

Nurses' rejection vote opens way to broader struggle against Quebec government

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In a stunning rebuke of both Quebec's Parti Québécois provincial government and the leadership of their union, Quebec nurses have voted to continue their struggle for better working conditions and patient care. In a secret ballot vote Wednesday, 75 percent of the nurses rejected a sellout contract that the government and Quebec Federation of Nurses (QFN) negotiators had cobbled together late last week so as to scuttle the nurses' militant month-long strike.

Within hours of the release of the vote results, nurses resumed picketing at health care institutions across Quebec. Other nurses expressed their dissatisfaction with the QFN leadership and its strategy by returning to work pending the outcome of a meeting of 600 union delegates this weekend, which is to discuss the future course of action. The confusion generated by the betrayal of the QFN leadership was shown by the fact that some of the nurses returning to work had defied the 3½ day "truce" that the QFN called during the ratification process. Many rank-and-file nurses are calling for the union's negotiating team to be fired. At Robert-Gifford Hospital in Quebec City nurses have passed a motion of non-confidence in QFN President Jennie Skene and in some Montreal-area hospitals nurses are circulating a petition demanding Skene's resignation.

The rejection vote means that despite the best efforts of government and union officials, the nurses' struggle may become fused with the contract struggles of Quebec's 350,000 other public and para-public sector workers. Like the nurses, Quebec's civil servants, public school and college teachers, school support staff, health care technicians, and hospital orderlies and janitorial staff have been working without contracts since June 30, 1998. Their unions have pledged to mount demonstrations and strikes in the fall, unless the PQ government makes a 180 degree turn and drops its insistence that the provincial budget surplus be used to slash taxes rates for the well-to-do, rather than to improve public health care, education and social services and increase public sector workers' pay.

Quebec's political elite is acutely aware of the danger that the nurses' struggle will spark a broader movement that directly challenges big business's drive to dismantle public and social services. In its lead editorial Thursday, the Montreal daily *La Presse* accused Quebec Provincial Police officers of seeking to take advantage of their "repressive function" to "blackmail" the PQ government into giving them a wage increase in excess of the 5 percent over three years being accorded all government employees. "They know the state may have need of them to maintain order in a fall that risks to be very hot on the labor relations front ..."

Even before the nurses had decisively rejected the tentative settlement, there was comment in the press that the nurses' strike marks the end of the "Quebec model" of union-government-employer collaboration. Big business in Quebec and its political representatives in the *indépendantiste* PQ and the federalist Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ) have long-lauded the close and institutionalized collaboration they developed with the unions, following a period of widespread social unrest in the early 1970s, calling it the "Quebec [competitive] advantage." For their part, the union

bureaucrats have used Quebec nationalist ideology to justify these corporatist arrangements.

For close to two decades, PQ and PLQ governments have been slashing health care budgets. But the roots of the current strike can be directly traced to two government initiatives that the unions, including the QFN, embraced as part of their program of *concertation* (literally dialogue.) First the union leadership supported, albeit with minor reservations, the PQ's *virage ambulatoire*, under which, in the name of promoting better homecare and day-clinic service, the government closed hospitals and slashed health care budgets. Then at the "national economic summit" convened by the PQ government in the fall of 1996, Quebec's unions agreed with the PQ and big business that the Quebec government should make eliminating the provincial budget deficit by the year 2000 the principal goal of public policy.

The nurses' resounding vote to reject last week's settlement and continue their struggle is all the more impressive given the high turnout—63 percent—and the 62 percent endorsement the sellout was given by the union's 600-member *Conseil Confédéral* last Saturday.

The unity between English- and French-speaking nurses that has been manifest throughout the strike was underscored by the heavy "no" votes at all Montreal-area hospitals. At the Montreal Children's Hospital 95 percent of nurses voted to reject, while at French-language institutions like Sacré-Coeur, Notre-Dame and Hôtel-Dieu nurses voted No by margins of 88, 87, and 82.5 percent respectively.

To say that the sell-out agreement fell far short of the nurses' demands is an understatement. The agreements on staffing levels left the nursing workforce substantially smaller than it was in 1997, when 3,500 high seniority nurses were coaxed by the government and union into accepting early retirement. Although nurses have endured a decade of declining real wages and seen their workload dramatically increase, the QFN leadership ultimately accepted the government's 5 percent wage offer and even accepted a cap on any increases that the government might have to pay under a special compensation package that is, in any case, to be determined wholly by a government study group. Last but not least, the QFN leadership agreed to a contract settlement without securing nurses any protection from the draconian penalties of Bills 160 and 72.

Already hospitals have started docking nurses two days' pay for every day of the strike. With individual nurses facing penalties running as high as \$7,500 for the three-week strike, nurses would have literally found themselves paying for any "gains" in the defeated contract.

Adding to rank-and-file nurses' fury over the sell-out was their keen sense that they enjoy widespread support from a public deeply troubled by the rapid deterioration of the public health system.

To the consternation of the government and newspaper editorialists, their attempts to whip up opposition to the strike by denouncing nurses for defying the law and by accusing them of holding patients hostage have fallen on deaf ears. Night after night, newscasts have shown patients expressing support for the nurses. In a radio interview Tuesday, even the

executive-director of the McGill University Center, a complex of four hospitals employing 3,000 nurses, expressed sympathy with the nurses' struggle: "We agree with the nurses," said Dr. Hugh Scott, "that there is a deteriorating situation in our health system and they have been drawing attention to important issues."

QFN President Jennie Skene, who as late as Tuesday was dismissing opposition to the sellout as the work of a small numbers of dissidents, told the press conference at which the QFN released the vote results that the rejection was a vote of non-confidence in a government which in the name of health care reform has instituted savage cuts. Nurses, she declared, "don't believe anymore that [the government negotiators] are acting in good faith." Asked if she or the bargaining committee would resign, Skene said no.

According to Skene, the QFN's *Conseil Confédéral* will discuss various alternative strategies including asking nurses to resign en bloc, continuing the strike but withdrawing essential services, or delaying further job action until the fall when other public sector unions will begin to mount their own protests.

Meanwhile, France Picarou, the president of the QFN local at Hôpital Sacré-Coeur and the leader of the dissident faction within the QFN bureaucracy, has called for the nurses' contract to be determined by binding arbitration. "Arbitration will be a better avenue, even if [PQ Premier] Bouchard and [PLQ leader] Charest are against."

PQ Health Minister Pauline Marois initially promised to comment on the nurses' vote Wednesday night, but later thought better of it. Subsequently a ministry spokesman said the government has no intention of budging from the rejected contract.

Currently there is a sense of satisfaction, if not jubilation, among nurses. On Monday and Tuesday, they were angered and bewildered when they learned the terms of the proposed contract. Now, despite the ongoing threat of massive penalties and the capitulation of the QFN leadership, they have boldly and categorically affirmed their determination to continue their struggle.

But the PQ government has only been winded. Moreover, the strike has shown that the union leadership sides with the government against the nurses. Skene and the QFN bureaucracy called off the strike, not because they were frightened of the government, but because they are frightened of the powerful public support which the nurses' strike was winning. They fear that if the nurses successfully defy the anti-strike laws and fines imposed by the provincial government, it will undermine the authority of the PQ and embolden other sections of the working class to take similar action.

Many nurses now recognize the need to broaden their struggle. From the beginning, the QFN bureaucracy tried to separate the nurses from the other public sector workers, in the hopes they could entice the Bouchard government into making a few concessions, in exchange for the QFN's continuing support for the government's austerity program.

It is not excluded the QFN leaders will now hold out the promise of a joint struggle with the other public sector workers—weeks or months from now—so it can quell the current insurgent mood in the rank-and-file and reinforce its ties with the rest of the union bureaucracy, the better to strangle the nurses' struggle.

There is no reason to postpone a united action of all public service workers to some arbitrary future date, however. The nurses have given the lead to the working class of Quebec and throughout Canada, first with their defiance of the PQ government's strikebreaking threats, and now with their rebellion against the capitulation of the union leadership. They have won a powerful response in public opinion. There is no better time than today to make a broad appeal for the mobilization of the working class against the PQ government's destruction of health care.

There is one indispensable requirement for taking the nurses' struggle forward: the nurses must take the direction of the strike out of the hands of

Jennie Skene and the QFN officials and repudiate their political support for the PQ government. A central strike committee should be established with representatives elected from the rank-and-file nurses at every striking hospital and health care facility.

This must be combined with a broad turn out to the working class, with an appeal to public sector workers, industrial workers and others to join the nurses now in a general strike movement to defend health care, reverse the cuts, grant the nurses' legitimate demands, rescind all fines and sanctions and repeal anti-union laws. Such a campaign would win broad support, not only in Quebec, but also among workers throughout Canada, particularly among public sector workers engaged in similar struggles.

Like the 1997 Ontario teachers' struggle and the November-December 1995 revolt of French public sector workers, the Quebec nurses' struggle has revealed the lack of popular support for big business's agenda of dismantling public and social services. If this agenda has nevertheless prevailed, it is first because the trade unions and social-democratic and Stalinist political parties to which workers have traditionally given their allegiance have supported it. And second, because the opposition to the dismantling of public services has been animated by a hope that through mass pressure the bourgeoisie can be convinced to return to the welfare state policies of the post-Second World War boom.

If the nurses, in fighting for what they and much of the public view to be entirely reasonable, indeed necessary demands, find themselves compelled to break the law and thrown into a headlong conflict with the provincial PQ government, it is because the defence of public services is completely at odds with the big business agenda of subordinating all aspects of social policy to the imperatives of the market. Although they are not yet conscious of it, the nurses have challenged the class strategy of not only the Bouchard PQ government, but of the entire Canadian bourgeoisie, beginning with the Chretien federal Liberal government, which has presided in both real and per capita terms over the biggest social spending cuts of any government in Canada.

To the dismantling of public services so as to ensure corporate competitiveness, working people must counterpose the struggle for a workers' government, that will radically reorganize the economy so the vast gains in productivity resulting from the current technological revolution can be used to benefit the vast majority, rather than to enrich a tiny few.

The nurses' struggle can be an important catalyst in building an independent working class political movement. But to do so, it must break out of the narrow and stifling framework of a trade union contract struggle. Nurses must make their struggle the spearhead of a movement aimed not only at mobilizing public sector workers in Quebec, but working people across Canada in industrial and political action to defend public and social services.



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