

Unions strangle Quebec nurses' strike

By Keith Jones
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The Quebec Federation of Nurses' Conseil Confédéral voted last weekend to terminate the militant strike that Quebec's 47,500 nurses have mounted since June 26, although the nurses have no contract and their wages will be garnished by tens of millions of dollars under draconian antiunion laws.

The QFN leadership claims the strike might resume in the fall. Events of the past month, however, have conclusively demonstrated that the leadership of the QFN is allied with Quebec's Parti Québécois provincial government against the nurses and is no less horrified and terrified than the government at the prospect of the nurses' struggle becoming the spearhead of a working class political mobilization against the dismantling of public services.

Even the QFN Conseil Confédéral balked at the first settlement that the QFN executive tried to foist on the nurses. Then last Wednesday, nurses turned out en masse to reject by an overwhelming 75 percent a sell-out agreement that the Conseil Confédéral had endorsed.

While QFN President Jennie Skene tartly dismissed suggestions she resign, claiming she had gotten the rank-and-file's message, she angrily denounced nurses who had opposed the sellout. Declared Skene, "We tore ourselves apart, accused each other in public, and the only people who benefited was the government ..."

The bluster aside, what riled Skene was that the membership had scuttled the sellout, thus jeopardizing the QFN bureaucrats' scheme to corral the nurses back to work.

To cover their tracks, QFN leaders have sought to justify their torpedoing of the strike by observing that large numbers of nurses—possibly as many as 85 percent by Friday—had returned to work despite the union's public posture that nurses should remain on the picket lines pending the outcome of the Conseil Confédéral.

This is truly a case of the author of a crime blaming his victim. It was the QFN leadership that orchestrated the strike's collapse. The QFN executive spent six days prior to last Wednesday's ratification vote trying to manipulate the nurses into accepting a contract that not only fell far short of their demands, but left them open to financial penalties of up to \$7,000 each. So as to demobilize the nurses, the

leadership imposed a 3 ½ day suspension of the strike during the ratification process. For her part, Skene first vowed never to end the strike without securing an agreement exempting nurses from most if not all financial penalties; then, less than 24 hours later, angrily rebuffed complaints that the union had accepted an agreement without a back-to-work protocol, saying nurses knew what they were getting into when they sanctioned an illegal strike!

With the QFN leadership demonstrating its unwillingness to fight for their demands, many nurses looked to France Picarou, the president of the QFN local at Montreal's Sacre-Coeur hospital, for leadership. Picarou had led the opposition to the sellout within the Conseil Confédéral, successfully mobilizing nurses at her hospital to defy the 3 ½ day "truce". But no sooner had nurses voted to reject the sellout, than Picarou led the Sacre-Coeur nurses back to work. At the very moment when the strike threatened to escape the control of the QFN leadership and many nurses were themselves debating how they could broaden their struggle to include other health care and public sector workers, Picarou declared that to continue the strike would be "suicidal".

The scuttling of the nurses' strike is a major defeat, not only for nurses but for workers across Canada. Precisely because the nurses became a lightning rod for public opposition to the dismantling of public services and in the process defied a battery of antiunion laws and refused to sanction their union leadership's betrayal, the government, big business, and the union bureaucracy will now seek to make of them an example, the better to intimidate all workers.

Acutely conscious of the danger that the nurses' strike would impel other workers, particularly among the 350,000 other Quebec public sector workers currently in contract negotiations, to defy the antiunion laws, the PQ government was adamant that it would not countenance any reduction in the financial penalties to be exacted from the nurses for defying Bills 37, 72 and 160.

According to the *Globe and Mail*, the Parti Québécois's federalist political opponents are lauding its handling of the strike, believing it strengthens their hands in confronting

mounting opposition to the dismantling of public services and continuing pay and job cuts for public sector workers. A “high-ranking premier's advisor from outside Quebec who has been in touch with other officials across Canada” told *The Globe*, “Governments generally view that the Quebec government handled this as well as they could.”

The leaders of Quebec's other public sector unions have said nothing about the outcome of the nurses' strike, but their silence speaks loudly. Like the leaders of the QFN, the heads of the Quebec Federation of Labor, the Confederation of National Trade Unions and the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec, have long been allied with the PQ and supported the Premier Lucien Bouchard's decision to make the elimination of Quebec's budget deficit the principal objective of public policy. Undoubtedly, they will seize on the example of the nurses to dampen militancy among their own members. As it is, they played a pivotal role in ensuring the defeat of the nurses' strike by quarantining it. Although in press interviews the QFL, CNTU and CEQ leaders routinely conceded that the outcome of the nurses' strike would weigh heavily on their own members' contract struggles, never for a moment was there any question of their organizing industrial action in support of the nurses.

Newspaper editorialists, who spent much of the strike fuming over the public's strong support for the strike, have, now that the nurses are back at work, issued a spate of commentary all aimed at proving the strike was futile.

What has spiked their ire is that in the nurses' strike they saw the specter of a social-political movement of the working class in opposition to the big business program of dismantling public and social services. Declared the lead editorial writer of *La presse*: “It is clear that the union leadership was overwhelmed by the membership. Some make a blind cult of spontaneous rank-and-file movements. But experience shows such popular expressions are generally confused and incoherent. Humans in their spontaneous collective actions rarely exhibit the finest personality traits. ...

“It's not up to the 47,000 members of the QFN to decide who governs Quebec.”

If the nurses' strike ended in confusion and disarray, if the potential for a broader social movement was not realized, it was firstly because the union bureaucracy acted consciously and ruthlessly as agents of the government. A second factor, ultimately no less vital, was the lack of understanding among nurses of the implications of their own struggle for better health care and working conditions.

Nurses were shocked and dismayed that despite the inherent reasonableness of their own demands and a groundswell of public support, they found themselves

thrown into all-out battle with the government, compelled to defy the law, and ultimately pitted against their own union leadership. While the nurses rejected the sellout, they neither understood the political roots of the QFN leaders' betrayal nor had an alternative political strategy to offer to the bureaucracy's reactionary and bankrupt perspective of appealing to the Bouchard government to make a separate deal with the nurses because they were “a special case”.

By last Wednesday, there was among many nurses a sense that they needed to broaden their struggle—that they couldn't fight the government on their own. But this had not congealed into an alternative perspective of mobilizing the entire working class, beginning with other public sector workers. At most, this remained limited to the notion that they should ally with the other public sector unions in a “Common Front” in the fall. But the fighting unity of the working class cannot and will not be established through the apparatuses controlled by union bureaucracy. For its part, the QFN leadership reiterated following last weekend's Conseil Confédéral that there is no question of it seeking to mobilize nurses in joint action with other public sector workers.

Even were the unions headed by genuine militants—instead of political allies of the PQ and open defenders of capitalism—the just demands of public sector workers for the maintenance and expansion of public services cannot be realized through the narrow portal of a trade union struggle. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working class.

All over the world, governments of whatever political stripe are pursuing the same agenda of dismantling public services, so as to lessen the tax burden on large investors and make big business more “competitive” in the global struggle for markets and profits. Even as society is growing wealthier and more productive, quality education, health care and other services are increasingly out of the reach of working people. To answer this reactionary social agenda, workers must place their struggles on an entirely new axis—the development, through industrial and political action, of a mass movement for a workers' government that would radically reorganize the economy to place human needs before the imperatives of the capitalist market.

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