

WHAT ARE THE RISKS ?

In Québec, the right to strike is restricted and codified by the Labour Code. Strike action while a collective agreement is in effect is considered illegal and risks repression. Sanctions can be applied to individuals as well as union organizations, ranging from financial penalties to dismissal.

That being said, past experiences show that the power in numbers allows us to protect ourselves from such risks. In Québec, we can count at least four movements for social strike in the modern era. The balance of forces built by the strikers and their solidarity have been sufficient to dissuade the state and the employers from repressing their movement.

It is also more common than we might imagine that unions engage in spontaneous illegal strikes, especially in the private sector, to contest unjust decisions of their employer. Mass civil disobedience, as in 2012 when the people rose up against the special law of the Liberal government, reminds us that legality is above all a question of the balance of forces.

September 7, 2025: Large demonstration in front of the office of the Ministry of Education in Montréal to demand reinvestment in the school system.

October 26 to November 8, 2025: Week of coordinated local actions to denounce cuts in education.

November 29, 2025: More than 50,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Montréal, upon a call by the entirety of Québec labour unions to denounce the social degradation caused by the government.

December 10-11, 2025: At the confederal council, the CSN decided to support a broad and swift consultation on use of social strike to stop the authoritarian and repressive laws and bills, and against social degradation.

March 23 to 27, 2026: Week of strike by the CRUES (Coalition de résistance pour l'unité étudiante syndicale) against austerity and to demand massive reinvestment in post-secondary education, from the perspective of free, quality and accessible education.

March 23 to April 2, 2026: National movement of strike in the community sector as part of the campaign Le Communautaire à boutte ! to demand adequate funding for their mission and recognition of their work.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON SOCIAL STRIKE

Since the introduction of Bill 89 (now Law 14), there have been discussions in the labour movement about using a social strike to make the government back down from anti-social, authoritarian and repressive laws. Here are some answers to questions about a social strike.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL STRIKE ?

A social strike, like a strike in general, is a concerted stoppage of work, aimed at pressuring the government to oppose policies considered unjust and harmful to the population.

Unlike a more conventional strike, a social strike is about demands whose social impact is larger than a collective agreement. The idea is rather to seek improvement of living conditions for the entire population, which can also improve the working conditions.

Such a strike movement involves many different sectors of society, such as labour unions, student associations and community groups, united in the conviction that a more just society is possible.

WHY ORGANIZE A SOCIAL STRIKE ?

We are currently facing historic austerity measures that will lead to far-reaching degradation of our public services. Over the last year, the government has also attacked the labour movement by restricting the right to strike (Law 14) and by interfering further with their democratic functioning (Bill 3).

More broadly, collective and individual rights are threatened by the constitutional law (Bill 1), which would concentrate power in the hands of the government at the expense of dissident voices in civil society.

Finally, our communities are affected by various racist and xenophobic measures, through which the government frames immigrants as a scapegoat for social problems instead of addressing the real causes.

IS STRIKE EFFECTIVE ?

Strike over price and wage controls in 1976 : 18,000 workers in the private sector went on strike at the same time as the public sector to oppose the repressive measures of the provincial and federal governments and their bills on wage controls. In the fall of 1976, the provincial government lost the election and the law was abolished in 1977.

Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) Strike in 2004: The HEU went on a general strike to stop sub-contracting in the healthcare sector, and it was quickly repressed by the British Columbia government that used a special law to end the strike and impose a contract. HEU members defied the special law and remained on strike, as thousands of workers from municipal, education and private sectors joined them in solidarity. Four days later, HEU succeeded in forcing the government to negotiate an agreement.

Social strike against austerity on May 1st, 2015: A first attempt at a social strike was organized on May 1st, 2015, to protest against the government's austerity program. Around thirty CEGEP faculty unions, tens of thousands of students and hundreds of community groups – 856 social organizations in total – went on strike, despite the illegality of the act.

BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) strike in 2005: The teachers in British Columbia led an illegal strike in 2005 against various repressive and neoliberal measures in the education sector. In 2001, the government passed a law declaring teaching as an essential service, preventing the BCTF from organizing against the attacks on their working conditions that followed. Despite the law, the BCTF members led a strike for two weeks to stop the government's neoliberal program, supported by other unions and the public.

Climate strikes in September 2019 and September 2022: As part of the movement La Planète en grève, student associations, community groups and labour unions went on strike in September 2019, at the time of Greta Thunberg's visit to Montréal. In September 2022, building on their experiences in 2015 and 2019, more than 20 unions struck once again with a day of social strike. The outcomes of these mobilizations include introduction of institutional days dedicated to just transition in many CÉGEPs, as well as political engagement at the municipal and provincial levels, such as prohibition of sale of gas-powered cars, decarbonization of buildings and expansion of bicycle lanes.