

# Québec's Bill 89: An Assault on the Right to Strike and Union Power <sup>1</sup>

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Perspectives No. 8, September 2025

On May 29, 2025, Québec's National Assembly adopted Bill 89, [\*An Act to give greater consideration to the needs of the population in the event of a strike or a lock-out\*](#). Championed by Labour Minister Jean Boulet, the bill passed with the support of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) and the Liberals. Employers' associations welcomed it, while unions denounced it as an "[anti-union bomb](#)." What exactly does Bill 89 contain, and why does it generate such controversy?

Bill 89 has two main components.

The first broadens the situations in which "minimum services" may be imposed during labour disputes.

Traditionally, Québec law restricts this to areas where interruptions could endanger public health and safety, such as hospitals. Bill 89, however, introduces the vague notion of protecting the "social, economic, or environmental security" of the population. This allows the state to limit strikes in a wide array of sectors, including education and public transit.

The second component—"Special Power of the Minister"—goes further. It authorizes the Labour Minister to suspend a strike or lockout and impose binding arbitration whenever a dispute "causes or threatens to cause serious or irreparable injury to the population." Though the public sector is excluded, this extraordinary power applies across most of the private sector.

The government insists the law protects vulnerable populations, often citing anecdotal cases—children with special needs, grieving families, domestic workers stranded by bus strikes. Unions counter that the true goal is to weaken their bargaining power, both against the state and private employers closely aligned with the CAQ.

Labour scholars and legal experts largely agree with the unions. At parliamentary hearings, most argued [the bill is unnecessary](#), unconstitutional, and politically dangerous. Québec's labour relations system is already tightly regulated: strikes are legal only during contract renewal, and essential services restrictions already cover health and other sectors. Moreover, over 90% of negotiations conclude without a work stoppage (even though the Legault government tried to inflate the number of strikes using data [later shown by Statistics Canada to be inaccurate](#)).

Legal experts predict [Bill 89 will not survive court challenges](#). In recent rulings, Canada's Supreme Court has strongly protected the right to strike as part of freedom of association, notably in *Health Services* (2007) and *Saskatchewan Federation of Labour* (2015). The bill also contradicts International Labour Organization conventions 87 and 98, which only allow limits on strikes where life, health, or safety are directly at risk. By relying on vague notions of "social, economic or environmental security," Bill 89 falls short of these standards.

The political implications are even more significant. Québec's social model is rooted in workplace struggles—from the Hull matchmakers' strikes of the 1920s, to the Asbestos and Murdochville conflicts of the 1940s and 1950s, to illegal nurses' walkouts in the early 1960s, to the adoption of anti-scab legislation in the wake of the United Aircraft strike of 1974. Many hallmarks of Québec's identity were forged in these battles. To jeopardize this right is to strike at the very foundation of Québec's social progress.

<sup>1</sup> An extended French version of this text will appear in [Les Nouveaux Cahiers du socialisme No. 34, Hiver 2025](#).

Why, then, would a self-proclaimed nationalist government attack such a defining feature of the Québec model? CAQ's nationalism is, of course, fundamentally class-based—aligned with the interests of “Québec Inc.” and hostile to unions. But another factor behind the timing of this announcement lies in the immediate labour relations context. After decades of decline, labour conflict has intensified in recent years. Frustrated by stagnant wages and inflation, workers have rediscovered the strike, often enjoying public support. Public sector strikes in 2023—whether organized by the “Common Front” or outside it—won notable gains. Confronted with high political costs and declining popularity, the government refrained from imposing back-to-work legislation—an unusual move in Québec's history.

The government's frustrations were also compounded by Québec's unique centralized bargaining system, where education workers can strike in support of health sector colleagues because many issues are negotiated at joint tables. This solidarity strengthens unions despite essential services restrictions. Bill 89's expanded definition of “minimum services” appears tailored to weaken this dynamic, particularly in education.

Bill 89 clearly mirrors Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, which allows the federal Labour Minister to end strikes and impose arbitration. Rarely used before, [it was invoked repeatedly](#) in 2024 to end disputes at Canada Post and in transportation. Though Boulet denies copying Ottawa, the intent is identical: bypassing legislatures to empower the executive to suspend strikes unilaterally.

Even if rarely applied, laws like Bill 89 have a chilling effect. Workers may hesitate to strike knowing their action could be nullified. Employers, conversely, may negotiate in bad faith, confident the state will intervene. During the recent strike at Air Canada, the company's CEO admitted as much, revealing the company never prepared for a strike because it expected Section 107 to be invoked. [The Canadian Union of Public Employees' defiance in that case](#), however—refusing to comply with what it deemed an illegitimate order—may inspire similar acts of civil disobedience. Such resistance recalls earlier moments in Québec labour history when unions challenged unjust laws directly, not just in court.

Since adopting Bill 89, the Legault government has doubled down on anti-union rhetoric as part of its rightward shift. Talk of “reforming Québec's union regime” now includes reviving old right-wing demands for financial “transparency” laws and restrictions on political activity by [making part of the union dues “voluntary”](#). These measures seek to artificially separate unions' economic and political roles—long a strategy of employers since the dawn of capitalism.

In this light, Bill 89 is not at all about protecting the public but all about disciplining unions. By weakening their most powerful tool, the strike, the CAQ aims to neutralize a movement that has historically been one of Québec's strongest bulwarks against conservative retrenchment. The rightward shift in Québec's public debate—evident in the Parti Québécois' reactionary turn and the rise of the once-marginal Conservative Party of Québec—makes it all the more urgent for progressives to defend union power, both inside and outside the workplace. □

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