

N.S. gov't has

Smelly feet

By KIRK WILLIAMS

The Nova Scotia government is dragging its feet in settling a three year dispute with its union employees. In doing so it is creating ill feelings and fostering a deep, (and perhaps radical) resentment in its public service.

In addition, the government is using the media to set up a straw man right-to-strike issue. By shifting the focus of the debate away from the arbitration argument, it is playing on Nova Scotians' fears that the province will be held ransom if hundreds of nurses and maintenance workers decide in the future to walk off the job.

The real issue is that the government's conduct in negotiating with its employees has been grossly unfair.

Check your facts, please!

In fact, under the Trade Union Act only 8,000 of the 11,000 members of the NSGEU are legally allowed to strike. The rest fall under the Civil Service Collective Bargaining Act and must settle their differences through arbitration—a process insisted upon by the government.

The irony of the dispute is that the government is not playing by its own rules. Through its negotiating agency, the Management Board, it is using loopholes in the arbitration process to avoid settling. The result is frustration and uncertainty for 8,000 government employees who have been without a pay increase since December 1984.

Relations between the two sides began to deteriorate after the government began to reclassify job descriptions in the civil service without consulting the union. Employees were finding their responsibilities increased without corresponding increases in pay. In essence, the government was trying to get more for less. When the union sought information about the reclassifications, the government suggested the union sign a new arbitration instead.

Arbitration is supposed to be a forum where two groups can work out their differences. But the parties involved must be at least willing to cooperate.

The government clearly is not.

The union took 10 days to nominate nine negotiators to represent its nine bargaining groups on the Arbitration Board. The Management Board on the other hand, stalled for 73 days and then came up with only three. So while three union bargaining groups would be one on one with the government, the remaining six would be waiting their turn.

The government wilfully com-

plicated things by protesting to the Civil Service Employee Relations Board that two union items (educational leave and sabbatical leave) were not subject to arbitration and demanded a hearing on the matter. When the hearing was held last December, the government again changed its mind and asked the board to rule on all the 75 items which would have taken more time and thus further delayed negotiations. The board overruled the government stating the two disputed items were in fact subject to arbitration. On January 26th, the government took the issue to the appeals division of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia to protest the hearing's decision. If the government loses its bid to overturn the board's decision then it would most likely appeal again. Another court case would take the dispute into its fourth hear.

To say that the union does not want the right to strike is not true. It is indeed a long term goal of the Union. In the meantime, it wants to negotiate but it can't because of government stonewalling.

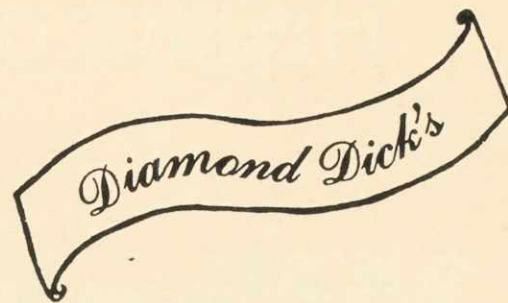
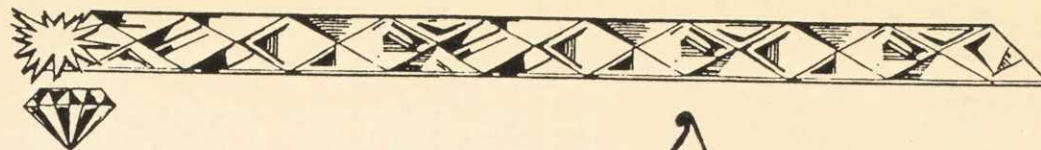
There is more to this issue than just a disagreement between an employer and its workers. The example the government is showing is not a good one. One of the purposes of government is to set a labor relations ideal, an example which the private sector would be encouraged to use as a model. If the provincial government introduces a 35-hour work week, ade-



quate compensation, health and safety programs and fosters positive labor relations with its employes (as demonstrated by other provinces, such as Manitoba) then it encourages others to do the same. If it does not take the lead and is in fact intransigent and hostile, how will other employers act towards their workers?

Nova Scotia is an economically depressed region. One of the criteria for development is sincere cooperation between all sectors of the economy: government, labor and business. Money is not the issue. Dialogue is. If Nova Scotia is to move forward it must work together as a unified force. If there is a difficulty then negotiate to find a solution. It is time the Nova Scotian government sat down and settled this dispute and set an example. Unless it does, the province could in all likelihood see a replay of the bitter and damaging battle between public servants and the provincial government that recently occurred in Newfoundland.

Our government has nothing to lose and everything to gain by starting to talk.



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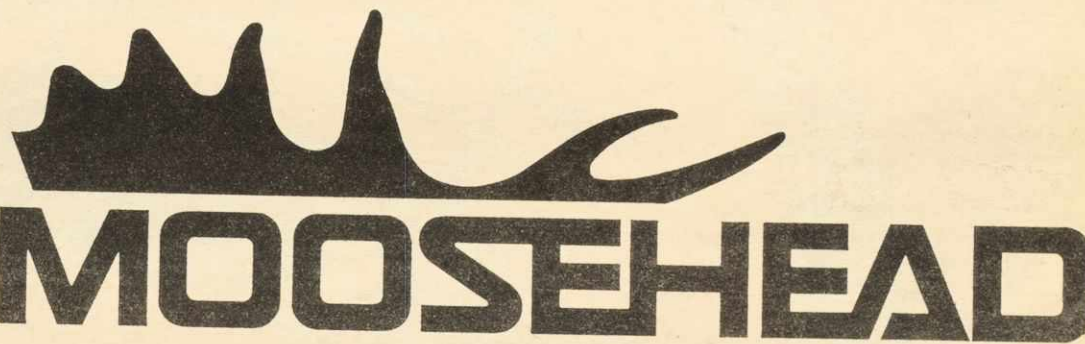
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