

## **WESTERN QUEBEC TEACHERS VOTE:**

### **STRIKE ACTION FORESEEABLE WITHOUT GOVERNMENT OFFERS**

#### **CARL HAGER**

**GATINEAU;--** The CAQ's slow response in public sector negotiations to the teachers and other public sector workers has caused them to vote massively for strike mandates. On Thursday, October 5<sup>th</sup> the teachers in the Outaouais' English school board's jurisdiction voted an unprecedented 100% strong to give negotiators the strike mandate needed to prompt respectful and appropriate government offers.

The vote included teachers from the Pontiac and northern sectors of the Western Quebec School Board. They have joined their colleagues in other English language school boards in Quebec to show their support for strike action. Overall the teachers have voted over 90% to strike. In this they join other workers in the health field and social affairs. Teachers in the French sector have also voted to support strike action.

The teachers deposited their demand one year ago, October 2022, ahead of schedule as their collective agreement expired this past spring. The CAQ's response has been such statements by the Education Minister as that his job was more important than that of teachers. Referring to the teacher shortage, he said that as long as Kindergarten classes have an adult in them, all was well because K teachers only supervise play time and have naps with their children anyway.

Government figures show that for the next five years inflation is expected to be 16%; the government is offering 10% over the next five years. The government has said it will change pension provisions so as to keep teachers in the system; however the changes reveal a serious reduction in pension benefits for public sector workers. Brian Smeltzer, President of the Western Quebec Teachers' Association remarked that "Teachers are expected to do much more than they have in the past. The government wants to have all special needs students included in regular classrooms, but it is not offering teachers help with behavioural issues and learning challenges. This is no way to retain teachers, not the way to attract them to work in Quebec. Not only that, but in Western Quebec we have more split or multi-level classrooms which makes lesson preparation and delivery all the more difficult."

There is a growing realization by teachers that the Education Minister is not aware of the issues found in schools, nor does he value teachers. The government has said that cell phone use in classrooms was no longer to be permitted, but the government has not specified how that would work in actual school situations.

Smeltzer explains that strike action will begin, if necessary, in short bursts. Required notices will be given to inform the public when strike days will occur. If progress does not occur at the negotiating table, an unlimited general strike may be foreseen.