

# STAND **with us**

to defend our public services



**BARGAINING UPDATE n° 3 • CENTRAL BARGAINING TABLE • APRIL 9, 2015**

## A DAY TO REFLECT ON STRIKE ACTION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

**ENLIGHTENING EXCHANGES, VERY STIMULATING DEBATES!**

**N**early 2,500 public sector activists eager to debate the recourse to strike action in connection with their negotiations with the Government of Quebec. High calibre guests, many divergent positions, but everyone determined to share their points of view on the question. An immense human chain surrounding the National Assembly grounds. Unequivocally, the *Stand with us, on the move! A day to reflect on strike action in the public sector* event was an unparalleled success!

The union delegates gave a rousing welcome to the three Common Front spokespeople, namely, Carolle Dubé from the SISF, Francine Lévesque from the CSN and Daniel Boyer from the FTQ. The latter had invited the participants to engage in wide-ranging and insightful exchanges on the indispensable clout and leverage that we'll have to build to get this Liberal Government to come to their senses. Faced with the latter's obstinacy, no form of job action can be taken off the table. This is why we have to immediately begin thinking about an eventual recourse to strike action, they indicated to everyone in attendance.

The first part of the day was devoted to workshops. What's the morale of our troops? At what stage are we at in terms of mobilization in the workplace? What conditions will have to be met for us to build really meaningful clout and leverage? What are the obstacles to going on strike in the public sector? Each table, which counted about ten people, had to debate a series of questions, try to define a majority position and write down their alternatives with the help of an interactive voting system. The results of the foregoing were then shared "live", which gave rise without fail to many



kinds of reactions. To the question "Is a strike an effective way to go?" the activists responded positively by a healthy majority, giving rise to vigorous applause. The exercise was primarily designed to enable the activists to share their arguments in view of the consultation exercise that awaits us over the next few months.

At noon, the 2,500 delegates formed a human chain about 1.5 km long, which went all around the National Assembly. The message was clear: this Government can no longer ignore the demands being put forward by the Common Front.

"Unions don't negotiate with public opinion, they negotiate with the Government." And for

the latter “Unions, are like a bad toothache.” The historian Jacques Rouillard, a specialist on the trade union movement, opened the afternoon plenary session by drawing a portrait of public sector negotiations over the past 40 years. From one battle to the next, from gains here and gains there, public sector Unions have definitively helped Quebec society progress and move forward.

Then, the table was set for the highlight of the day: a rousing adversarial debate between the former Bloc québécois leader, Gilles Duceppe, the conservative commentator Tasha Kheiriddin, and the academics Jean-Noël Grenier and Laurence-Léa Fontaine.

A law professor at UQAM, Laurence-Léa Fontaine vigorously defended the right to strike in the public sector and invited the Unions to elaborate a militant strategy within the framework of the present round of bargaining. “The only effective strike is a strike that ruffles feathers,” she argued.

Ms. Kheiriddin’s comments, which contested the economic legitimacy of a strike in the public sector, certainly didn’t please everyone. “I’m here to expose to you a position that exists. Most probably, you won’t like it, but I’m presenting it to you so that you’re aware of it, so that it can help you in your discussions,” she declared, faced with some polite objections from the hall. While expressing their disagreement with her thoughts, a few participants took the time to salute her courage for coming there to defend her arguments in front of a rather hostile audience.

Gilles Duceppe underlined that a strike was the ultimate weapon, but all the same a legitimate one. Inasmuch as it is truly what employees aspire to, the recourse to strike action constitutes an incontrovertible tool for reaching a settlement. Mr. Duceppe took advantage of the opportunity to take a jab at the President of the Treasury Board: “Mr. Coiteux sees reality only in terms of numbers on a spreadsheet. But there is a reality on the front lines in human terms that exists behind these numbers, and one has to take the latter into account in politics.”

Jean-Noël Grenier literally brought the house down. Recalling the legitimacy of our bargaining proposals designed to put an end to salary disparity in the public sector, he argued that the Common Front should not hesitate to resort to strike action, a legitimate and effective means to settle this problem.

Did the debate end at the adjournment of this meeting? Certainly not. The Common Front spokesperson reiterated the importance of the work that awaits us: the next few months must be devoted to exchanges and discussions in all our workplaces so that all the Unions in the Common Front will be prepared to exercise a recourse to strike action, should it become necessary. ■



Upper left: **2,500 activists formed an immense human chain around the National Assembly.**

Upper right: **The spokespersons: Carole Dubé from the SISP, Francine Lévesque from the CSN and Daniel Boyer from the FTQ.**



## CENTRAL BARGAINING TABLE: THE PARTIES EXPLAIN THEIR POSITIONS

Since the tabling of the Common Front's bargaining proposals and the Treasury Board's offers, on October 30 and last December 15, five bargaining sessions have taken place at the central bargaining table. These sessions have enabled the two parties to explain their respective arguments and perspectives. All the subjects have not yet been addressed, but here follows a summary of the exchanges that have occurred to date.

### **SALARY DEMANDS**

The Common Front was able to present its arguments in support of its salary demands. The paramount argument is that we must put an end to the 7.6% disparity in terms of the total remuneration of Government employees vis-à-vis other Quebec workers. The Common Front spokesperson demonstrated that the Government offers (a 2-year wage freeze, 1% per year for the next three years) would have a harsh impact: in addition to having their purchasing power drop by 7%, Government employees would see their salary disparity grow to nearly 15%. At the end of the presentation, the Common Front negotiators shared with their vis-à-vis a video that describes our salary proposals,

which you can likewise see on the Common Front Web site at: [frontcommun.org](http://frontcommun.org).

### PENSION PLAN

The Treasury Board views defined benefit pension plans as the best way to ensure a person's pension income. By their own admission, the RREGOP is in very good financial health and its capitalization is in the neighbourhood of 100%. However, making use of certain excerpts from the Report by the committee of experts on the future of the Quebec retirement system – the d'Amours Report, that need we recall does not deal with our pension plan – the Treasury Board considers that we can no longer administer the RREGOP as we've done in the past. Although they acknowledge that modifications were made during the last round of bargaining, the foregoing would be insufficient. In the long run, more fundamental structural modifications would be necessary to ensure the sustainability of the pension plan.

### SALARY RELATIVITY

The Treasury Board spokespeople explained the orientation that they wanted to give to this process: First of all, they want to settle the complaints from 2010 with regard to pay equity and agree upon maintaining equity in 2015 *before* approaching the work to be done dealing with salary relativity. Our negotiators reminded their vis-à-vis that the pay equity complaints, covered by the Pay Equity Act, are not a subject of collective bargaining and that the Common Front has no mandate to address this question: the Union organizations who are members of the Common Front or their affiliates are the ones with this responsibility.

### SKILLED WORKERS

The Treasury Board first sought to clarify the parameters surrounding the whole skilled workers question. In the Common Front's mind, this exercise was done by the two parties beginning in 2010, and the question that remains today is whether the Treasury Board is prepared to make the necessary salary adjustments. The Common Front reiterated its demands: they are described in the union recommendations of the final report of the Task Force on Skilled Workers tabled in 2013.

### WORK ORGANIZATION AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE WORKPLACE

At the Treasury Board's request, the Common Front clarified the sense of its demands pertaining to measures to address work organization and the quality of life in the workplace (the fight against the private sector, protection of one's professional autonomy, putting an end to contingent work and balancing family-work-education). The Common Front believes that it is imperative that the parties monitor the sector-based negotiations on this subject so as to avoid impasses arising and to identify the mandates and resources that should be allocated in these areas. ■



With Jean-Philippe Cipriani acting as the moderator, Tasha Kheiriddin, Gilles Duceppe, Laurence-Léa Fontaine and Jean-Noël Grenier took part in a rousing adversarial debate on strikes in the public sector.

## 1% ADJUSTMENT ON MARCH 31

The salaries of public sector employees were increased by 1% last March 31. The collective agreement negotiated in 2010 stipulated that if the wage increases were lower, during the course of the collective agreement, than the increase in the cost of living, a maximum increase of 1% would be granted at the end of the agreement. Which indeed was the case. However, notwithstanding this salary increase, inflation during the course of our collective agreement ended up being 1.3 % higher than the salary increases paid to us by the Government.