

Montreal firefighters dispute highlights need for workers to mount political struggle

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"There's tension in the air. We're anxious to be done with it, but we'll only stop if the city gives us some respect." This statement of a Montreal firefighter typifies the spirit that reigns at fire stations in Canada's second largest city.

The Montreal firefighters confront a city administration that is determined to slash its labor and equipment costs--no matter that in so doing it is jeopardizing public safety, to say nothing of firefighters' lives.

In its assault on the jobs and working conditions of the firefighters, the Bourque city administration has been seconded by divers branches of government and the state, including the Quebec Labour Commission, the Essential Services Council, and above all the Parti Québécois government of Lucien Bouchard. Why? Because the Bourque administration is carrying out at the municipal level the program of dismantling social and public services that is being pursued by all levels of government and capitalist parties of all stripes.

In this context, the firefighters' struggle goes far beyond a traditional contract struggle. It raises fundamental questions concerning the future of public services: are they to be organized to meet social need or subordinated to big business's struggle for markets and profits?

The leadership of the Montreal Firefighters Association (MFA) has failed, however, to link the firefighters' struggle to these broader social issues. It has not even sought to mobilize the firefighters in a common struggle with other municipal workers in Montreal, let alone across the province, who are facing similar cuts and concession demands. While balking at some of the Bourque administration's most outrageous contract violations, the MFA, like the rest of the union movement in Quebec, has supported the PQ government in its drive to eliminate the provincial deficit through massive social spending cuts, including drastic cuts in municipal grants.

Isolated and politically disarmed by the MFA leadership, the firefighters have sought to vent their anger and frustration through acts of petty vandalism, such as painting fire trucks and puncturing fire hoses. These acts have been seized on by the city and the big business press to whip up hysteria against the firefighters--the better to obscure that it is government budget cuts that are imperiling lives--and to try to break the firefighters' resolve by threatening them with suspensions, firings, prosecution, and union decertification.

To answer this witch-hunt and, above all, to bring to light what is

at stake in the firefighters' struggle, a detailed analysis is necessary.

The dismantling of fire services

Between the early 1970s and 1996, the number of firefighters in Montreal fell from 2,500 to 1,662. Since then, a further 100 jobs have been eliminated. Meanwhile, the city has never acted on a 1989 report authored by its own fire department (Service de la prévention des incendies de Montréal) urging the creation of two new fire stations and the moving of nine others.

According to a study conducted for the MFA in 1996, firefighters took more than the five minutes to arrive at almost half (44 percent) of all fires over a two month-period. (The city's objective is four and a half minutes.) On average, it took firefighters a minute and half longer than the prescribed time to respond to high priority calls--those from schools, hospitals and other public institutions and hotels, apartment buildings and commercial centers.

In 1995, the last year for which Montreal's fire service has published statistics, the number of dead and injured in fires rose considerably. Whereas in 1994, six people died in 1,684 fires; in 1995 there were 16 deaths in 1,597 fires.

A political struggle

In the spring of 1997, the PQ government announced that it was transferring responsibility for financing \$500 million worth of public services to Quebec's municipalities, and that half of the consequent shortfall in municipal budgets would be made up by cutting the municipalities' labor cost by 6 percent. Should municipal workers fail to "assist" their respective employers in attaining the requisite 6 percent payroll savings, hastened to add PQ Municipal Affairs Minister Rémy Trudel, the provincial government would legislate wage cuts.

Armed with this ultimatum, the Bourque administration went on the offensive. While ostensibly conducting negotiations with the firefighters and Montreal's other municipal workers, it pressed forward with job cuts and sought court injunctions to stifle even the most inoffensive worker protests. In August 1997, when an arbitrator rejected an MFA grievance that challenged the city's right to cut jobs, the Bourque administration issued a press communiqué celebrating that it had secured "the right to diminish the numbers of firefighters according to need," irrespective of any commitments made in contract negotiations.

In a related decision, involving workers in the Montreal suburb of Mont-Royal, an arbitrator applauded the PQ government-led

assault on municipal workers' jobs, wages and working conditions: "It is almost notorious," declared the arbitrator, "that municipal workers have been treated like veritable darlings.... One had the impression that the municipalities lived in a world apart where it was never necessary to apply the brakes."

The unions representing Quebec's 70,000 municipal workers staged several protest demonstrations against the PQ's threat to legislate cuts in municipalities' payrolls. But this was merely to vent pressure from the rank and file. Never did they question, let alone challenge, the official sanction that the province's labor federations had given to the PQ's budget cutting drive at the 1996 Quebec economic summit. Rather than seeking to tie the municipal workers' struggle to rising public anger over the dismantling of all public services, including health care and education, the union bureaucrats exchanged proposals with the government and municipalities as to how the province's labor cost-cutting objective could be realized without recourse to legislation

"We are conscious that one group can't enrich itself when society is growing poor," declared Gilles Raymond, president of the Quebec Firefighters Union. As for the Montreal Firefighters Association, in June 1996, even before the Bouchard government intervened, it had formulated a plan to slash the city's labor costs by \$10 million by getting older workers to retire so they could be replaced by lower paid new hires and imposing a wage freeze for 1997 and other concessions. But the city rejected this as inadequate.

In April 1998, the Montreal municipal unions, including the firefighters, did "negotiate" new contracts with the city that met the PQ's 6 percent payroll reduction, but not before the Bouchard government had passed a bill empowering an arbitrator to impose contracts on those municipal workers who did not reach agreement with their employers on how the reduction was to be achieved.

A warning to firefighters

In the case of the Montreal firefighters, the new contract contained a commitment from the city to maintain a minimum of 1,557 firefighting jobs. But the Bourque administration has repeatedly violated this commitment. The firefighters, says city spokesperson Brunelle, "want that we fill a post the day somebody retires. It's impossible to hire someone right away; that takes time."

The city's failure to adhere to the minimum staffing agreement has outraged the firefighters for two reasons. First and most importantly, because it shows that the city administration is callously indifferent to their safety and that of the public. Secondly, because the sanctity of the law has repeatedly been invoked to prevent them from taking action to defend their working conditions, yet the city routinely violates its collective agreements with impunity. In recent weeks the firefighters have tried to put pressure on the city by defacing and in some cases damaging firefighting equipment. (Any job action by the firefighters would, without doubt, be immediately declared illegal by the province's Essential Services Council.)

While publicly condemning these acts of frustration, the president of the MFA, Gaston Fauvel, has given them implicit encouragement. "I don't yet have my diploma in lion taming," he declared. "When the herd comes forward, you can be sure I'll move aside to let it pass."

Firefighters and all workers should take note: having endorsed the PQ government's budget-cutting agenda and blocked any united action against the assault on public sector workers and the services they provide, the union leadership is now seeking to defuse growing rank-and-file anger by encouraging workers to engage in protest tactics, which, notwithstanding their appearance of militancy, are utterly retrograde.

Petty vandalism and sabotage provide the city--as has already been demonstrated--with a golden opportunity to victimize militant workers, if not frame them up. More importantly, these actions contribute nothing to a struggle against the real sabotage of public services that is being carried out by the Bourque and PQ administrations. On the contrary, they obscure the link between the firefighters' struggle to defend their working conditions and the provision of proper fire services.

One can readily appreciate why firefighters who feel that the city is playing with their lives are furious. But that anger must find a progressive outlet by making the firefighters' struggle the spearhead of a movement to mobilize public sector workers and all working people in defence of public services. There is no question that such a struggle would evoke a powerful response in Quebec, where the recent election campaign was dominated by discussion of the lamentable state of the province's healthcare system, and, indeed, across Canada.

When public teachers in Ontario launched strike action in the fall of 1997 against the Tory provincial government's plans to gut public education, they rallied mass support. If the strike ultimately failed, it was because it was not conceived of by the teachers and their supporters as an independent political struggle tied to the fight to build a mass workers party armed with a socialist program, but rather as a means of pressuring the big business politicians.

There is no question that modern technology has created the means to provide quality public services to all. But if this is to be realized, working people must attain political power so that they can undertake the radical reorganization of the economy to place it at the service of social need, not individual profit.



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