Quebec public sector workers balk at giving unions strike mandate

Keith Jones
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Some 300,000 Quebec teachers, school board employees, hospital workers, health care professionals and other provincial public sector workers voted last month not to give an inter-union alliance known as the Common Front authorization to stage a one-day strike October 25 and a general strike beginning November 18.

With the workers divided among three labor federations, a multiplicity of unions, and more than 1,200 locals, a complete tally of the balloting has not been made, but a majority of union locals and workers opposed the Common Front's strike strategy. Typical were the results from the Confederation of National Trade Unions' 90,000-member health and social services workers affiliate, the FSSS. Some 55 percent of FSSS locals and 52 percent of FSSS members opposed giving the Common Front a strike mandate.

The rejection of the Common Front's strike strategy is tantamount to a vote of no-confidence in the union leadership. It comes in the aftermath of a three-week strike this past summer by 48,000 Quebec nurses that was torpedoed by the Quebec trade union leadership, because it had become a challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the Parti Québécois (PQ) government of Lucien Bouchard. For striking in defiance of a battery of anti-union laws, the nurses have been subjected to massive financial penalties totaling tens of millions of dollars.

It is common knowledge that public sector workers are greatly dissatisfied with their terms of employment and frustrated at the level of services they can provide. They have borne much of the brunt of the billions of dollars in spending cuts the PQ government has imposed since coming to power in 1994 and, over the past 15 years, have repeatedly had their wages frozen or cut. Such is the disaffection, 40,000 public sector workers, double the number anticipated and ten percent of the entire provincial government workforce, opted for early retirement in 1997-98.

The gulf between worker aspirations and government policy is so great, media commentators had long been forecasting a "hot fall." Public sector workers have demanded the state make a major reinvestment in public services, now that the provincial budget deficit, the ostensible reason for the social spending cuts, has disappeared.

Premier Bouchard, meanwhile, has said that to give public sector workers any more than a paltry 5 percent pay increase spread over three years would jeopardize the PQ's plan to make tax cuts its principal policy objective. Moreover, the Quebec government is demanding significant concessions from public sector workers on work rules and workload. For example, it wants to rewrite teachers' job descriptions to increase "flexibility" and change the way teachers' hours of work are determined so as to pay them less.

Over the past two decades, Liberal and PQ provincial governments have repeatedly invoked draconian antiunion laws against public sector worker strikes. And in September, Bouchard stated outright he would move quickly to illegalize any job action by the Common Front. "While legal," said Bouchard, "a strike couldn't be long tolerated."

In seeking to explain the no-strike vote, FSSS President Louis Roy conceded he presides over an organization whose members are profoundly alienated from both their employer and union. "I sense a depression, a profound depression, among our members ... It's years since we've mounted any collective actions."

The erosion of workers' confidence in the unions is the result of many bitter experiences. To mention only

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the most significant of recent years: In 1996 the Common Front unions publicly endorsed the PQ government's plan to eliminate the provincial deficit by the year 2000. Then in 1997 they authored an early retirement scheme that enabled the government to slash thousands of public sector jobs, producing both a sharp deterioration in the quality of public services and an increase in their members' workload.

This summer the Common Front unions helped ensure the nurses' strike was defeated. Even as the public rallied behind the nurses to show its dismay over the appalling decline in the state health care system, the Common Front unions ordered their members to stay on the job.

Needless to say, Premier Bouchard welcomed last month's vote not to strike: "Everything will now happen at the bargaining table. Clearly, people want to see that this is solved through negotiations and that's what we want."

In their post-mortems on the strike-vote, Common Front leaders have said the defeat of last summer's nurses' strike had a chilling effect on their members. Unquestionably, it did, for the strike graphically illustrated the unions' role in suppressing the resistance of the working class.

To the dismay of the government and big business media, their attempts to blackguard the nurses for holding patients "hostage" and striking in violation of the law fell on deaf ears. Instead, much of the population rallied to the support of the strikers, because they recognized that in fighting to improve their working conditions, the nurses were fighting to defend a quality public health care system. Such was the isolation of the Bouchard government, it could not even prevail on four, state-chartered organizations of health care professionals to issue reports condemning the strike.

But with the PQ government weakened and isolated, the unions maneuvered to end the strike. The Common Front kept its members, tens of thousands of whom work alongside the nurses, on the job, while the Quebec Federation of Nurses' negotiated a sellout that not only abandoned the nurses' major demands, but left them open to the full sanctions of a battery of anti-unions laws. The strike ended in confusion with the nurses voting massively to repudiate the sellout agreement negotiated by their union, but then returning to work.

To obscure their own role in rescuing the Bouchard government, the Common Front leaders have blamed the nurses' defeat on a "tactical mistake" by the QFN—the fact that the nurses walked off the job before passing through all the legal hoops the government has set up to frustrate any struggle. No doubt many workers see this self-serving assessment as a further indication that the Common Front leaders are not prepared to lead a struggle against the government.

What is urgently required is a new perspective of struggle based on the independent political mobilization of the working class. For decades the Quebec unions have maintained that the allies of Quebec workers are the big business politicians of the PQ, not workers elsewhere in Canada and internationally. Support for the PQ and its project of an independent Quebec has been the overt political expression of the unions' acceptance of the domination of economic life by a tiny minority of bankers and corporate magnates.

The Quebec nurses' strike, like the 1997 Ontario teachers' strike, which also ended in a capitulation by the unions, showed that there is mass opposition to the dismantling of public services. But this opposition cannot find genuine expression within the narrow framework of trade unionism and political reformism. On the contrary, these struggles have demonstrated that any working class counter-offensive will come into headlong collision with the existing union organizations.

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