and 9.

"It's a strong mandate to tell the government that the proposals we're receiving at the bargaining table are unacceptable. Our working conditions are already very difficult, but what François Legault wants to do is make them even worse by treating us like interchangeable pawns. He has no respect for our professional judgment or our personal lives. Facility managers better get ready: the strike is coming," said FIQ president Julie Bouchard.



This means that as of October 25, all workers in health, social programs and education in Quebec have voted to exercise their right to strike. The Common Front announced on October 17 that it had received a mandate for strike from their members with an average of 95 per cent in favour of this action. According to the leaders of the Common Front, this level of support has not been seen for 50 years (see press release below).

The 60,000-member Fédération autonome des enseignants (FAE), which is not part of the Common Front, also voted in favour of an unlimited strike.

"Our members have made it clear: the status quo is not an option. Teachers' working conditions are also students' learning conditions. For months, headlines have been reporting on the critical state of the Quebec school system. It's high time the Legault government took the necessary steps to ensure that the start of the 2023 school year is the last to take place under similar circumstances," declares Mélanie Hubert, President of the FAE.

Earlier in October the FIQ launched its campaign "There's a Limit – Heading for a Strike." In addition to opposing the government's measures to increase their workloads and thus undermine the quality of patient care, the FIQ rejects the addition of a retirement eligibility criterion (i.e. age 57) regardless of the number of years worked. "Thus, a care professional who started her career very young would be forced to work two years longer, even if she had already accumulated 35 years of service," says the FIQ.

That's nearly 600,000 public sector workers saying *No!* to the government's refusal to take their demands as a starting point for bargaining and impose measures that will increase their already unsustainable workload.

Prior to the Common Front announcement of one day strike on November 6, Quebec Treasury Board President Sonia Lebel announced that she will present new offers to public sector workers on Sunday, October 29. She made this announcement on social media, without informing the workers' negotiation committees through official channels. Her public announcement was made on October 25, which is just within the period of the legally required 10-work day notice for the strike scheduled for November 6. At a press conference on October 26, FTQ President Magali Picard pointed out that this very much sounds like a ploy to then say that the workers announced a strike without hearing the new offer. Common Front representatives said they would not comment until they see the offer but warned against government attempts to play games. In her third "new offer" of March 27, Lebel maintained the totally unacceptable nine per cent wage increase over five years but added a 2.5 per cent increase for sectors considered "government priorities."

Furthermore, Premier François Legault is trying to gauge public opinion by talking to individual workers directly. On Wednesday he stopped by to speak to public sector workers demonstrating outside the National Assembly to tell them that "we all want the same thing." He told them that he "doesn't know" what Minister Lebel will propose on Sunday, but that, in his opinion, "we need to give bigger increases to full-time, night, weekend and regional staff." He said that differentiated wage increases "have rarely been seen in Quebec's history," but that the government's financial capacities "oblige it to make choices based on needs."

Common Front representatives did not reply directly to Legault's new attempt to create a division among workers and yet again invoke the government's nebulous "capacity to pay." Experience shows that when it comes to meeting the claims of public sector workers for wages and working conditions, the "capacity to pay" is limited but its "capacity to pay" is apparently unlimited when it comes to pay-the-rich schemes that further dislocate Quebec's national economy for further integration to the U.S. war economy. The Common Front did say in its press release: "In this context, the Common Front takes the liberty of making it abundantly clear: stop negotiating through PR stunts, take an interest in what's happening on the floor, and come back with a serious offer."

Attempts to blame unions and workers for the slowness of negotiations are not acceptable either. The people of Quebec who receive health care and social programs, as well as all the services provided in schools, are fully aware that it is the workers who provide them who are defending a public health care system and system of education that meets the needs of the people. It is the government that must be held to account if it fails to provide the working conditions and wages that they need to do so.



A Historic 95 Per Cent Strike Mandate for Common Front

– *Common Front Press Release, October 17* –

Following a series of general assemblies held in recent weeks, the Common Front today confirms that it has officially obtained a strike mandate which could extend to an indefinite general strike (GGI). On average, members of the Common Front organizations (CSN, CSQ, FTQ, APTS) voted 95 per cent in favour of the mandate, which specifies that the triggering of the GGI will be preceded by strike sequences.

"The strike mandate that we obtained is historic! This is a message that could not be clearer to the government. We have witnessed it, something extraordinary has really happened over the last few weeks. The mobilization of members is very concrete and very active. The Common Front is anchored in our communities. The strength of the mandate with which we present ourselves before the government must be taken seriously. If the government still doubts the context in which we find ourselves, this is the ultimate signal," argue the representatives of the Common Front,

François Enault, first vice-president of the CSN, Éric Gingras, president of the CSQ, Magali Picard, president of the FTQ, and Robert Comeau, president of the APTS, recalling that there was no shortage of warnings.



"We have said it from the very beginning: this negotiation is first and foremost that of the 420,000 workers that we represent, 78 per cent of whom are women. It is their requests that we carry. The strength of the mandate they gave us testifies to their massive support for the Common Front and this great strike movement, unprecedented in the last 50 years."

"Such a strong response and support also comes with great responsibility, as well as high expectations for the outcome of the negotiations. Let's be clear: the government is playing a very traditional narrative, demonstrating its disconnection from the realities on the ground. It is certain that maintaining a salary offer of nine per cent over five years, despite the ridiculousness of the offer, does not help to calm the discontent of the members, but for Ms. LeBel, there is still time to do the right thing. And it will be necessary to come up with substantial offers."

The Common Front is therefore calling on the government today and reiterating its openness to negotiate to reach a settlement that will allow workers in the education, health and social services and higher education networks to stop getting poorer and improve their working conditions in concrete terms. For all job categories. "What we want is for the outcome of this negotiation to allow us to look resolutely forward and rebuild our public services on solid foundations. And that is in the interest of all Quebecers, who have understood this well, as evidenced by their support in this negotiation. Can we come to the table for the rest of things now, and seriously?"

The Common Front finally recalls that obtaining mandates does not mean that it will be exercised *de facto*. If necessary, the announcement will be made officially and publicly, in advance, by the Common Front.

(Translation from the original French by WF)



United States

Workers Fighting for Their Rights in the U.S.



Workers at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in Michigan join strike, October 23, 2023

Auto workers in the U.S. are militantly carrying on their strike for better wages, working conditions and job security. A United Auto Workers (UAW) statement reads: "When these corporations make these decisions, they affect our members' families, and not only that, the community. That's why it's so important during these negotiations every four years that we negotiate job security. The problem is the rich want to get richer, and they want to keep the poor poorer and they want to wipe out the working class."

The UAW strike which began September 15 continues to expand. On October 23, 6,800 UAW members at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in Michigan, Stellantis' largest plant, joined the strike. On October 24, 5,000 members at Arlington Assembly joined the strike, shutting down production at General Motors' largest plant and bringing the number of auto workers on strike to over 45,000 out of a total membership of 150,000.

The auto workers also supported the 75,000 medical workers from Kaiser Permanente facilities who went on a planned three-day strike from October 4 to 6, putting pressure on one of the leading not-for-profit U.S. health care networks to reach an agreement on a new contract.



"Today, we stand in solidarity with the 75,000 members of our union family who are on strike at Kaiser," UAW President Shawn Fain said. "Whether you work in a hospital, or behind a desk, or on an assembly line, your fight is our fight. We all deserve dignity on and off the job. We all deserve a future for our families and our communities. We all deserve our fair share of the economy that we, as working people, create and run. To our union family on strike at Kaiser, the UAW has your back."

It was the largest walkout ever in the U.S. health care sector, surpassing a 53,000-person strike in 2018. It stems from staffing shortages in the sector, largely a consequence of occupational "burnout" from the COVID-19 pandemic. As the health care unions were about to serve notice of another three day walkout, they succeeded, on October 13, in reaching a tentative agreement which includes a 21 per cent wage increase over the next four years. Voting on the tentative agreement started on October 18 and will continue till the beginning of November.



Kaiser Permanente health care workers picket October 6, 2023

The U.S. labour movement saw a resurgence in 2022, with high-profile organizing campaigns at companies including Starbucks, Amazon, and Trader Joe's amongst others. Union organizing is also on the rise. More than 16 million workers were represented by a union in 2022 -- an increase of 200,000 from 2021. Unions also saw their highest public approval rating in more than 50 years. Throughout 2022, strikes provided workers critical leverage to bargain over better pay, safe working conditions, and a larger share of the value they produce in the economy

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show the number of workers involved in major work stoppages (strikes and similar activities) increased by nearly 50 per cent compared with 2021. As the U.S. saw a re-energized labour movement and a labour market where there are more job openings than available workers, 120,600 workers were involved in major work stoppages in 2022.

There is also an alarming increase of the number of poor people. The poverty rate in the U.S. exploded last year, the first increase in 13 years, the U.S. Census Bureau reported. In 2022, the rate was 12.4 per cent, up 4.6 percentage points from 2021, according to the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). The SPM is a method for tallying government welfare programs and tax credits designed to assist low-income families.



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