

# Quebec nurses' strike at a turning point

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8 July 1999

Now in its third week, the strike by the 45,000 members of the Quebec Nurses Federation (QFN) is at a turning point.

The nurses have shown great determination in fighting for decent working conditions and quality health care. They have not hesitated to defy anti-strike laws, and since, last Saturday, to disobey a draconian back-to-work law passed by the Parti Québécois majority in the Quebec legislature. Nurses have just voted by a margin of 93 percent to continue the strike.

A groundswell of popular support for the nurses has shaken the pro-indépendentiste PQ government, and forced it to apply only very cautiously the hard line advocated by Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard. The strike has popular legitimacy despite the stipulations of the law, the denunciations of the capitalist media, and the hardships caused to patients and their families, because it is broadly recognized that the nurses have borne much of the brunt of a decade of savage cuts to health care and that in fighting for increased staffing and better working conditions the nurses are fighting for all working people.

Canada's health care system has been bled white by budget cuts by all governments, beginning with the federal Liberal government, which cut the annual transfers it makes to the provinces to finance social spending by \$6 billion. The PQ government tried to camouflage its cuts behind a reorganization of health care aimed at promoting walk-in clinics and homecare, the so-called "virage ambulatoire." But the results have been similar to those in other provinces—hospitals closed (nine in the Montreal area alone), thousands of jobs cut, overcrowded hospital emergency rooms, and months-long waiting lists for all but emergency treatment.

Despite overwhelming popular support and the manifest isolation and weakness of the Bouchard government, the nurses' struggle will be lost unless it

transcends the narrow framework of a trade union contract struggle and becomes the spearhead for a mass political mobilization of working people aimed at bringing about a radical reorganization of economic life, so social policy can be based on human need, rather than subordinated to the exigencies of big business.

Although the leadership of the QFN has been forced to distance itself from the PQ, a longstanding political ally, it is adamantly opposed to such a struggle. Rather than fighting to make the nurses' strike a catalyst of a social movement, it has sought to use the popular support for the nurses to plead for the government to treat the nurses as "a special case." Even in the most narrow and immediate sense such a strategy cannot serve the interests of the nurses. How can nurses' working conditions be separated from those of the orderlies, medical technicians and other workers with whom they work? How can public health care be defended without mounting a political challenge to the big business agenda of budget-cutting, privatization, and tax cuts?

The more powerful the strike has grown, the more anxious the QFN leadership has become to find a mechanism whereby it can be terminated. Nurses face the danger of a similar betrayal as that carried out against striking Ontario teachers in November 1997. In that struggle, the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) called off the strike by 126,000 teachers just at the point when popular opposition to Tory Premier Mike Harris had exposed the isolation and weakness of his right-wing government. The courts, fearing that an injunction ordering an end to the strike could further incite opposition and destabilize the entire national political situation, relied on the OTF bureaucracy to strangle the movement and impose massive rollbacks on the teachers.

While publicly the PQ government is adamant that

there will be no negotiations until the nurses obey the law and return to work, behind the scenes the government and union are discussing a plan whereby an arbitrator or mediator will be named to consider the nurses' grievances.

In Saskatchewan, where nurses struck for ten days last April in defiance of a strikebreaking law, such a formula was used to corral the nurses back to work. Ultimately, the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses agreed to a new contract falling far short of the nurses' demands and the Association of Health Organizations has sought a \$1 million fine against the nurses for illegally striking.

Thus far the Bouchard government has flatly rejected arbitration, affirming that it is “unthinkable

to name someone to decide such a thing as the Quebec budget.” But the PQ would likely be willing to give the nurses a modest increase above the five percent over three years it has offered them, were it not for the fear that this would encourage a wave of militancy among Quebec's other 300,000 public sector workers, who are also currently in contract negotiations. The QFN leaders' claim that the nurses are a “special case” is aimed at addressing the government's fears and raises the prospect that the nurses will in future be used to enforce the government's wage limits against their colleagues. But the government, having for months resisted the QFN leaders call for a “special deal,” faces the thorny problem of how to make such a settlement without being seen to reward militancy and defiance of the province's battery of antiunion laws.

In tabling the law against the nurses' strike, Bouchard declared, “In the wake of this illegal strike, all kinds of groups have announced votes on illegal strikes. This disorder is very contagious. Very contagious are these illegal strikes.”

For Bouchard—and in this he is right—the pivotal issue is not the tens of millions more the government might have to spend so the QFN leaders can “claim victory,” but the danger that the nurses' strike will trigger a larger social movement challenging, at least implicitly, the very essence of the PQ government's and the entire bourgeoisie's policy: the dramatic downsizing of the public sector and public services, so as to increase corporate “competitiveness” and transfer wealth from working people to the capitalists and managerial and

professional elite.

The government's cautious response to the strike reveals how acutely aware it is of the growing unpopularity of its social agenda. The PQ has not imposed the harshest provision of the existing antiunion legislation (Bill 160)—the stripping of a year's seniority for each day of illegal strike. And last week's back-to-work (Bill 72) did not increase the penalties for rank-and file nurses, although it did dramatically increase those against the nurses' local union representatives.

The government's strength lies in the political domination of the strike by a union bureaucracy committed to the existing social and political order (the QFN leadership, like the rest of the Quebec trade union leadership supported the government's drive to eliminate the provincial deficit by the year 2000) and the lack, as of yet, of an alternative perspective among nurses and working people.

The support for the nurses from the population remains passive. The nurses themselves have not sought to mobilize this support beyond asking motorists passing their picket lines to honk their horns. Nor have they appealed to Quebec hospital workers, let alone other Quebec public sector workers or health care workers elsewhere in Canada, to join them in job action in defence of public health care and public services.

If the nurses strike has underscored the potential for a working class counter-offensive, it has no less strikingly demonstrated the urgency of a struggle to arm the working class with a socialist perspective so that this potential can be realized. The challenge facing nurses and all workers is to confront the great taboo questions of contemporary political life: In a society that is ever-more productive, why are public services shriveling? Why are poverty and social inequality growing by leaps and bounds in the midst of a technological revolution?



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