

Quebec nurses return to work under 48-hour "truce"

Union bureaucracy seeking to defuse challenge to PQ

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The 47,500 members of the Quebec Federation of Nurses (QFN) suspended their strike and returned to work yesterday under a 48-hour truce.

Determined to put an end to years of deteriorating working conditions and patient care, the nurses had for 17 days courageously defied the Parti Québécois provincial government's threats of severe legal penalties under Quebec's Bill 160 and an emergency back-to-work law rushed through the province's National Assembly July 2.

The truce has been presented by the QFN leadership as a goodwill gesture. Its real purpose is to torpedo the strike, for it has become a major political threat to the PQ government, with which the QFN bureaucracy has long been closely allied. The nurses' militancy has served to strengthen the resolve of 300,000 other Quebec public sector workers who are currently renegotiating their contracts. Even more importantly, the popular support the nurses' job action has evoked has exposed the fraudulence of the claims of big business and the political elite that there is a public consensus in favor of the dismantling of public services.

The "truce" came in answer to a direct appeal to the QFN leadership from Premier Lucien Bouchard, who had insisted his government would never reward "law-breaking" by negotiating with the nurses while they were on strike. "If I were them," said Bouchard, "I would say: 'The strike has just been supported by 93% of the membership (a reference to a vote last week to continue the strike), therefore we are not on our knees, and, in line with the responsibilities that our profession, the public and the law give us, we are returning to the negotiating table.'"

At a meeting of 600 union delegates last Friday, several opposed the truce, declaring that they have no confidence in the government. "Nurses," admitted QFN President Jennie Skene, "have doubts in those who have implemented budget cuts at the same time as reforming the health care system—doubts as to the genuineness of their will to come to a negotiated deal." Such doubts are far from unjustified. While the QFN has said its truce was conditional on the government agreeing to negotiate with the union over its wage demands, Bouchard continues to

vow that there is no question of his government budging from its offer of a 5 percent wage increase over three years. Quebec nurses, who, depending on years worked, are either the lowest or among the lowest paid in the country, are seeking a 16 percent wage increase over the next two years.

In announcing the truce, Skene admitted that it will be hard to resume the strike. Indeed, that is the calculation of both the government and the QFN leadership.

For the vast majority of nurses what is at issue in their struggle is the future of public health care. But the QFN leadership has kept the nurses' struggle within the narrow framework of collective bargaining, thus preventing it from becoming an explicit challenge to Bouchard's budget-cutting program and the potential catalyst of a political movement in opposition to the subordination of public services to the exigencies of big business..

From the outset, the QFN leadership has urged the PQ government to treat the nurses as "a special case," offering, in effect, to turn a blind eye, if not openly support, the government's hardline against other public sector workers and continuing assault on public services, if only it grants the nurses a few concessions. And, while the capitalist media has been forced to concede that the public overwhelmingly supports the nurses, there is no question of the QFN leadership seeking to broaden the struggle. "Honk-your horn to support the nurses"—that is the limit to which the QFN leadership is prepared to go in tapping into the popular support for the nurses.

It should be added that the major trade union federations have worked alongside the QFN leadership to quarantine the nurses' struggle: the leaders of the Quebec Federation of Labor, the Confederation of National Trade Unions and the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec have done nothing to support the nurses, apart from issuing the ritual press release pledging solidarity.

If the nurses' strike has struck a powerful public chord—editorialists are indignant that even broad sections of the middle class are indifferent to the strike's illegality—it is not just because there is profound anxiety over the state of health care

and public services as a whole after a decade of brutal budget cuts. For an entire period, all the powers-that-be—the politicians, the employers, the press and the unions to which workers have traditionally looked to represent them—have said government deficits leave no choice: public services must be slashed. The nurses' strike has become the focal point for an opposition that until now has been successfully marginalized.

For the QFN leadership, the popular support for the nurses has become a double-edged sword. Much as they initially sought to use this support to pressure the government to get a deal that could placate their increasingly militant membership; they now recognize that the longer the strike goes on, the more it becomes the incarnation of popular opposition to the government and its budget-cutting agenda. Like the rest of the trade union leadership in Quebec, the QFN bureaucracy has not only traditionally supported the pro-indépendentiste PQ, it specifically endorsed the government's objective of eliminating Quebec's deficit by the year 2000 and thus has itself been complicit in the dismantling of health care. At the beginning of 1997, the QFN and other public sector unions proposed a vast early retirement program for Quebec's public sector that Bouchard recognized as an "improvement" on his own plan for a one-year 6 percent wage cut, since it enabled the government to permanently reduce its payroll by eliminating thousands of jobs, including in the health care sector.

Just last weekend, Bouchard openly recognized the value of the unions in containing working class opposition. He rejected media suggestions he revoke the QFN's legal status, by noting the right to association is recognized in the constitution, then added : "From a practical point of view, if the organization is not recognized legally anymore, there is no one with whom to negotiate. Are we going to negotiate with the street?"

The "timing" of the truce exemplifies the role of the union bureaucracy and the unions in policing the working class. It was precisely at the point when the government had proven to be almost completely isolated that the union leadership prevailed on nurses to accept a truce.

At the beginning of last week, four organizations of health professionals whom the government had asked to report on the strike's impact refused to condemn the nurses, choosing instead to point to the ruinous effect of the government's cuts on patient care.

Wrote Ghyslaine Desrosiers of the Quebec Nurses Corporation, "Taking into account the recurrent diminution of services every summer, and the penury of nurses, it is impossible to quantify with precision the effects directly related to the strike itself."

The Quebec Medical Council doubted the government's claims that the strike has forced the cancellation of 16,000 operations: "While all those numbers may make a deep impression when first seen, they do not give all the necessary elements to objectively evaluate the scope of the situation. In analyzing those numbers, one should take into account

cancellations that are occurring normally for many reasons."

Later last week, Bouchard had to publicly apologize when it was revealed that the PQ leadership had tried to mobilize local party officials in a covert campaign to blackguard the nurses through letters to newspapers and calls to radio talk shows.

And there was a chorus of newspaper editorials urging Bouchard to accept the QFN's claims that nurses are a special case, so as to avoid a "social crisis."

Parallels with the fall 1997 Ontario teachers' strike are manifest. In that struggle, the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) called off a strike by 126,000 teachers in defense of public education just at the point when the province's right-wing Tory government had been shown to be isolated. Fearing that an injunction ordering an end to the strike could further incite opposition and destabilize the entire political situation, the courts refused to grant the Tories an injunction ordering an end to the strike. The OTF took that as a signal that it had to take in hand the strangling of the strike, and quickly terminated it, saying there was no alternative since the government refused to bargain.

The nurses' strike has again shown that there is a vast latent opposition to big business's drive to dismantle public services. But this opposition cannot find expression and develop into a genuine working class counter-offensive through the trade unions and trade union struggles. If the nurses' are not to see their struggle smothered, they must make it the spearhead of a political mobilization of all working people in Quebec and across Canada in defence of health care, public education and all social programs. Above all, this opposition needs to be fructified by a political program that rejects the subordination of social needs to the capitalist market and motivates the struggle for a workers' government to undertake the radical reorganization of the economy in the interests of working people.



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