

Threatened with government takeover of their union

Montreal firefighters suspend pressure tactics

A correspondent
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Under threat of punitive action by Quebec's Essential Services Council and the placing of their union under state trusteeship, Montreal firefighters have suspended pressure tactics aimed at forcing the city to live up to a minimum staffing agreement.

Last Saturday, Montreal Firefighters' Association President Gaston Fauvel called on firefighters to cease their pressure campaign so as to demonstrate their "good faith" to the city administration and provincial Labor Minister Diane Lemieux.

Earlier last week, Lemieux had said she was considering "all solutions" for forcing a quick end to the firefighters' dispute, including imposing a settlement and placing the MFA under government trusteeship. In the past, most notably in the case of the Montreal subway drivers and mechanics union, the Quebec government has used trusteeship--under which government appointees replace a union's elected officers--to quell labor unrest. Such action requires the passage of legislation by the Quebec National Assembly, which is currently not in session.

To further demonstrate the MFA's eagerness to arrive at a settlement, the union chose at a hearing Tuesday not to challenge the extension until February 24 of an Essential Services Council order outlawing union pressure tactics. A quasi-judicial body, the Essential Services Council has draconian powers to limit and outlaw job action by public and para-public employees in Quebec. Unions and individuals who defy its ruling are liable for massive fines.

Mayor Bourque's administration has responded to the MFA's declaration of "an unlimited truce" by refusing to meet within union representatives. In a transparent attempt to induce the Quebec government to intervene in the dispute, the city is citing any instance of firefighters not obeying management orders, whether

they are bound under the contract to do so or not, as proof that they are covertly continuing their pressure campaign. Bourque himself has made clear that he won't rest content until the firefighters have been brought to heel through firings and the imposition of state trusteeship over their union. "The current law," he complained to reporters at a January 12 press conference, "unfortunately does not give to the city the means to act rapidly. We have to follow the Quebec labor code. We're going to resort to drastic measures if they don't obey."

The firefighters, who began their pressure tactics December 10, are outraged by the city's failure to adhere to guarantees it gave last April to maintain at least 1,557 active firefighters and a fleet of 91 fire trucks. The city's penny pinching, they contend, is putting both firefighters' lives and public safety at risk.

The city disputes the MFA's charge that it is removing fire trucks from the streets for unnecessary inspections and repairs so it can save money. The city does concede that, as of last week, Montreal had 34 firefighters less than the 1,557 called for in the contract, but claims that under the minimum staffing agreement management it is only required to take stock of the number of firefighters each June and then has until September 30 to fill any vacancies.

The Bourque city administration, the PQ provincial government and the capitalist media have seized on acts of petty vandalism committed by some firefighters to obscure the real issue in the firefighters' dispute: how municipal and provincial budget cuts are imperiling public safety.

Last April's contract settlement between the MFA and Mayor Pierre Bourque's administration was reached only after the PQ provincial government threatened to impose a contract by legislation. As part of its

campaign to eliminate Quebec's budget deficit, the PQ government has forced municipal workers and all civil servants, public school teachers, and hospital workers to make contract concessions equal to a 6 percent reduction in payroll costs.

Quebec's unions, which officially endorsed the PQ's campaign to balance the province's books by the year 2000, have ensured that any struggles that have arisen over the implementation of these concessions have been isolated.

Nothing has been done to broaden the firefighters' struggle, even to link it to similar disputes involving municipal employees in the Montreal area, let alone appeal to the growing public anger over the dismantling of social programs and public services.

Just since the beginning of 1999, the Essential Services Council has issued orders limiting or banning job action by workers in three Montreal suburbs--Verdun, Lasalle and Laval.



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