

Canada: Saskatchewan nurses defy back-to-work legislation

A correspondent
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Nurses in Saskatchewan are defying an emergency back-to-work law despite the threat of draconian fines.

Just five hours after the nurses walked off the job on a legal strike Thursday, Saskatchewan's New Democratic Party government rammed a law through the provincial legislature that strips the province's 8,400 nurses of their right to strike and imposes a new three-year contract on them.

Members of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses, however, voted unanimously to defy the back-to-work order at a mass rally later in the day. NDP Premier Roy Romanow, whose government has closed scores of rural hospitals and otherwise slashed healthcare services, is posturing as a defender of patients, saying the nurses' action is placing them at risk. In fact, the nurses are providing essential services. The government's real fear is that the nurses' militancy will galvanize opposition among other healthcare workers and the public at large to the decade-long assault on healthcare and other public services that all levels of government and parties of all stripes have mounted. Thursday, the Service Employees Union issued a 48-hour strike notice on behalf of 10,000 other Saskatchewan healthcare workers.

Under the back-to-work law, rank-and-file members of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN) are liable to fines of \$2,000, plus \$400 per each day that they defy the back-to-work order. Their union can be fined \$50,000 and \$10,000 per day of defiance.

The NDP law provides for the nurses to receive annual wage increases of 2 percent per year for the next three years, which is even less than what the government had offered prior to the strike. Nurses are demanding wage increases of up to 22 percent and urgent government action to resolve an acute nursing shortage. Because nurses in Saskatchewan are so poorly

paid in comparison with those in other Western provinces and much of the US, many have left the province. Others have retired to escape a heavy and stressful workload.

The nurses' defiance has thrown the NDP government into crisis. Thus far, the NDP has refrained from issuing further threats against the nurses. With much of the public supportive of the strike, the government no doubt fears a hostile response were it to threaten to jail nurses. Instead, the social democrats will first turn to their allies in the trade union bureaucracy to try to maneuver an end to the strike.

Both the Canadian Labour Congress and the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) have pledged to assist the SUN in paying its fines. Meanwhile, SFL President Barb Byers has reiterated her organization's support for the NDP, saying that while the government is "out of touch," support for the NDP is "official policy." Significantly, Associate Health Minister Judy Junor is a former SUN president.

Events in Saskatchewan are being watched closely by governments across Canada. With federal and provincial governments now recording their first budgetary surpluses in decades, public sector workers, who have endured years of job cuts and declining real wages, are becoming increasingly militant. Big business and their political representatives are determined, however, to nip this movement in the bud.

Last week Newfoundland's Liberal government broke a strike of 4,500 nurses with a back-to-work law. The week before that the federal Liberal government outlawed a campaign of rotating strikes by 14,000 federal blue-collar workers.



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