

# 'suffered long enough'

hundreds of workers hit the streets. Two of the strikes lasted more than seven weeks. The government and hospital administrations fought back with every low trick in the books — legislation, manipulation, threats, even firings.

In each case these underhanded tactics sent the employees back to the job defeated. But in each case the workers vowed that they had learned valuable lessons, that they would be back with a vengeance.

It's not an easy way to learn. But lessons learned in the heat of battle are not soon forgotten; next time they'll have a better idea of what to expect, of how to organize to win.

And there'll be a lot of next times for hospital workers and for the rest of the province's civil service workers. For all public servants now face the same situation: grinding inflation, rising taxes, and a government under pressure to cut costs — how?... by cutting civil service wages. Previously secure employees now find themselves living on the edge of poverty. And from across the country the response has been the same — teachers, post office workers, medical workers, government clerks are all forging links with the labour movement, joining the wave of worker militancy.

More than a few hospital workers have expressed similar sentiments: "A few weeks on the picket line really opened my eyes. The way things are, is that the way they're supposed to be?... We came into this as nice little innocent boys and girls. We've come out hardened labour people. You can't change everything in eight weeks, but



Hospital technicians confront Attorney-General Sullivan with new demands.

this has been a good start...I used to believe that nonsense about being a professional. In the hospital, with my lab coat on I thought maybe, just maybe, someone

would mistake me for a doctor. I learned the hard way. You can't eat that clean white coat. Now I call myself a worker, and I'm proud of it."

## ...and nurses, too

Just four months after the technicians' strike began it was the nurse's turn. Fed up with the government's callous offer of 19% and 10% over two years, they pulled the plug on June 12. More than 1000 nurses from 12 provincial hospitals walked off their jobs.

Almost immediately the Regan government claimed to find a serious deterioration in health care in Nova Scotia. The day after the walkout began, a bill to force the nurses back to work was introduced in the House of Assembly.

The labour movement's response was immediate and strong: Trades and Labour Councils, Building Trades Councils, the Federation of Labour, and individual union leaders bitterly denounced the planned legislation. Nurse's Association president Theresa Murphy claimed the hospital workers were being 'set up' as an example to other trade unions. She said that the negotiations up until the strike were just a 'charade' — the government put them in a position where they had to strike, and then introduced a compulsory back-to-work law. It was "the most gutless piece of legislation ever introduced in Nova Scotia."

But within days the legislative attack had been stalled. Brought into the open by the admission of a Halifax-area supervisor that conditions in hospitals were near-normal, the government suspended discussion while it fished for new excuses to back the legislation.

The members of the Assembly were even more embarrassed when their unswerving dereliction of duty was made public. While the province's health care system was supposedly in a crisis they had been spending their time partying. When it came time to reopen debate on the bill they found that they couldn't — they were too drunk!

One nurse put it bluntly but accurately to a minister: "We've been out pounding the pavement for three days only to get in here and find you guys drunk, stumbling around."

The government had lost ground. It had to make a new offer, one which would be better but not too much, and by a means which would make it look better than it really was. This means was a surprise announcement in the legislature by Health Minister MacEachern — 37.5% over two years was the new offer.

It worked. In bypassing the union's negotiators and appealing directly to the membership, the government created even more confusion among an already demoralized Halifax-area membership. Within a couple of days the Halifax nurses had voted to accept the offer, split from their Cape Breton fellows, and had returned to work.

Nurses in Cape Breton fought on for another week, though the handwriting on the wall was clear. In the end, they found that they too were unable to cope with the government's "misbehavior and contradictions", as they called it. They were simply not able to match the unlimited resources the government had been willing to spend to break the strike.

Theresa Murphy and her fellow nurses lost that round, but they are just as sure that the fight isn't over yet. Either the government recognizes nurses "as an essential service and pays nurses appropriate salaries", was her parting shot, or they'll "become more militant and really strike without providing emergency services."

(Ken Clare is a member of the Nova Scotia Labour Research and Support Centre.)

### THE DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY LABOUR ARCHIVES

In 1976, the Dalhousie University Archives, in conjunction with the N.S. Federation of Labour, inaugurated a Labour Archives devoted to the collection of

local union papers and other Labour related material. The establishment of such a depository represents a decisive step forward in the process of documenting Labour's untold story.



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