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Quebec readies for mass protest of Liberal cost-cutting

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Montreal—Quebecers are girding for "the day of disruption" tomorrow, when unions representing more than one million workers will stage protests to show their displeasure with the cost-cutting Liberal government.

Under slogans such as "I didn't vote for this," tens of thousands of workers are expected to take to the streets in Quebec's cities and towns, flexing their muscle in a way not seen in decades here.

The demonstrations will shut down at least half the province's 1,000 day-care centres, slow down the business of the provincial government and are expected to play havoc with traffic in Montreal and Quebec city at noon, when the protests are planned.

It's part of an escalating warning to Premier Jean Charest from organized labour, which accuses the Liberals of embarking on a plan to weaken unions in Quebec, the most unionized province in Canada.

Union leaders are attacking the government's plans to contract out unionized jobs, its hike of day-care rates to \$7 a day from \$5 and plans to fast-track labour negotiations, particularly in the health-care sector.

"This government placated us during the election campaign by staying it was 'ready,'" says a slogan on posters pasted around Montreal yesterday, a reference to the Liberal's campaign theme: "We're ready."

"Now we know what they're ready to do — to demolish all our social gains.... We never voted for that."

But Charest, who has vowed to trim \$3 billion to \$4 billion in government spending and "re-engineer Quebec," has already warned the public that unions would attack his policies. He shows no sign of buckling to what is likely only the start of the labour protests.

"If there's one thing everyone should be clear about," Charest declared in an interview with La Presse published yesterday, "it's that we were elected to do exactly what we are doing."

Polls, however, show Charest's popularity has now dipped below 50 per cent.

That has breathed new life into the once-troubled leadership of Parti Québécois leader Bernard Landry, who has fought off calls for his resignation and is now telling followers the Liberals can be beaten in the next election, approximately four years from now.

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