

Saskatchewan nurses continue to defy legal strikebreaking

A correspondent
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Thousands of Saskatchewan nurses continued to strike Monday in defiance of both a court injunction and provincial back-to-work legislation. The nurses are rebelling against a decade of wage austerity and cuts to the health care system.

For defying the injunction handed down Sunday by Court of Queen's Bench Judge Ted Zarzecny, the nurses could be held in contempt of court, making them subject to heavy fines and even prison terms. Rank-and-file nurses, however, vow that they are ready to risk jail to win wage parity with their counterparts in Canada's other western provinces, and to force the Saskatchewan government to hire more full-time nurses and eliminate a chronic shortage of nursing staff.

Speaking at a press conference Sunday night, the chairman of the government bargaining-agent said he does not intend to use the injunction to force mass arrests of picketing nurses. Brian Rourke of the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) appealed to the leaders of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN) to return to the negotiating table. He read out a letter from provincial Health Minister Pat Atkinson promising to "listen and act on the concerns of nurses and other health-care providers."

In granting the injunction, Judge Zarzecny found that SUN leaders had not complied with a back-to-work law that was rushed through the provincial legislature by Saskatchewan's New Democratic Party government last Thursday, just hours after the nurses began a legal strike.

In arguing for the injunction, SAHO lawyers claimed that the strike was causing a health care emergency. Lawyers for the 8,400-member SUN countered that the union has ensured that enough nurses are working at all times to maintain essential services.

After the injunction was issued, SUN president

Rosalie Longmoore said she would not order the nurses to end their strike. "I cannot ask nurses to go back to the working conditions they have left," she said. However, Longmoore did not call for the injunction to be defied or for other Saskatchewan workers to walk out in support of the nurses and the struggle to defend public health care. "It's an individual's choice" whether to defy the injunction or not, said the SUN President.

The Saskatchewan nurses' strike is the crest of a wave of renewed militancy among public sector workers in Canada. Nurses are particularly rebellious, having borne much of the brunt of the massive cuts to health care made by the federal Liberal government and by provincial NDP, Parti Québécois, Liberal and Tory regimes. Low pay, long working hours, stress, and the refusal to hire new full-time staff have led many nurses to leave the profession or move to the U.S., producing a shortage of nurses across Canada.

The Quebec Federation of Nurses announced last week that its members have voted in favor of mounting wildcat strikes. (Last year, Quebec's Essential Services Council ruled it was illegal for nurses to impose even an overtime ban, such is the shortage of nurses in that province) Manitoba nurses are threatening to strike later this month. Newfoundland's Liberal government broke a week-long strike by 4,600 nurses earlier this month with a back-to-work law. Ontario's Tory government has pledged to spend \$375 million this year to hire 10,000 additional nurses.

If the Saskatchewan nurses have so readily defied the government and courts, it is not just because of a profound sense of grievance, or because they feel that their work is undervalued and that government number-crunchers are preventing them from providing quality care to their patients. It is also because they recognize that there is massive public discontent with the

systematic assault that governments of all stripes have mounted on the public health care system.

Implicitly, the Saskatchewan nurses' struggle is a challenge to the policy all levels of government have pursued, subordinating health care and public services to the imperatives of the capitalist market. It also is a repudiation of the political program of the union bureaucracy, which touts the social-democratic NDP as its political arm. The Saskatchewan NDP government, which has been hailed by federal party leader Alexa McDonough as a model for a more "business-friendly" NDP, enjoys close and organic ties to the trade union leadership. The current Associate Health Minister, Judy Junor, is a former SUN President.

But because the nurses' action is not consciously political and is not animated by an alternative socialist political perspective to the pro-capitalist program of the trade union bureaucracy, it is in grave danger of being derailed. The nurses' defiance of the courts and government notwithstanding, their struggle remains within the narrow and politically sterile confines of a trade union contract struggle.

Labor leaders in Canada and across Saskatchewan have mouthed promises of support for the nurses, all the better to maneuver behind the scenes to broker a back-to-work deal. While condemning the NDP back-to-work bill, Saskatchewan Federation of Labour President Barb Byers was quick to reiterate the SFL's support for the NDP government. Some SUN leaders, meanwhile, have suggested that nurses could "punish" the NDP at the polls in the coming election by supporting the social democrats' right-wing political opponents in the Tory, Liberal and Saskatchewan Parties.

For its part, the Service Employees International Union came to the NDP government's assistance by postponing a threatened strike by 10,000 Saskatchewan hospital workers that was to begin last weekend.



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