

Saskatchewan: nurses union offers to end outlawed strike

A correspondent
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Leaders of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses have said they will order their 8,400 members to comply with an emergency provincial law and court injunction and end a nine-day-old strike, if the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government gives a written pledge to address nurses' complaints concerning wages and working conditions.

"We've all become fairly entrenched in our positions and somebody has to make a move," declared SUN President Rosalee Longmoore Thursday. "So we are ... appealing to [Health Minister] Pat Atkinson to take the next step in working toward a collective agreement."

Previously, SUN leaders had said they would instruct nurses to end their strike only if they reached agreement with the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations--the bargaining agent for the province's hospitals, nursing homes and medical clinics--on a new contract setting aside the three-year contract the government imposed on the nurses under Saskatchewan's Bill 23 (The Resumption of Services Act). Longmoore received a prolonged standing ovation at a mass rally Monday when she vowed she never order nurses to return to work without improvements to their working conditions and terms of employment, even if that means arrest and imprisonment.

Strike leaders could be held in contempt of court and jailed for failing to comply with last Sunday's court injunction instructing them to order the nurses to return to work.

Individual nurses faces thousands of dollars in potential fines for defying Bill 23.

Saskatchewan Premier Roy Romanow has been adamant his government will not negotiate with nurses until they return to work and, in any case, will not give them an annual wage increase of more than 2 percent.

Needless to say, Romanow's stance has received strong backing from the big business press, which fears the nurses' militant example. Over the past quarter-century, governments across Canada, often with the connivance of the trade union bureaucracy, have routinely resorted to back-to-work laws to break strikes. In a lead editorial, Conrad Black's *National Post* called Romanow's stand against the nurses "decisive and principled," while chastising the Saskatchewan Party, a newly-minted right-wing alliance of Liberals, Tories and Reformers, for criticizing Bill 23.

With the full support of the NDP government, SAHO has petitioned the courts to begin imposing heavy fines on the union. At a court hearing Monday, it will argue for a \$250,000 fine to be levied against SUN for contempt of court.

The greatest threat to the nurses' struggle, however, comes from the trade union bureaucracy, whose political arm is the social-democratic NDP. On Wednesday, the Service Employees International Union reached a tentative agreement with SAHO on behalf of 10,000 hospital support staff. The agreement adheres to the NDP's 2 percent annual pay hike, while providing for an additional increase in health and dental benefits of 2.1 percent.

Although nurses are providing essential services, the nine-day strike undoubtedly is causing considerable hardship for patients and their families. Press attempts to blame nurses for this situation have met with considerable public resistance, however. Broad sections of the population recognize the nurses have borne the brunt of the cuts to health care and that in fighting for increased staffing they are fighting for better patient care. A *Globe and Mail* reporter traveled to North Dakota to document the case of a six-year-old boy suffering from cancer who, because of the strike, had to

be flown to the US for treatment. The boy's US doctor proved to be a Saskatchewan native. He had left the province in the early 1990s because of his concerns about the deterioration in Saskatchewan's health services and voiced support for the nurses' stand.



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