

Quebec nurses enter fourth day of general strike

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In defiance of severe anti-strike laws, 47,500 nurses affiliated with the Quebec Nurses Federation (FIIQ) are undertaking a general strike, now in its fourth day. The government has threatened to reconvene the National Assembly at the end of the week to pass a special law to force the nurses back to work. It has also called for some of the provisions of anti-union Bill 160 to be implemented. For each day on strike, nurses would be docked two days of wages; the automatic union dues check-off would be suspended for 12 weeks; and every union involved would be fined \$125,000, totaling at least \$14 million thus far.

Nurses have worked without a contract since June 1998 and are demanding a 15 percent wage increase over three years and a 10 percent wage adjustment to bring wages in line with teachers and social workers. They are also seeking the filling of vacant job posts, the conversion of large amounts of overtime into more full time jobs and improvements in job security for the younger nurses. Since the strike began, the unions have reduced their demands to 6 percent for two years, with the third year open for negotiations, and a 7 percent adjustment.

The strike has won important support from the public and thrown the provincial government into crisis. In May, the Prime Minister Lucien Bouchard rejected public sector workers' wage demands, saying "the government will put as much energy and determination into reducing taxes than it has put in eliminating the deficit." This was a clear appeal to the more affluent sections of the population to support him against union demands that austerity measures be relaxed.

Bouchard has repeatedly said he will not budge from his demand to limit wage increases to five percent over three years. Fearing that militancy could spread to other public sector workers if the nurses succeed in breaking

this barrier, the government is using a propaganda campaign to undermine public support for the nurses.

"I'm making a solemn appeal to the nurses' sense of responsibility... We think the health of the population is so important that such a strike is unacceptable," said Pauline Marois, Quebec Health minister. "We are waiting now, but not for a long time."

There is great public concern about the impact of a decade of savage government cutbacks on the health care system. Many patients must wait nearly two years for an operation, emergency rooms are routinely overcrowded, the elderly receive minimal or no home care, and it is common policy for hospitals to close beds to reduce spending.

The public sees nurses' action as an attempt to forestall further assaults on social programs. Surveys indicate about 70 percent of the population support the nurses' demands. Patients are joining striking nurses on the picket lines and passersby are honking their horns in solidarity. Doctors' associations have expressed official support for the strike and have held the government responsible for the decaying state of the health care system.

The striking nurses have offered to maintain workloads equal to weekend duty to maintain full coverage for emergencies, intensive care, birth and dialysis units. "We want to tell the population we are sorry for any inconvenience, but the fight the nurses are involved in is to maintain a health system that can in one, two or 10 years, answer the needs of an aging population" said Jennie Skene, FIIQ president.

Although a tremendous potential exists for a broad mobilization of workers and middle class people in defense of social programs and living standards, the FIIQ bureaucracy has no answer to the government assault on health care. The bureaucracy has appealed to

the government to consider the nurses as a special case and has isolated them from the struggle of other public service employees.

The FIIQ and other public sector unions bear responsibility for the condition health care workers face today. Since his rise to power in 1995, Bouchard has pointed to the government deficit in order to push through cuts in social programs. Union leaders have given their full support to Bouchard's zero deficit goal by year 2000 and offered their own plan to drastically cut jobs.



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