

## Nova Scotia Labour's "Fight-Back Position": Hot Debate at the NSFL Convention in Halifax

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When the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour opened its 1982 Convention on September 28, there was a general consensus that the stakes were very high and that they were stacked against labour. According to C.U.P.E.'s National President, Grace Hartman, Canadian workers were faced with their "most serious struggle in thirty years against anti-union forces determined to weaken or destroy the labour movement.

Union delegates in Nova Scotia didn't need much convincing. The Provincial Government has declared an unholy war against labour and in the process has established an anti-union record that would make Margaret Thatcher envious.

Committed to denying the province's workforce elementary trade union rights whenever possible, the Cabinet's all-purpose hatchet man, Ken Streach, followed his blatantly anti-union Michelin Bill with an equally vicious encore. His one-page free-enterprise fisheries bill reneges on a government promise and denies inshore fishermen minimal rights of collective bargaining.

This refusal to give in to one group of workers' demands was followed by a takeback affecting another. Legislated settlements will be imposed by March 1983 on public sector unions unless they capitulate and sign agreements accepting a 6% wage ceiling. The aim is to make this temporary withdrawal of the right to strike permanent, following the report of a so-called Commission of Inquiry into essential services.

And then there are the Digby school bus drivers who have been hung out on the line and forced to endure the longest strike in Nova Scotian history. Always in the background of the Federation Convention and sometimes on the floor was the question of labour's failure to support the Digby workers. A few backhanded apologies and much chest pounding about "how much we have already helped them" replaced the embarrassing silence on this three-year strike during last year's Convention. The rhetoric about "making a plan of action and damn well carrying it out" was enthusiastically applauded by the delegates. Rhetoric usually is. The main question at the Convention, however, was what action the labour movement would take in response to the entire government-led employer offensive. On this issue there was nothing approaching consensus.

Unlike the C.L.C. Convention in Winnipeg, there was no organized opposition or rank and file caucus during the N.S.F.L. Annual Meeting. In Nova Scotia, dissent either took the form of an *ad hoc* opposition to certain policies sponsored by the Executive, or centered around the Postal Workers who consistently proposed and supported demands for planned and specific action. Otherwise, with the absence of representatives from the financially troubled Steelworkers, from the building trades and from most of the Mineworkers' locals, non-industrial unions dominated the Convention. The 50-plus block vote from the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union proved decisive on many

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issues.

### **Fight-Back Position**

The centrepiece of debate was a two-and-a-half page document entitled the "Fight Back Position" of the N.S.F.L. The document pledged to inform both members and the general public of the negative effects of both the Federal wage control bill (C-124) and Buchanan's imitative 6% ceiling, by organizing information pickets and local demonstrations. In addition, the Federation would support or organize support for unions which go on strike against unfair legislation. There were no specific proposals in the policy paper on current issues such as organizing Michelin or ending the Digby strike.

The over-riding solution envisaged was political. From the opening remarks of C.L.C. President Dennis McDermott, through the Fight-Back document (which called for "a government that will work on behalf of workers and their families"), to the debate on the Digby strike in which C.U.P.E.'s Al Cunningham told delegates to "get off their butts and defeat the Conservatives," the message was clear: the main focus of activity must be the ballot box.

There was no opposition from the floor of the Convention to this tactic of supporting the N.D.P. but, for many delegates, the fight-back policy didn't go far enough. There were no clear objectives or concrete proposals to put any teeth into the calls for support, an omission which prompted the Public Service Alliance of Canada's Ken Hawley to ask: "What does the Chairman mean by support? Only high ideals and flowery sentiments?" The primary shortcoming of the policy was the limited tactic of having individual locals take on national or provincial legislation themselves. This only meant that they would be defeated one by one. It was a lesson the labour movement had learned from the last episode of wage controls but the tactics had not changed.

In contrast to this official position, other resolutions before the Convention did specify concrete tactics. Resolution 41 called for the establishment of "strike support committees within each Labour Council," while Resolution 29 urged the C.L.C. to begin preparations for a general strike.

The attempt by some delegates to have the fight-back position strengthened by incorporating these two resolutions as an amendment was defeated by a 73-56 vote, with solid N.S.G.E.U. opposition. In addition, both Secretary-Treasurer J.K. Bell and former president Gerald Yetman made militant-sounding speeches opposing the amendments. Yetman said that workers "have to take employers on in the streets" but did not address the problem of isolated resistance. Bell stressed that "resolutions are not enough" and labour must become "more militant on behalf of fellow workers." He objected to planning for a general strike on the grounds that labour "must not out-bid itself," but did not address the concrete proposals for strengthening the rank and file response through the Labour Councils.

With the official policy accepted by a majority on the strength of this posturing, a second opportunity to add some muscle to the fight-back came during the debate on individual resolutions. In its handling of these motions, the tendency of the Executive

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was to eliminate any proposals for "action", other than references to education, publicity or unspecified support. This has been a perennial problem. In the past, resolutions directing the Federation to take specific action have been ignored. During conventions, the Executive and its Resolutions Committee exercise control over which motions come to the floor and they provide direction by recommending concurrence or nonconcurrence. This year, a C.U.P.W. resolution asking for an annual report to delegates outlining the steps taken to implement resolutions passed by the Convention was not even brought up for debate.

### **Combining or Burying?**

One tactic, then, is to avoid some issues by controlling the agenda. A second tactic is to lose resolutions by "combining" those with stronger or more specific wording under those with weaker or more vague prescriptions. Resolution 9 (from C.U.P.E. 760) resolved "that the N.S.F.L. support and encourage all N.S. locals to participate actively and financially to prevent the Provincial Government from introducing strike-limiting legislation." There was no disagreement with the need for such support, but the motion did not provide any specific directions. It remained at the level of "flowery sentiments." The Resolutions Committee, chaired by Cunningham, "combined" under this one resolution, numbers 17, 28 and 44. Resolution 17 called on the labour movement to "prepare for any or all collective action that may be necessary as a result of such anti-worker legislation". The intent was similar, but the wording stronger. Resolution 28 advocated a "province-wide education and action campaign" around specific slogans, to be launched by January 1983. This would be followed by a week of action in March including public rallies, information pickets and "a massive distribution of publicity material." Here was a call for more specific action which specified "reasonable deadlines for actions which were not far from the general plan of action adopted in the fight-back policy." By being "combined" under resolution 9, these were being sidestepped.

To their credit, this attempt to shuffle issues aside was defeated by the delegates. The Resolution Committee was directed to deal with each motion separately. Resolutions 9 and 17 were promptly passed, on the basis of the committee's recommendation of concurrence. The decision to combine resolutions logically implies that they are all equally acceptable. This would have to apply as well to Resolution 28. In this case, however, the required recommendation of concurrence included deletions from the motion -- it was not entirely acceptable to the Committee. They were not "major ones" according to Cunningham, but as amended most of the concrete actions were omitted. Nevertheless, when finally passed, the Convention had agreed to a "province-wide education and action campaign to be launched by January 1983," and had advocated an increased mobilization of the membership of the Federation in support of the Digby bus-drivers.

These three resolutions were passed during the last session of the Convention and, after dealing with Resolution 28, President Sanford dismissed the Committee and went on to other business. That meant that Resolution 29 -- urging the C.L.C. to prepare for a general strike -- would not be debated. The provincial cornerstone of the C.U.P.W.

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fight-back strategy, the formation of strike support committees in each Labour Council, was also buried. (An attempt to reintroduce this motion during the debate on the Officers' Report was also lost, although the Executive did bring in a resolution to discontinue the Annual Brief to the government. Significantly, the Executive supported this resolution.) C.U.P.W. argued that the local Councils provide the best forum for rank-and-file participation and for organizing strike support actions. However, their proposal to strengthen local links with the Federation and increase rank-and-file input by having Council Presidents occupy vice-presidential positions on the N.S.F.L. Executive was also lost.

### **Some Direction**

In general, then, the Convention passed motions exhorting workers to support strikes and aiming to expand educational activities, but there were very few which made the Executive more accountable by demanding concrete action. But some of the resolutions which were passed did place obligations on the "house of labour." The Convention resolved to "undertake a massive educational campaign aimed at the rank and file to prepare them to resist government attacks," and agreed that "actions similar to those held August 23 and 24 [the rally against the federal budget during the First Ministers' Conference in Halifax] would be organized during the sitting of the legislature." Publicity campaigns will be initiated educating the general public on the purpose of unions, on the "need for fully-paid maternity leave" and equal pay for work of equal value, and "on the archaic health and safety laws." The object of the last campaign is "to mobilize workers ... to take part in a demonstration at Province House." The Federation promised to assist the Maritime Fishermen's Union in its drive to organize inshore fishermen by helping with the production and promotion of material, by launching a moral and financial appeal, and by throwing "its full weight behind" a demonstration, should fishermen choose to stage one.

On one issue, delegates brought about a reversal of Executive policy. Resolution 27 directed the Federation to take specific action on behalf of the unemployed by naming a Commission of three representatives to hold province-wide public sessions on unemployment and to initiate an "education action program" to bring the jobless and the labour movement together. The initial recommendation of non-concurrence was referred back to the Committee and the motion was finally accepted.

### **Picketing Policy**

The clearest expression of rank-and-file opposition was over the Executive's policy on picketing. This document demanded that a union intending to establish picket lines must give the N.S.F.L. 72 hours notice (later amended to 48 hours). During this time a meeting would be held between Federation officers and representatives of all unions affected by the picket lines. At this co-ordinating meeting agreements would be reached "on those principles" (amended from "proposals") which will serve the interests of the workers directly involved and the trade union movement."

Three additional clauses in the document outlined the sanctions to be imposed when affiliated unions either picketed "in a manner other than that agreed upon" or violated

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such a picket line. These sanctions included "suspension or expulsion" from the Federation, with the decision being taken by the Executive.

The intention of the document was obvious. The Federation of Labour intended to adopt a policy which made the crossing of a picket line legitimate.

The policy stuck in the throats of many rank and file workers and long-time trade unionists. Having spent time on picket lines, they were not prepared to accept as a "principle" the demoralizing practice of having fellow workers waltz through their lines. Their response was reflexive. Replying to the example of last year's U.M.W. strike, when non-strikers were apparently "confused" about whether or not they should cross picket lines, Don MacRae retorted: "There was no confusion at my picket line. If people tried to go through, they did so at their own risk. You don't cross a picket line. If you do, you're a scab."

The proposed policy went further by indicating that other unions would have a say in how a strike would be run. Kevin MacNeil, President of the Cape Breton Labour Council, opposed the document because "no one is going to come into my bargaining unit and tell me what to do." As C.U.P.W.'s Wayne Mundle put it, cooperation with other unions was O.K., but the only acceptable "principle" was the sanctity of the picket line.

Against the usual block voting, the document was referred back and eventually reintroduced with the three clauses specifying the sanctions having been omitted. Supporters of this slightly amended document claimed that the opposition had been "confused." Sanford sarcastically remarked that some people didn't think the policy was "good enough for us super-militants in Nova Scotia."

The policy was eventually passed. As Cunningham told the delegates at the end of the debate, "this document does not advocate that picket lines be crossed," it simply means that unions must "get together." The intent of the document, however, was to remove the stigma from those who do cross.

The policy document did prove one thing. The Federation Executive is not averse to devising specific plans of action, nor against formulating strict sanctions up to and including expulsion for those unions which violate them. But they are highly selective of the issues they choose. That the policy document with the most specific directives was meant to provide legitimacy to those who cross picket lines is itself a powerful commentary demonstrating the real attitude-of many labour leaders to worker solidarity and militant trade unionism.