

Quebec proposes austerity to teachers

Is Québec's public education system in jeopardy?

Laurent Robillard-Cardinal

The collective agreement between the Western Quebec School Board (WQSB) and the Western Quebec Teachers' Association will expire at the end of March, 2015. If unrenewed, collective agreements typically repeat themselves until a new agreement is reached.

"The first and most critical level of collective bargaining begins at the provincial level with the Treasury Board. That is where the action is at the moment," said WQSB President James Shea. Negotiations at the provincial level include provincial intersectorial matters and provincial sectorial matters.

Intersectorial matters include salaries, pension plans, group insurance plans, regional disparities and parental rights. Those matters are negotiated by the Québec Treasury Board and unions. The Treasury Board, Chaired by Martin Coiteux, Member for Nelligan, has made a five-year offer to all public sector workers, about 400,000 people, represented by the common front negotiators.

The Treasury Board's offer raised the ire of many teacher associations, including the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT), representing about 8,000 teachers in the English school boards.

"The government's offer is an attack on teachers and their ability to help their students," said Richard Goldfinch, QPAT President. "Quebec teachers have been the lowest paid in Canada for some time and a salary freeze for the first two years with only 1% increases for the next three means we will continue to lose buying power to inflation." The increase is 3% over five years. Average inflation for Canada in 2014 was 1.9%.

"The government's proposals respect the established framework, and respect Quebecers' ability to pay. The government's financial position is serious. That's why the government is asking everyone, including state employees, to do their part," said Coiteux, Treasury Board Chair, arguing the offers are reasonable; he did not refer to payments to parting ministers, such as Minister Bolduc who left cabinet with well over a half-million dollars in bonus-like payments.

"The government will negotiate in the whole community's interest. We will negotiate what is reasonable in the context of public finances and respect citizens' ability to pay," said Minister

Coiteux. "I invite unions not to approach this round of negotiations in a confrontational way, but rather to see the opportunity of collective responsibility and the challenge of public finances. I invite our union partners to be agents of change. The government wants to reach an agreement negotiated in good faith."

The offer also forecasts changes to teacher's pensions that would take effect in 2017. The offer on the table would see the age for an unreduced pension rise from 60 to 62 years old. Calculating an average salary would also change by replacing the best-five for the best-eight years. The actuarial reduction for taking a pension before qualifying fully will also rise from 4% to 7.2% per year.

"Teachers have been responsible, fully paying for their half of the cost of the pension plan so that it is fully funded today. The government failed to do the same for its half for many years and it now wants us to pay for its irresponsibility," added Goldfinch. In other words, the pension plan is in a healthy state right now. "There's no problem with the pension plan, there's no reason to do what they are doing," Goldfinch told *The Bulletin*.

Furthermore, progressive retirements and deferred salary sabbatical leaves will lose their favorable contribution status and will be treated like all other leaves-without-pay. The current favourable contribution provisions for partial leaves (20% or less) will be removed.

Discussions to re-evaluate indexation provisions will take place after the plan's next actuarial evaluation, due in the fall of 2016. A new automatic mechanism would change the age of retirement (and possibly other parameters) whenever life expectancy changes.

TEACHERS' SECTORIAL TALKS

Sectorial negotiations which include employment conditions, fringe benefits excluding insurance and parental rights, remuneration mechanisms excluding remuneration as such, job security and so on, are also ongoing.

Talks are taking place between a ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) and a Quebec English School Boards' Association (QESBA) representative. These two organizations comprise the Management Negotiating Committee for English-language School Boards (CPNCA) who negotiate with QPAT.

The sectorial offer is, according to teachers (QPAT), designed to make large and very substantive changes to working conditions. "A change in the focus of power from the school board to the school is probably a big part of the motivation," argued QPAT. According to the union, the management proposal has been presented only as principles and are therefore vague and general.

With the present offer many changes appear on the horizon for teachers' workloads. These include a possible increase in the work week to 35 hours from 32, increase of maximum class sizes, the likely disappearance of average class size provisions and so on.

"There would be more students in classes. These larger classes would also include more special needs students without resources, services or support. The government's proposal is an attack on the public education system and this attack will most deeply affect our most

vulnerable students," said Goldfinch.

"They are asking for some pretty heavy stuff. They are asking for a greater say in our professional autonomy, in our workload; they want to do away with our student-teacher ratio which would change everything upwards. They are looking at anything they can to save money, but they are looking at the silliest places," Goldfinch told *The Bulletin*.

"What they are about to do is undo an education system that for all intent and purposes is one of the best in world. We are at the top end for what we call the PISA standings in Canada. Public education in Québec, both English and French, scores very well. We've faced cuts for the past four years and are now really at the bare bones. If they continue cutting like they are, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that they will destroy a world-class education system. This will be the straw that breaks the camel's back," added Goldfinch.