

Quebec nurses protest against tentative pact

Union leaders conspire with government to end militant strike

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The 47,500 members of the Quebec Federation of Nurses (QFN) are voting today, July 21, on a contract settlement with the Parti Québécois provincial government. Approved by 600 QFN delegates last Saturday by a margin of just 62 percent, the proposed settlement has been widely condemned by rank-and-file nurses as a sellout of their struggle to secure better working conditions and defend public healthcare.

On Friday, dozens of nurses demonstrated outside the union delegates' meeting to press for the continuation of their three-week-old, provincewide strike. Some urged the broadening of the nurses struggle to include the other 350,000 Quebec public sector employees currently in contract negotiations. "Come help us, because we are in trouble," said an emergency nurse from Centre Hospitalier Saint-Eustache. At several healthcare institutions, picketing nurses placed a black X on their placards effacing the QFN's name.

To demobilize the nurses and thwart the organization of rank-and-file opposition, the QFN leadership ordered the nurses to return to their jobs Sunday afternoon, pending the outcome of the ratification vote. However, at one major Montreal-area hospital, Sacré-Coeur, nurses have refused to comply with the union leadership's order and remain on strike. "I cannot understand that they could consider this agreement sufficient," explained the president of the QFN local at Sacré-Coeur. "Not when you consider the sanctions we face [for having struck in defiance of a battery of antiunion laws] and the anguish that led to this strike."

Following a meeting Tuesday at which union officials reported on the proposed settlement, nurses at the Hôpital de Chicoutimi, in eastern Quebec, also walked off the job.

The tentative settlement was the product of a week of maneuvering by the union and the government, in which it became increasingly evident that the QFN bureaucrats and the PQ politicians were allied in seeking to end the strike. First, the QFN leadership took up Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard's suggestion that they call a 48-hour truce so as to facilitate negotiations. (The government had insisted throughout that it would never negotiate with a union on an "illegal strike.") Then it abandoned the nurses' demands at the bargaining table, accepting for all intents and purposes the PQ's wage offer of 5 percent over three years and agreeing that an additional, special compensation package, to which the government had already agreed in principle, should be the object of a two-year government study.

When the end of the 48-hour truce came Thursday morning, QFN leaders claimed they had the elements of an agreement in principle. But by Friday morning, it became clear that that agreement would not win the support of the union delegates, so the QFN leadership appealed to the government to return to the bargaining table. Anxious to bolster the by now shaky authority of the QFN executive, Health Minister Pauline Marois immediately accepted the union's offer. The QFN called a further eight-hour "truce" Friday evening and on Saturday morning, union and government negotiators emerged to say a new settlement had been reached.

Under this agreement, the government has withdrawn a \$35 million interim pay package that was to tide the nurses over until the completion of the two-year compensation study. Instead the government has agreed to a provisional deadline of November 15 for

completing the study's first stage. However, caps have been set, stipulating the maximum increase the government study group can order during the first year. At most, the vast majority of nurses will receive an additional 2 percent pay rise in the coming year. There are no minimums.

QFN leaders have claimed that nurses have made gains in working conditions. But the PQ government has pledged to hire only 1,000 additional nurses, meaning staffing levels will remain well below what they were before mid-1997, when 3,500 high seniority nurses took early retirement as part of the government's cost-cutting drive.

Moreover, the union sellout does not provide for any lessening of the sanctions nurses face for defying Bill 160, a law limiting strikes in Quebec's public sector, and Bill 72, an emergency back-to-work law passed July 2. Should the tentative pact be accepted, nurses will in effect be financing much of their "gains" through fines and other penalties. Although the union is providing essential services, meaning that 90 percent of the nurses have remained on the job during the strike, all nurses are automatically being docked two days' pay for every day of the strike. According to one estimate, each nurse is currently facing financial penalties of in excess of \$7,500 or about a fifth of his or her yearly salary. The QFN, its affiliates and individual union representatives also face tens millions of dollars in fines and other penalties.

In an editorial published last Saturday, admittedly before the details of the second tentative pact had been made public, *The Montreal Gazette*, Conrad Black's local daily, exulted, "The deal that Mr. Boucahrd offered the nurses Thursday is terrible for them."

Rank-and-file nurses are angered, shocked and not a little bewildered by the events of the past week. Up until last Thursday, QFN President Jennie Skene was viewed by many nurses as, if not a hero, at least the incarnation of their opposition to the government. Now she is routinely castigated. Read one picket sign Friday: "Skene I can think for myself and it's NO."

What most dismays nurses is that the QFN leadership moved to torpedo their struggle at the very point when the government was totally isolated. Four professional organizations that the government asked to condemn the strike chose instead to deplore the crisis in Quebec's healthcare system created by two decades of budget-

cutting. Even the capitalist press has had to concede there is mass popular support for the nurses and that most of the population has been indifferent to the government's attempts to witch-hunt nurses for taking patients "hostage" and tar them as lawbreakers.

It is precisely because the strike was becoming a challenge to the PQ's government's socioeconomic agenda and risked to become a catalyst for a general rebellion among public sector workers against job- and wage-cuts and the dismantling of public services that the QFN leadership moved so decisively and ruthlessly to scuttle it.

Like the rest of the trade union leadership in Quebec, the QFN bureaucracy has traditionally supported the pro-indépendentiste PQ. The past president of the QFN, Diane Lavallée, was a PQ candidate in the 1994 provincial election, and the head of Premier Bouchard's constituency office, Nancy Lavoie, is a former QFN vice-president. QFN leaders joined with their counterparts at Quebec's labor federations in endorsing the PQ government's objective of eliminating Quebec's deficit by the year 2000 and thus are themselves complicit in the dismantling of healthcare.



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