

Unions make case for wage hikes

But Quebec pleads poverty

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THE GAZETTE

Quebec's common front of union leaders is defending demands for pay increases from the Quebec government just as the province is emerging from the recession and carrying a deficit.

With talks between the government and unions representing 475,000 public sector workers set to resume Jan. 14, the leaders of the province's unions are going out of their way to convince taxpayers their demands for wage increases are legitimate.

"Public opinion is not an easy thing," conceded Michel Arsenault, president of the Quebec Federation of Labour. "But at the same time, I was reading the papers over the holidays, and it's clear people want an efficient universal health-care system.

"We are at the stage where if you want to preserve it, you have to pay. If we want quality workers, we have to pay them."

Arsenault was one of three union leaders to meet The Gazette's editorial board yesterday to explain their demand for a 3.75-per-cent annual wage

increase, or 11.25 per cent over a three-year contract.

Claudette Carbonneau, president of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), and Lucie Martineau, president of the Syndicat de la fonction publique du Québec, participated as well.

The unions argue while private sector wages have gone up over the last few years, their wages were either frozen or barely increased in a contract imposed on them by government decree.

The independent Institut de la statistique du Québec says public sector employees earn on average 7.7 per cent less than private sector employees doing similar jobs. The average public-sector employee in Quebec earns \$36,124 a year.

The government is pleading poverty. Premier Jean Charest has warned everyone will have to make sacrifices if Quebec is to return to a balanced budget by 2012-13.

But Martineau said Quebecers expect their tap water to be drinkable and highways and overpasses safe and that means paying public workers.

"It's true nobody likes pay-

ing taxes, but if we want services, and Quebecers want services, we have to pay taxes," Martineau said.

Carbonneau said the solution to balancing the books is not just cutting spending and defended the idea of increasing taxes for high earners to raise money.

She said the government has a host of other options to boost its cash, such as higher taxes on luxury items.

Arsenault said the government also could increase mining royalties. Instead of trying to balance the books by 2012-13, the government should carry a deficit through to 2015-16, which would leave more room for wage increases.

The leaders, who have agreed not to raid each other's memberships, said the government is in the mood to talk. A negotiated deal is possible.

And they defended their own salaries, which were made public yesterday. Arsenault earns \$140,000 a year, Carbonneau \$103,000 and Martineau \$86,000 a year.

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The collage features a newspaper clipping on the left with the headline "Il n'a pas froid aux épaules" and a photo of a man. On the right is a smaller clipping titled "Pour les syndicats, les hausses de salaire". Below these is a large advertisement for Home Depot's Energy Star rebates, featuring the text "ENVIRONMENTALLY CONNECTED 500\$ IN REBATES" and "ENERGY STAR". The ad also mentions "30 stores" and includes the Home Depot logo.

EDITORIALS

Quebec can't afford to meet union demands

Quebec's union common front has marshalled the best arguments it can find in support of an 11.2-per-cent pay raise, over three years, for 475,000 civil servants, teachers, hospital workers, and others. In better times their demands would have more appeal.

Three union-movement presidents – Claudette Carbonneau of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, Michel Arseneault of the Quebec Federation of Labour, and Lucie Martineau of the Syndicat de la fonction publique – met The Gazette's editorial board yesterday to argue their case. Public-sector pay lags behind other pay, they said. Quebecers need the public services that unionized workers provide. We must raise pay to forestall looming manpower shortages. There's no need to hurry to get the province out of deficit. And since the government imposed contracts by decree two years ago, it would be wrong to do so again.

In any public-sector labour negotiation, success goes to whichever side can win the support of the public. To many Quebec workers, 11.2 per cent over three years would look awfully good right now. So the CSN's proposal – higher taxes to finance all our social programs and raises to public servants – is not likely to be popular. Even the Parti Québécois, often the unions' best friend when it's not in power, has been slow to support these demands.

It's true that public-sector wages have slipped behind private-sector pay. But this gap vanishes when you compare pay and benefits to the private sector; the unions' real beef is that they don't make as much as municipal and federal employees. And public-sector job security is better, and pensions tend to be more generous – and more reliable – than in the private sector.

The unions expressed no regret when

Monique Jérôme-Forget retired last year as Quebec's finance minister and Treasury Board president. At Treasury Board, which handles government labour negotiations, her replacement is Monique Gagnon-Tremblay, a veteran minister with a more conciliatory manner. But Jérôme-Forget's claim that the government's "purse is empty" still reverberates. To this the unions respond that instead of getting back to balanced budgets by 2013, Quebec should just stretch out the date to 2015.

It doesn't make sense. Quebec will have a \$4.7 billion deficit this year, and will pay over \$6 billion in interest on the public debt. And new demands for spending – on health care and education, and on our costly social programs – never cease. Just this week we were warned of an impending epidemic of Alzheimer's disease – which demands costly care – among seniors. Who knows what new spending demand will materialize tomorrow? It's just common sense to defeat the deficit as quickly as we can. Deficits are like cigarettes – one's bad enough, but the habit will kill you.

Carbonneau and the CSN think more money can be found by imposing a new higher tax rate on those who earn over \$125,000 a year. But there aren't many such people – they make up less than four per cent of the workforce, Carbonneau conceded – and Quebec's current top tax rate already kicks in when your income reaches around \$60,000 – the lowest such threshold in Canada. Fraser Institute figures for 2007, the latest available, indicate that the highest-earning 30 per cent of Quebecers already pay a higher proportion of their income in taxes than do their counterparts in any other province.

The Liberal government of Quebec, with a majority in the National Assembly and considerable public support on this issue, needs to keep labour costs under tight control, just as private employers are doing.

We truly wish Quebecers could offer generous settlements to teachers and nurses and many others. But we can't.



Lutte contre le décrochage scolaire

L'argent devra être sur la table, clament les commissions scolaires

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ÉDUCATION. En 2009, Québec s'est donné comme objectif de diplômer 80 % des jeunes Québécois d'ici 2020. Dès cette année, des mesures doivent être prises pour encourager les élèves à demeurer sur les bancs d'école, clame la Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec.

«Il va falloir que les sous soient au rendez-vous», a mis en garde hier la présidente de la FCSQ, Josée Bouchard, en entrevue à *Métro*. Selon elle, Québec devra injecter près de 300 M\$ dans le milieu de

l'éducation seulement pour compenser la hausse du coût de la vie.

«Quand on regarde les défis qui attendent le Québec, [notamment] pour ce qui est de la demande de main-d'œuvre qualifiée, il faut que nos jeunes réussissent à se rendre jusqu'au diplôme», a insisté M^{me} Bouchard.

Des solutions

Déjà, la ministre de l'Éducation a annoncé en septembre qu'elle comptait réduire le nombre d'élèves dans les classes du primaire et mettre en place des moyens de com-

munication entre les garderies et les écoles pour mieux détecter les enfants susceptibles de décrocher.

La FCSQ propose de son côté de mieux outiller les jeunes enseignants, dont le cinquième abandonne au cours des cinq premières années d'enseignement. Elle veut entre autres que les formations universitaires les préparent mieux à travailler avec des élèves en difficulté. Les enseignants chevronnés pourraient aussi les aider grâce à des programmes de mentorat.

Le contrat de travail des enseignants doit être renouvelé en 2010. Les négociations commenceront sous peu.

«Il faut se donner les moyens d'agir»

La Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) militera aussi pour réhausser le taux de diplomation. «Mais il faut se donner les moyens pour le faire», a martelé le président de la CSQ, Réjean Parent. Selon lui, 700 M\$ de plus doivent être injectés dans le réseau de l'éducation au Québec. Il faudra aussi réduire le nombre d'élèves par classe, augmenter le personnel de soutien, dépister plus rapidement les élèves en difficulté et favoriser la mixité sociale des écoles pour augmenter le nombre de diplômes décernés.

