

Hospital workers- 'We've

by Ken Clare

The more of our past we rediscover, the more we learn of a strong strain of militancy which runs through the story of Nova Scotia labour. It was there in the coal mines during the 1920's, 30's and 40's; among farmers in the 1930's, in steel plants in the 1940's and 50's and among Canso strait fishermen in the 1970's.

But it's not all tradition, history, it's not in our past alone. Sometimes in areas with a tradition of workers' battles and now, ever-increasingly in new places Nova Scotians are fighting back. No longer willing to put up with shoddy working conditions and near-starvation wages they want things better, a whole lot and not just a bit, and sooner rather than later.

For more than two years the province's hospital workers — technicians, nurses, janitors, dieticians, and more — have been one of the most active parts of our labour movement. In a few short years they have shed the false

cloak of professionalism, joined the ranks as militant workers.

Like a lot of government employees, hospital workers have paid a heavy price for their passivity. But the 1970's medical workers were being squeezed hard: They'd been getting annual wage settlements of 7%, 6% or even less, while inflation was running into double digits. Almost half of the Victoria General and Pathology Institute technicians earned less than \$7200 a year, the 1974 'poverty line'; some starting salaries were as low as \$5145.

In July, 1975, nurses in this province were getting as little as \$651 a month, compared with the Ontario starting salary of \$945. In mid-1976 some hospital employees were making less than \$100 a week **before deductions**.

In a horribly cold and calculating way our government and hospital administrators have proven in the past two years how little they care for the province's sick, except as a bargaining tool. For years they've jeopardized people's health with inadequate care and poor safety conditions in

hospitals, paying wages which literally force some of our best medical people to look for jobs elsewhere. They've done their best to make sure that people doing vitally important jobs are disgruntled, dissatisfied, often half-hearted about their work.

Up until a strike vote the government tells them their jobs are so insignificant that they rate pennies-an-hour increases; once they leave work the jobs magically blossom into an "essential service".

Three times in these past two years, our hospital workers simply decided that they'd suffered long enough. The era when they'd be satisfied with pittance had come to an end, they went for substantial raises.

In each case the government responded with pitiful offers. They pleaded poverty, they pleaded patriotism (read A.I.B.). In each case the government said, "We're just not going to offer any more." In each case the workers took up the challenge.

Three major strikes have been fought. In each case

Recent battles: technicians...

It's doubtful if Halifax's Victoria General Hospital and Path Lab technicians had a choice to strike or not. Every step the government took seemed designed to force the workers to walk out.

They started with an offer of about 10% a year over two years. They added a split-contract offer, paying larger percentage increases to the technicians who were already getting higher wages. Then, just after a mediator had been appointed to look into the dispute, hospital administrators declared war: they began collaring technicians, asking them to train interns and residents as replacements.

The technicians weren't buying any of it. They weren't about to train scabs, especially ones — as the interns and residents admitted publically — whose work would only jeopardize patients' health. And they certainly weren't going to go for a low wage, split-contract offer. They stuck, as a unit, with their \$3200-a-year, across-the-board demand.

Denied by law the right to strike, the technicians opted for the mass resignation tactic. Their resignations were planned for Feb. 5, 1975, but as soon as administrators started talking about training replacements, technicians started walking out. By Jan. 30 they handed in their resignations; 86% were out for good.

They knew they were taking on hospital heads, the government, and the province's repressive labour legislation, with no strike fund, no experience in the strategy and tactics of the labour movement, and with no certainty that there would be jobs for them to go back to after the strike. What they didn't know was that they also faced a seven-week battle with their own 'union', the Nova Scotia Government Employees Association.

The N.S.G.E.A. did all it could to smother the striking members' initiative, to muzzle them, to keep the technicians' battle for a living wage looking like a friendly 'dispute'.

The Association president, Cyril Reddy, refused to call on other unions for help of any kind, despite the technicians' pleas and a clear offer of help from N.S. Federation of Labour head Gerald Yetman. Reddy ordered local leaders Ron Stockton and Ken MacKenzie to stop



Hospital technicians on strike.

issuing statements, to stay away from the press. The Association discouraged offers of financial assistance from other unions, and actually withheld one contribution that was made. The executive kept technicians' elected representative out of meetings where vital decisions about the strike were made.

...general workers...

In June, 1976 yet one more group of underpaid hospital workers faced the same government across the bargaining table. Some 1300 housekeepers, engineers, kitchen and dietary aids, and certified nursing assistants, taking home as little as \$92.50 a week, demanded a \$300 a month, across-the-board increase. The government (this time hiding behind the title 'Nova Scotia Health Organization') stuck with its usual first-offer, take-it-or-leave-it stance.

The workers decided to leave it. After their early-July walkout, the battle followed a familiar pattern: the government refused to discuss any possible compromises; in some hospitals scabs were brought in to break the strike.

By July 19 the union had scaled down its demand to a \$200-a-month raise; still the government wouldn't talk. Although the Neils Harbour hospital had returned to work, CUPE representative Harold Martell told the press that the rest were still solid, ready to last three months or more if necessary.

CUPE showed it was prepared to make a contest of it. When scabs came to work at New Glasgow's Aberdeen Hospital, union members not on strike walked off their jobs. Halifax citizens were treated to a little 'union theatre' in front of the legislature. Demonstrations were held, there was a brief sit-in inside the House of Assembly building.

But with one tactic, things began to go sour. Upset by a poor show of support from other hospital unions, notably the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport, and General Workers, CUPE decided to set up picket lines in front of the hospitals. CBRT leader Gerald Jollimore told members to cross the lines and by-and-large they did,

turning the CUPE attempt into a public flop.

"Regardless of the issue involved — and ordering men to cross a picket line under those circumstances is a serious matter", said one long-time local trade unionist, "CUPE should have known better than to go ahead with their plan if they weren't pretty sure it would succeed. There were a lot of really discouraged picketers out there."

Into mid-August the government wouldn't budge. Even CUPE national president Grace Hartman found nobody home when she went knocking on Province House door. She left charging that the government was trying to "crush" the hospital workers.

By the end of the month workers at one more hospital, Pictou's Sutherland-Harris, had been forced back to their jobs. With the strike now seven weeks old and the government still sitting tight, time and the ever-increasing financial burden of being off the job were beginning to take their toll.

On August 27 Martell admitted that once more "our position has softened. There will be no heroes coming out of this strike." It was clearly only a matter of time. On September 2 union leaders, saying, "there's no hope left", urged acceptance of a two-year settlement: a 6% - 30% raise plus \$400 lump sum for some, 10% plus \$1000 lump sum for others in the first year; 8% for all in the second year.

A clear government victory, but perhaps an empty one in the long run. The union's last comments could be prophetic: "There are some surprises to come, and they (the government) will live to regret the day they starved the hospital workers back to work."

And in the end, Reddy simply sold the workers down the river.

If anything, the government's response was even more vicious. Their first attempt to get an injunction to ban information picketing failed, so they kept trying, and eventually succeeded. They advertised for replacements for resigned workers. Attorney General Alan Sullivan used the legislature to threaten that no matter what else happened, the 'instigators' (read, democratically elected leaders) would never be rehired. Hospital administrators spread wild rumours about technicians too intimidated by each other to return to work, even calling workers at home to try to talk them into coming back.

Technicians' chairman Stockton explained the government's campaign this way: "The government doesn't care about reason, justice, or health care for hospitalized patients. All it cares about is breaking the 'strike' group up because they know we are setting the trend for a stampede of dissatisfied technical workers all across the province."

At first the lab techs stood by quietly, letting the government and the N.S.G.E.A. seize the initiative with their combined attack. Simple 'withdrawal of services' was the only tack they knew for workers to take. But the more they found themselves forced to the wall, the more they were forced to come up with imaginative counter-tactics, keeping the striking workers active and up-to-date, combatting management-spread demoralization.

When you look back at the strike, it was this phase of the technicians' battle which stands out: they used the energies, ideas and enthusiasm of the full membership to turn an unequal match-up into a real contest of wills.

Weekly meetings turned into full strategy sessions, lively discussion generating top-notch ideas. Committees drafted public leaflets; others distributed them all over town. Phone committees kept in touch with all technicians, squelching the latest rumours. Support petitions were taken into the community, in shopping centres and door-to-door. Almost daily demonstrations in front of and inside the legislature kept them in the public eye.

By mid-March they had gained enough support to hold a public rally on their own. More than 700 trade unionists and Halifax citizens heard the strikers' leaders and other union representatives rip into government and hospital administration irresponsibility. The Federation of Labour promised full support any time the N.S.G.E.A. asked for it. N.S.G.E.A. president Reddy, however, revealed that the Association still hadn't decided whether or not to call its members out to support the by now six-week-old strike.

During the next week support continued to grow. Sydney city hospital technicians walked out, others seemed likely to follow. For the first time substantial donations started to flow in from union locals around the province.

The increased backing forced the government's hand; they had to reopen negotiations. But this time there was a difference: no technicians could take part in the talks.

The result was predictable — a slightly higher wage offer, but still a split contract. Technicians' leaders Stockton and MacKenzie would be reinstated in their jobs only if an arbitrator agreed. And the Association's message to the technicians was clear: accept the package, or forget about any more support.

The government now knew that it had the technicians at a tremendous disadvantage. Without N.S.G.E.A. support, the rising tide of labour backing would soon begin to ebb. After eight weeks, some simply couldn't afford to stay out any longer.

And yet, even when so badly undercut, the majority wanted to fight on. The settlement they had been offered was worse than an insult, and they didn't want to abandon their leaders. For four more days they discussed and debated, trying to find a way to hold out. But by March 24 it was clear they couldn't. Stockton and MacKenzie recommended that they return to work.

One last fight remained—winning back their leaders' jobs. A March 26 rally of hundred of technicians and their supporters served notice to the government that the return to work was conditional. This time the government had to listen; within two weeks the two men were back on the job.