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**Quebec Public Sector Workers' Strike**  
**An Authority at Odds With Current Conditions**



Education workers, Montreal, December 4, 2023

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#### Quebec Public Sector Workers' Strike

## An Authority at Odds With Current Conditions



Common Front, Montreal, December 8, 2023

Starting on December 7, for seven days, the 420,000 health, education and social program workers of the Common Front joined the 66,500 teachers of the Autonomous Teachers' Federation (FAE) who have been on an unlimited strike since November 23. The 80,000 members of the Interprofessional Health Federation of Quebec (FIQ) were on strike from December 11 to 14. Despite the enormous difficulties the strike is causing Quebec families, public support remains strong, simply because people are aware that the quality and quantity of care to which they are entitled are defended by workers in this sector.

One of the issues at stake in the current battle is that the health and education sectors are close to a breaking point following nearly 30 years of anti-social offensive, which over time has been called cutbacks, cuts, austerity, balanced budgets and now the need for flexibility. Far from solving anything for the population and protecting the services to which the people are entitled, these anti-social policies have exacerbated the crisis in the systems of health care and education that are badly in need of investments and reform to strengthen not destroy them, in order to privatize and pay the rich with monies diverted from the social programs. Working conditions are now such that health care workers and education personnel are deserting these sectors. After the tragedies of the pandemic, workers are saying: enough!

The aim of the government's restructuring of public services is to hand over decision-making in this sector to the narrow private interests it serves. Its scheme is to be able to deploy the workforce as it sees fit, without having to take into account the limits on hours of work and shifts achieved by workers in employment contracts. The Legault government is refusing to tackle the major problems identified by the community, and in particular by workers in these sectors and their organizations, nor is it its intention to do so. Because it has no pro-social solutions, this government resorts to attempts to divide the ranks of the workers and threatens them to achieve its ends. As quoted in the press on December 6, Legault said:

"It's important that all Quebecers understand that the negotiations we're currently conducting to renew collective agreements will be decisive for the future of the health and education networks. ... For decades, we haven't been able to improve education and health services much because of the rigidity of collective agreements. We're not able to. [...] Let me give you an example: if a manager agrees with an employee on a work schedule, the union may reject it. Often, employees would agree with our proposals, but they're rejected by the unions. [...] That's what negotiations

are all about. [...] It's going to be a bumpy ride over the next few weeks." Despite the fact that the basic disagreement in the current battle is who the managers serve, Legault said: "It's not right that our network should be managed by unions rather than by managers."

The question before all Quebecers is to hold the government accountable and make sure it assumes its social responsibilities when it comes to increasing investment in health care and education and end privatization.

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

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## **Public Sector Workers Remain Determined to Win Working Conditions That Meet Peoples' Needs**

**– Geneviève Royer –**

The employment contracts of nearly 600,000 public sector employees expired on March 31, 2023. As early as autumn 2022 these employees presented their demands to the government for working conditions and wages acceptable to themselves for the care they provide to the population. One year later, after the use of various pressure tactics up to and including strike action, and with massive public support for their demands, it is clear that the government's desire is to exercise virtually total control over all decisions made in these sectors, and that to do so, it must eliminate the limits contained in the employment contracts. In addition to being profoundly anti-worker, this government policy will only intensify an already untenable crisis in health and education. Workers in this sector are courageously continuing their struggle and regularly informing the public about what is happening at the bargaining tables. It should be remembered that the Common Front and the Interprofessional Health Federation of Quebec (FIQ) are in their third round of strike days, ending on December 14, while the Autonomous Teachers' Federation (FAE) has been on an unlimited strike since November 23.

The Common Front, representing more than 420,000 employees in health care, primary, secondary and college education and social programs, said on December 10:

"The government's mantra about flexibility and agility poorly conceals a desire to further control the work of the network's exhausted staff.

"After more than a year of negotiations, and at a time when the network has been hit by one of the biggest crises in its history, the union organizations are astonished that the government is still proposing concessions at the sectoral tables. Its intention in reviewing local matters is to be able to move staff around several departments and sites, and to impose multi-shift schedules. Yet what network workers and the public want is more stability in the services offered.

"Currently, staff are leaving the network through every door and window. By attacking the little stability that remains in working conditions, the government is stepping on the gas pedal and driving into the wall. We need to do just the opposite. We need to improve working conditions for all job titles in the network, starting now. By staging a third round of strikes across Quebec this weekend, network workers are showing that they are determined to improve their working conditions and fight for better services for the public.

"Added to this is the fact that the government, in the middle of negotiations, has put an end to the double overtime rate for all staff, which was an important staff retention measure. Since the start of sectoral negotiations, the government has been proposing temporary measures and measures that apply to only a few job titles, which is far from enough to convince staff to stay in the network and to attract the next generation.

"Minister Dubé and Premier Legault should spend less time taking cheap shots at the unions and more time giving mandates to improve working conditions at the sectoral tables. It's not the unions' fault that many job titles are understaffed, or that the workforce is stretched to the limit. The striking workers expect more from the government."

The FAE which represents 66,500 teachers pointed out on December 11 that:

"From the outset of these negotiations, the Federation has clearly stated teachers' priorities: improved class composition, lighter workloads and greater professional autonomy. If François Legault's government truly cares about public schools, it must do everything in its power, starting now, to respond to the many pressing needs of teachers. Yet, after 11 months of negotiations, more than 80 meetings and 13 days of strike action, we wonder whether the government is taking the situation seriously, when half a million students are not in class every day. We are collectively wasting precious time. The FAE is willing to give negotiations another chance, but the mandates of the employer representatives at the tables must lead to concrete improvements in teaching and learning conditions in the classroom, on a daily basis."

In its verbal submission on December 4, the government made it clear to the FAE that openness on assignments was essential to break the deadlock at the bargaining tables. This is why, last Wednesday, the FAE met with its governing body, the Conseil fédératif de négociation, to draw up new mandates concerning these assignments. Following discussions between the delegations, a union counter-offer proposing various terms on assignments was adopted on Wednesday and tabled with management on Thursday morning.

However, over the weekend, rather than responding to the union proposals as expected, management instead invited the FAE to make other moves and seek new mandates from its governing bodies. This attitude contrasts sharply with the promises made publicly on November 23.

The FIQ, which represents 80,000 health care workers, is currently in its third round of strike days. On December 11, it published the following commentary:

"To discuss something as simple as parking for care professionals who require a vehicle, it took the government negotiating team 48 hours to get back to us. One cannot say they're making negotiations a priority when it takes that long for something so simple. François Legault and Sonia LeBel may say that negotiations are a priority, but things aren't moving fast enough at the table. They need to give their negotiators real mandates. While discussions have accelerated in recent days and some progress has been made, not enough has been made on issues that are essential for care professionals. Workload and work-life balance are priorities that must be taken seriously by the government.

"While the government insists on putting salaries on the public agenda, the FIQ would like to point out that the heart of the dispute also stems from abysmal working conditions in the health care network.

"Obviously, money is important. Care professionals must be paid what they're worth, in line with their expertise, and we'll never accept a cut-rate deal. But there's more to it than pay, there's also working conditions. We have to stop exhausting care professionals to the point where they're left with only two choices: burnout or resignation. This way of doing things is getting us nowhere.

"There is no doubt that a large part of the population understands that the struggle waged by nurses, nursing assistants, respiratory therapists and clinical perfusionists is also a struggle to improve the quality and safety of care offered to Quebec patients.

The same day, the widescale support that the public sector workers have amongst the population

was confirmed when the Steelworkers' union, a member of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), announced a donation of \$100,000 in the form of grocery gift cards for striking public sector workers, given their lack of income and even minimum strike pay.

"The workers, the vast majority of whom are women, who deliver the public services, who look after our young people, our children, our seniors and the population as a whole, are currently fighting an important battle for decent working conditions. In these times of galloping inflation, these workers refuse to be impoverished and demand respect from their employers. Like most of Quebec's population, our members stand shoulder to shoulder with them. It's important for us to support them."

Donations are being distributed via Steelworkers' regional offices across Quebec, directly on picket lines and through organizations.

"We know that the battles of some people reflect on others. A strike represents a major sacrifice. These donations don't begin to replace a salary, but we hope to give a little respite to the families most affected, so that the strikers get a settlement with their heads held high. When one of us is affected, the whole Steelworker family is there to respond. Public sector workers include our sisters, daughters, mothers, boyfriends, girlfriends, children and friends. The Steelworkers are there for them!"

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

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## Hidden Agenda of Minister Dubé and the Public Sector's Struggle

– Claude Moreau –



Quebec City demonstration against Bill 15, December 12, 2023

Adopted under gag order on December 10, Quebec Health Minister Christian Dubé's Law 15, called the *Law to make the health and social services system more efficient*, concentrates all powers in the minister's hands by creating the agency Quebec Health which becomes the only employer in the network in Quebec. The minister may show off, but he nevertheless knows that he must "bulldoze" the collective agreements if he wants to succeed in his anti-social reform.

This is how the unions appear to be the obstacle which, if not removed, will prevent Minister Dubé from carrying out his reform. The minister wants absolute management rights over working hours, the length of the working day and the working week; he wants to be able to move employees from one sector to another, from one establishment to another within a 60 km radius, from one shift to another, from one day to another, etc.

All this would have the consequence of destroying what is still working well, by displacing staff, robbing Peter even more to pay Paul. In other words, the crisis would worsen in the network and cause even more employees to flee.

We have been living for some time in this scenario where the health crisis creates a market for the private sector.



As the crisis worsens, will he call on private management firms to take care of a hospital in a region or even Quebec Health itself? So they could then subcontract what is the most profitable for the private sector?

Minister Dubé prohibited establishments from using private placement agencies. Did he succeed? NO. On the contrary, it has increased. Window dressing and manipulation of public opinion.

Everyone is aware that if the government succeeds in sabotaging the struggle of public sector workers, not only will they suffer disastrous working conditions for themselves

and their families, but the destruction of the public hospital and health and social services network will be taken to even higher levels.

It is not for nothing that many seniors encourage the strikers by saying "don't give up," they who are undoubtedly the first victims of the growing dehumanization of health care.

We must invest in health, education and social services. But the government considers this a cost and not an investment. Investing in them means giving billions of dollars to very rich companies, money that they do not have and must borrow. Who are they borrowing from?



By following the money, we will realize that the money comes from large foreign financiers, perhaps even directly or indirectly from the Northvolt company which makes enormous profits from the interest on loans to the government and government grants. Possibly, at the end of the day, this financial operation will bring Northvolt more than the cost of the construction of its planned battery factory itself, if it goes ahead. Guaranteed profits.

This is how the state demands that its employees become poorer and their living and working conditions destroyed, that they -- along with the entire population -- finance the government's pay-the-rich schemes through their taxes, and the ensuing deterioration in health, education and social services.

The nurses' slogan is: *Our working conditions, your care conditions* and they are absolutely right.

They want their *No* to mean *No!* Long live the struggle of public sector employees!

*(Translated from French original by Workers' Forum.)*

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## Unwavering Support for Teachers' Courage



Since the launch of the indefinite general strike by the 66,500 teachers of the Autonomous Teachers' Federation (FAE) on November 23, support from the public has been pouring in daily. Apart from the constant honking of car horns, the teachers' picket lines are regularly visited by members of the community who bring them coffee and food. Restaurateurs also serve pizza or chicken to striking teachers in their neighborhoods, and shopkeepers offer discounts on purchases. *Operation Entraide pour les profs en grève* (Operation Support for the Teachers on Strike) was also set up to help FAE members meet various needs, as they have been without pay or strike funds for nearly three weeks.

On December 11, the Steelworkers announced a donation of \$100,000 in grocery gift cards for the families of public sector strikers.

The group *Je protège mon école publique* (I Support My Public School), which also organizes human chains around schools, said:

"The media frequently point out that FAE teachers have valiantly decided to go on unlimited general strike without a strike fund, which obviously causes problems. But solidarity initiatives are also being organized, such as this self-help group between teachers (whether they are with the FAE or the Common Front), and these shopkeepers who have also decided to support these strikers who want to improve public schools. "

The struggle of public sector workers is also receiving support outside Quebec. The Ontario Federation of Labour expressed its support at its convention in early November, and Education International did the same in a press release on November 14.

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

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## All Out in Defence of Public Education!

On Monday, December 11, Outaouais teachers once again responded massively to the call of the Outaouais Teachers' Union (SEO) for a surprise action which was announced the evening before. At 9:30, people gathered in front of the Branchaud-Brière Sports Complex where Coalition Avenir Québec MPs were meeting for an announcement made by Deputy Premier and Minister of Transportation and Sustainable Mobility, Geneviève Guilbault. The latter announced the expansion of two roads and wrote on X that it was "excellent news for the citizens of Gatineau."

Union members were particularly disgusted with Premier François Legault's most recent statement, bringing up yet again his demands for more "flexibility." Leaving no doubt as to what his intentions are and clearly stating that, rather than improving working conditions, he is taking measures to deteriorate them even further, he said: "It is inevitable that we must make workers' contracts more flexible so as to give managers in the health and education system new powers. That's how it works in the private sector, and that's how it should work in the public sector."

A number of teachers raised that their struggle demanding that they be respected and in defence of public education has become a matter of principle.



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## Impressive Teachers' Demonstration in the Outaouais Demands Quebec Government Take Up Its Social Responsibilities

On Monday morning, December 4, close to 3,000 teachers, some coming from as far as Papineauville, closed a section of boulevard de la Carrière and St-Joseph in Gatineau to "march without trembling." The slogan was an intended pun referring to Hull CAQ MP Suzanne Tremblay, who before being elected as MP in the last elections, was the president of the Outaouais Teachers' Union (SEO).

In its call for the demonstration, the SEO wrote: "It is high time we force our CAQ MPs in the Outaouais to commit themselves in this round of negotiations. Their silence has lasted long enough. Seeing as they refuse to take the initiative and speak out, we will visit them collectively and ask them questions. The first person we will visit is Suzanne Tremblay, MP for the Hull riding and government assistant to the minister of Education."





Before beginning the march starting at the Lac-Leamy Casino, the current president of the SEO said that union members felt betrayed by their former president. She stated that the union will not leave any sector aside in these negotiations. "For the past 25 years, things have deteriorated in education. Did the Premier really think he would succeed in convincing us to go back to work by shedding a few tears?" She was referring to a recent theatrical performance by Quebec Premier François Legault who went public to ask that the strike be stopped because it was "hurting the children." The union immediately fired back on social media by stating that what was hurting students was the decades-long deterioration of public education.

Everyone then marched to the Hull MP's constituency office where they demonstrated loudly. By turning out in such great numbers, SEO teachers are showing their determination in securing their rights to working conditions and salaries acceptable to them for the work they do and for upholding their social responsibilities, and which meet their needs and those of their students. They are demanding that the government listen to them and that it take up its own responsibilities with regard to education, to teachers, students, parents, and society as a whole.

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### Letter to the Editor

## On the Picket Lines at Saint-François d'Assise Hospital

This is the start of the seven-day strike. It's getting better and better organized in terms of keeping warm and also available clothing.

People give coats to new arrivals, Africans, Tunisians, etc. who have just started at the hospital. To one of them who was freezing and not moving, I suggested that she come in and warm up for 10 minutes, and that she could do so regularly. The people who are new don't know our ways of acting.

When I arrived at the picket line, one person said to me: "I love you, because you arrive every day with a new sign." A sign read, "Stop the destruction of the health care system," and received much approval and many took photos.

Echoing the Premier's words, today's statement said: "Unions, an obstacle to private sector health." This helps to liven up discussions, such as what is the flexibility requested by the government and what does it want to do with it? Money flow, how does the government pay the rich? The crisis of institutions, etc.

I talk about this because it is clear that people experience and feel things, but do not have the words.

Inside the hospital, many critical situations occurred this week. Let us mention that we almost lost the computer servers of the hospital network, the five hospitals and everything connected to them. The IT technicians saved the situation by installing fans, opening to the outside to circulate cold air to cool the server room a little.

Many hospital workers were happy that the disaster was averted, concerned about the damage it would have caused to the region's health system, aware of the fact that such a disaster would have served to attack unions and union members and to blame their pressure tactics.

The Premier's physical language was noted. He grimaces when something bothers him. This is seen as a good sign.

Monday, the 11th, FIQ nurses joined the Common Front unions on the strike pickets. Registration of strikers is now done in the same tent for all strikers from all unions.

I have the impression that the employer is starting to procrastinate and cheat on strike times and the work that managers must provide. This coincides with the media's sudden preoccupation with "collateral effects on patients." In other words, the pressure is beginning to be exerted on the health strikers.

Some strikers still think that there is a possibility that this will be resolved soon and that is discussed, but the contrary opinion seems to prevail. There is also concern about the exhaustion of the strike fund after 10 days, which demonstrates the first point. In two weeks, the pay will be smaller because that is when the cuts due to the strike will be reflected.

One last point. I noticed that many elderly people on foot or in cars showed their support for the strikers. And I am not the only one, another retired worker being of the same opinion said that it was bad for the CAQ if the seniors supported the strikers. They are particularly suffering from the health crisis, as well as from the pandemic.

Greetings to all public sector workers!

*A reader from Quebec City*

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## Photo Review

# Public Sector Workers Take to the Streets

Since December, the nearly 600,000 public sector employees have been taking to the streets on a daily basis to assert their demands. They are often joined by parents and passers-by in their communities. Below are photos of their actions in different regions of Quebec, from December 4 to 12.

Greater Montreal





### Laval



Quebec City





## Eastern Townships



## Outaouais





**Lebel-Sur-Quévillon**



**La Sarre**



*(Photos: PMLQ, FAE and its affiliated unions, FIQ, CSQ, CSN)*

**Website: [www.cpcml.ca](http://www.cpcml.ca) Email: [editor@cpcml.ca](mailto:editor@cpcml.ca)**