

# Fighting Austerity? The Public Sector and the Common Front in Quebec

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The previous round of negotiations in Quebec between the rightwing provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest and the public sector unions in 2005 was ended abruptly by the adoption of a special law that unilaterally imposed wages and conditions on the workers, while providing draconian penalties for any disturbance to the normal functioning of public institutions. The special decree (Bill 142/Law C-43) was quite a remarkable attack on public sector collective bargaining, even by the standards of the Quebec state.

As a result, according to the unions, the workers suffered 4 per cent decline in real wages over the five-year period of the imposed contract. Further, in the estimate of a government agency set up to monitor the relationship between public and private sector wages in Quebec in order to facilitate public-sector negotiations, the wages of provincial workers had already fallen 8.7 per cent behind those of the private sector by 2004. The government, however, now argued that public sector workers enjoy the advantage of job security compared to private sector workers (which is the case for at most three quarters of public sector workers).

## A Common Front Forms

In May 2009, the CSN (Confédération des syndicats nationaux – Confederation of National Trade Unions), the FTQ (Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec – Federation of Workers of Quebec, affiliated with the CLC) and the SISP (Secrétariat intersyndical des services publics – Inter-union Secretariat of Public Services – most nurses, school teachers, professionals and others) announced a ‘Common Front’ (Front commun) of provincial public-sector workers (recalling in name the illegal general strikes of Quebec workers in 1972).

In numerical terms, this was the biggest Common Front ever, representing 475,000 workers (of some 555,000 provincial public sector workers in Quebec). It was made possible by an agreement to abstain from raiding each others’ unions over the summer (the annual raiding period in Quebec). The main common demand was an 11.5 per cent raise over the course of a three-year agreement. This would allow the workers to make up for the 4 per cent lost during the last contract as well as some modest, new gains. Apart from the common front, the unions also negotiate sectoral agreements.

In launching the Common Front, the leaders announced that their goal was to reach an agreement before the current contract ended on March 31, 2010. This clearly implied that leadership did not

intend to mobilize with a view to building a favourable correlation of forces, since any strike pressure could be legally applied only after that date. And, in fact, there was no serious mobilization. When the Quebec government began negotiating, even though its initial 'final offer' was light years from what the unions were asking, this was presented by the union leaders as a victory.

### **Abstention from Coalitions against Public Sector Austerity**

This 'strategy' was, to say the least, surprising, given that this government had abruptly ended the previous negotiations with a special law that it did not even try to justify seriously. In 2005, there were no economic crisis, nor budget or debt crises. The Common Front leaders did little to inform the public of their demands or to present what was at stake as quality public services. This was the case even though they were bargaining with an extremely unpopular government that was facing serious accusations of corruption and was bent on a course of creeping privatization of public services and introducing or raising fees for these services.

The Common Front leaders also abstained from participation in a broad coalition of social forces that was organized in opposition to the government austerity Budget of March 30, 2010. The Budget called, among other things, for introducing a \$25 fee per visit to doctors, a \$200 annual 'health tax' regardless of income, a 17% rise in electricity rates over 2014-2018 beyond the usual annual increases, and a 2% increase in the provincial sales tax. These regressive measures were extremely and broadly unpopular across Quebec. But the refusal of the Common Front leaders to join the coalition (although many local unions did) only helped to undermine whatever public support there was for the front, since the wage demands, if granted, would appear to be at the expense of the worst-paid workers.

### **The Accord and Public Sector Worker Setbacks**

The agreement with the Quebec government signed by the Common Front leaders on June 27 was very far from their initial demands. The unions were asking 11.5 per cent over three years. The agreement is for five years and gives between 7 per cent and 10.5 per cent over that period. The higher figure depends on whether GDP grows faster than expected. In that case, the workers will get 0.5 per cent, 1.5 per cent and 1.5 per cent more in the last three years. The agreement not only gives up the goal of recouping the lost wages of 2005-10 but it accepts a further decline, since inflation over 1.2 per cent annually will be compensated by only 1 per cent more for the entire five years. As for the additional 3.5 per cent if GDP grows faster than expected, that is quite hypothetical in current circumstances.

The accord was signed and presented as a victory by the union leadership without sounding out the rank and file. It still has to be ratified by the local-union assemblies, but a significant revolt seems unlikely, given the weakness of left wing currents in a union movement in Quebec that has increasingly embraced the corporatism of 'social partnership' and social investment funds over the past 30 years.

Despite the 'common front,' the conclusion of the agreement means the abandonment by the Common Front of the 55,000 nurses of the FIQ (La Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec - Federation of Nurses of Quebec), who have not signed their sectoral agreement. Their main demands concern workloads (vast amounts of overtime) and the widespread use of agency labour. In a way, the Common Front experience of 2010 repeats the earlier failure of the big federations to support the nurses in the summer of 1999 when, in defiance of their own leaders and

in the face of extremely punitive laws, they struck, with much public support, for two weeks. The federations reaped the bitter fruits of their inaction when in 2005 they saw their own union rights trampled underfoot by similarly repressive laws.

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