

CONSULTATION ON A COMMON FRONT

INFORMATION
DOCUMENT



Centrale des syndicats
du Québec

ALLIANCES

Public-sector negotiations will take place in 2020. We are undertaking consultations on our members' interest with regard to a common front, in preparation for our strategy framework and as follow-up to the assessment of the latest negotiations.

We are providing information to fuel discussion about the benefits and disadvantages of such an alliance.

HOW DO NEGOTIATIONS WORK?

Negotiations in the public sector affect some 500 000 employees in Québec's four public service networks: schools, colleges, health and the public service.

National negotiations are conducted at two levels:

1. Intersectoral

• The union organizations negotiate the following issues with the Conseil du trésor du Québec:

- salary increases
- the conditions of the pension plan (RREGOP)
- parental leave
- regional disparities

• The government has always signed or decreed a single intersectoral agreement that applies to all the collective agreements of public service personnel, regardless of their network or union allegiance.¹

2. Sectoral

• Each union federation negotiates general working conditions with the Management Negotiating Committees (comités patronaux de négociations—CPN), such as:

- workload
- employment security/fight against precarity
- various premiums
- leaves and vacation
- classifications
- harassment prevention, etc.

• The CPNs bring together representatives of:

- the management of institutions
- the relevant Ministère
- the Conseil du trésor

• All in all, some fifty sectoral agreements are concluded.

National public-sector negotiations are concluded through the intersectoral agreement and the sectoral agreements.

In some cases, local agreements are reached later to oversee the specific application of working conditions in each workplace.

¹ Excluded from this intersectoral agreement: lawyers and legal counsel, officers of the Sûreté du Québec (SQ), the physicians and pharmacists paid by the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec (RAMQ) and the personnel of provincial crown corporations.

WHAT IS A COMMON FRONT?

A common front is a form of union alliance which brings together union confederations² for the purpose of jointly negotiating intersectoral matters such as salaries and pension.

In a common front, the union confederations:

- ✓ constitute a single negotiating team
- ✓ harmonize their demands to table a common set of demands
- ✓ adopt a shared calendar and mobilization and negotiation strategy
- ✓ sign a protocol that determines operations, decision-making rules and the sharing of resources
- ✓ often conclude a non-raiding agreement

MORE THAN 45 YEARS OF UNION ALLIANCES

Since 1967, the government of Québec has centralized the negotiation of salaries and pension to exercise tight control over the remuneration of public-sector personnel.

In response to the employer's strategy, the union movement founded the first Common Front in 1972. The objective: to assert unions as a united counterpart in intersectoral negotiations.

Since 1972, there have been twelve rounds of negotiation, two of which did not result in the establishment of a common front. Common fronts have always been formed by union confederations.

Until the end of the 1990s, including independent unions was a question that had not yet been asked. Independent unions had broken away from one or the other of the confederations and only represented a small proportion of members.

The inclusion of independents in the common front would amount to granting them the same weight as a confederation, even though they only represent one sector or one employment category.

In 2010 and 2015, the establishment of the Secrétariat intersyndical des services publics (SISP), overseen by the CSQ, made it possible to welcome a number of independent unions within a broader union alliance. The assessment of the last round of negotiations shows that such an additional structure reduced the visibility of the CSQ and its affiliates, and that it encumbered the decision-making process. The partners mutually agreed to dissolve the SISP.

² The Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) and the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ). The Centrale des syndicats démocratiques (CSD) is not active in the public sector.

INTERSECTORAL SETTLEMENT WITHOUT A COMMON FRONT

There has always been only one intersectoral settlement. Historically, the government has always offered the same salary increases to all personnel working in the public services. However, in some situations, adjustments related to the *Pay Equity Act* and salary relativity exercises have caused salaries to evolve differently.

The government does not conclude an agreement in principle at the intersectoral level until it is certain that it can obtain the support of a critical mass of its employees and thereby finalize negotiations.

Past experience has shown that the government has never subsequently offered a more advantageous agreement to other groups. The political cost would be too high.

In the absence of a common front, the government is free to determine which strategy to adopt. It decides which counterpart it will negotiate and come to an agreement with first. Critical mass may be measured in terms of the number of members, the strength of mobilization or the group with whom it is easiest to settle.

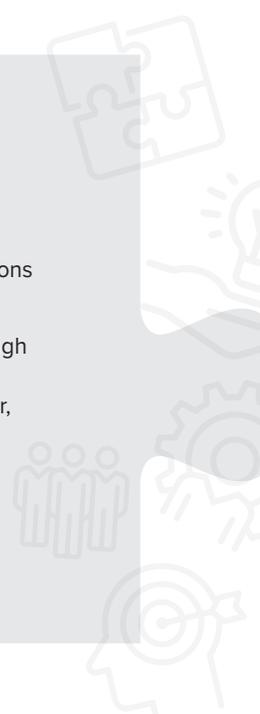
Creating a common front that represents the majority of employees in the public services enables union confederations that are part of it to promote their strategy and to assert themselves as the government's counterpart, and as a group with whom the government must settle.

If a majority union alliance is established, and we are not a part of it, then we are not sitting at the central table. Unions that are not part of the common front certainly have their own intersectoral bargaining table, but historically, the settlement that is negotiated by others has been imposed on these groups.

THE BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES OF A COMMON FRONT

An alliance between strong union confederations involves benefits and disadvantages.

Some disadvantages can be mitigated through the establishment of more precisely defined mechanisms between the partners. However, other disadvantages are unavoidable.



NEGOTIATING CAPACITY

BENEFITS

Benefiting from a power relationship linked to the large number of members

Being an articulate decision-making counterpart in dealing with the government

Providing a consistent response to the government's strategies and objectives

Participating in the determination of priority orientations

Having greater control over the pace and the coordination of sectoral negotiations

Having the ability to obstruct all public services using pressure tactics

Preventing the government from signing with the least demanding group

DISADVANTAGES

Experiencing difficulties in quickly changing strategy in line with circumstances, particularly during a blitz

Being held responsible for the settlement

Accepting compromises on the priority orientations at the intersectoral table

Allowing internal bodies the opportunity to deviate from agreed pressure tactics

Being induced to accept offers if a majority of other groups are willing

DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

BENEFITS

Taking part in decisions on strategies and the settlement

Enabling dialogue between union confederations and their components

DISADVANTAGES

Experiencing a cumbersome, slow-moving decision-making process

Experiencing friction arising from asymmetry between the decision-making processes, the pace and the cultures of different confederations

Often accepting compromises arising from the harmonization of our orientations

COMMUNICATIONS AND VISIBILITY

BENEFITS

Benefiting from a unified message in the public arena

Taking advantage of the pooling of human and financial resources

DISADVANTAGES

Having your visibility reduced as a union confederation and affiliate

Observing inequalities in terms of respect for guidelines on dissemination and visibility

UNION LIFE

BENEFITS

Having an official channel of communication between the union confederations

Benefiting from channels that facilitate sectoral negotiations

Avoiding having to devote tremendous resources to raiding

DISADVANTAGES

Assuming the duties of coordination

Limiting your ability to seek new members