

NOVA SCOTIA LABOUR AND THE UNITED FRONT: RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

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If the lure of modern social history is to participate vicariously in an age of trade union militancy and overt working class consciousness, then Nova Scotia is a mine for romanticism. The province has a long and colourful labour history, although if the Cape Breton Labour Party is successful in its dream of separation, or the Cape Breton Liberation Army finally manages to tear down the Canso Causeway, what is left of "mainland" Nova Scotia will lose a great deal of this heritage. Industrial Cape Breton may be a mine for labour historians, but the more recent record of the labour movement in the province has strayed a considerable distance from this tradition. It is a story of sporadic local militancy and heroism coupled with overall weaknesses. Collective victories of the labour movement in Nova Scotia have become rare events. This province is one of only a handful in the country that denies provincial civil servants the right to strike. Provincial highways workers, organized by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, have been seeking the right to strike since their initial organization, a demand which has been turned down by successive governments. In-shore fishermen have been insulted with the so-called "free enterprise" fisheries bill, which gives them all they rights they already had, such as the right to organize, and denies them the right they need: to bargain collectively with the fish companies. From the creation of a Civil Service Association as the hand-maiden of government policies (Thomson 1983) to the notorious Michelin Bill (cf. Belliveau and da Marsh 1977), the Nova Scotia government has been at least as blatant as any in the country in demonstrating its class character.

While the government has been overt in its defence of private economic interests, the labour movement has been, to an equivalent degree, a failure in its pursuit of working class interests in the province. This is not caused by a lack of rhetoric. With the return of Gerald Yetman to the Presidency of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour, the words of the movement will again reflect the real tradition of militancy. The real issue, however, is what the labour movement has done and is doing to promote the more general interests of working people in the province. As always, the need for a strong and militant rank and file movement is a prerequisite both for winning immediate reforms and for obtaining the longer term aims of social justice. A great deal has been written about the reasons for the failure of the trade union movement to do any more than meet some of the sectional interests of groups of strategically placed and easily organized employees (Gonick 1983; Calvert 1983). Part of the answer lies in the characteristics of members. In a manner analogous to the disjunction between the old left and the "new left" of the 1960s, modern workers have been cut off from the real history of labour militancy and democracy. Working in an era of automatic membership and the dues check-off, the union is perceived to be an external service body, an insurance service (Black 1983a: 20-21). There is a "crisis of hegemony in the detachment of workers from their organizations" (Mahon 1983: 153). The revival of

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militancy in the late 1960s and 1970s reflected high expectations for personal rewards rather than an expression of heightened class consciousness (Black 1983a: 24- 25).

There is, in addition, the question of the fragmentation of the Canadian labour movement which, as Mahon has argued, "has left the unions to calculate their options and define their strategies in particularistic and defensive terms (1983: 150). Given this inherent weakness, and the difficulties of mobilizing the rank and file, unions "may be inclined to calculate their options at the sectoral level, leaving them vulnerable to the appeals of particular capitals" (:156).

A third issue is leadership. The post-1945 labour movement operated under the umbrella of legitimacy supplied by the federal government. As militants and socialists were squeezed out in the post-war settlement years, unions expanded into bureaucratic organizations with centralized control and high- salaried executives. Bargaining became a highly specialized legal exercise conducted in a rarified atmosphere remote from the membership. The Executive monopolized discourse, disseminating both information and understandings. Many union leaders lost touch with the members and the members' interests. The present national labour leadership, as Parrot argues, does not "want to work on the basis of the strength of the membership" (1983b: 60); "the weakness is really that the leadership is not going to the membership to lead. Too many leaders say the membership is not ready" (:61) and consequently abdicate the long-term task of arousing and educating the rank and file. This remoteness dovetails with the problems of membership because, as Parrot further argues, when workers are passive it is easy for leaders (and social democratic governments) to betray them. Leaders will be conservative "until pressures on them for change become extreme from within their own unions" (1983:11). From an analytical point of view, then, the problems are to be found in both membership and leadership. The solution requires a militant and legitimate local level leadership capable of organizing the rank and file and, as Mahon argues, a broad programme linking concern over restructuring with sectoral and local concerns (1983: 159).

In addition to the fundamental issue of the complex interplay between leadership and members, the union movement is also faced with a number of other important contradictions and differences. The latter include provincial and regional differences, questions of separate industrial and occupational interests, issues of gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. The labour movement is also beset with a number of contradictions. One of the most fundamental of these is the distinction between public and private sector workers. There are several dimensions to this, including the issue of possible contradictions between clients and public employees, the question that the source of the salaries for government workers comes from individual taxation, and the special conditions of employment by the state (Levi 1980; Katz 1979). The majority of this paper, however, is concerned with relations among public sector unions. Here the major contradiction, as with the labour movement as a whole, is between the sectional interests of the individual unions and the general interests of the movement as a whole.

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Trade union consciousness can be conceptualized as a matter of degree, as varying according to the extent to which the common concerns of all workers are put ahead of those particular to the group of employees organized (Black 1983a: 22). The most celebrated attempt to forge a militant unity among public sector workers in Canada occurred in Quebec with the Common Front of 1972. In the last few years a wider and potentially more significant coalition has been organized in British Columbia. The main concern of this paper is to analyze the efforts in Nova Scotia to create a United Front of public sector unions to fight threats that the right to strike would be denied across the board in the public sector and that the government would effectively remove the right to bargain collectively by imposing legislated settlements. The United Front dissolved under the pressure of its internal contradictions, particularly those between the particular interests of the separate unions and the broader concerns of the labour movement.

Underdeveloped Economy and Labour Movement

One point is particularly pertinent to a study of class consciousness in Nova Scotia: the relative importance of the petite bourgeoisie, both numerically with the survival of numerous small fishing communities (Kirby 1983), and ideologically. The main concern here is the individualistic or particularistic orientation which has been linked with small, petty production. Generally speaking, ideologies persist in the "political culture" (Williams 1975) even when the objective basis for their development is eroded. In the case of Nova Scotia, the official discourse is strongly influenced by petty bourgeois ideologies which reinforce any and all tendencies to accentuate particularisms and militate against working class consciousness. While this consciousness of economic independence "is clearly changing..., it is [still] a major barrier to effective collective action and solidarity" (Williams 1975; cf. Brym 1979). And while the actual adoption of particularistic attitudes and policies relates to the existence of objective conditions and contradictions, it is never a simple reflection of them. Nova Scotia is an underdeveloped part of Canada with a workforce which is more rural than most of the country. The traditional resource sectors of farming and fishing employ a significant part of the labour force (Connelly and MacDonald 1983: 51). One of the upshots is that Nova Scotia, and the Atlantic provinces in general, have become a bastion of the reserve army of labour in Canada (Veltmeyer 1978; 1980; Sacouman 1980), a generalized condition which places specific constraints on union militancy.

The response of Nova Scotian workers to the crisis of the 1980s is shaped by the nature of the economic and social structures of the region. The relative importance of resource production for more advanced industrial regions, including central Canada, has created a different economy and a "different type of class structure" (Clement 1979: 79; cf. Clement 1978). Indigenous developments in the late 1800s were destroyed by a combination of failed markets, foreign competition, depression, the National Policy and the success of Maritime entrepreneurs who made the highest profits by selling out to Upper Canadian capital (Acheson 1977; 1972; cf. Clow 1984). As Veltmeyer describes

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it:

On the periphery...the class system is more clearly formed by conditions of surplus labour that produce a severely restricted industrial proletariat, a dramatic emigration of workers, an expanding mass of unproductive workers and, most notably, a growing concentration of unemployed and partially employed persons, subject to the requirements of capital accumulation at the centre (1979: 26). From the regional point of view, post-World War Two relative prosperity was related in an ambivalent way to developments in central Canada and in other developed regions of the capitalist west. As numerous writers have claimed, the Maritimes operate as a two-way valve for migration. In the absence of substantial industrial development and the decline of primary production in the post-war years, the potential for creating an unbearable burden of under- and un-employed people was avoided by the out- migration of workers to the central and western regions of the country. Those who remained were subsidized by substantial transfer payments from central Canada--the Keynesian welfare policies of the federal government became a central component of the maintenance of living standards in Nova Scotia. The importance of these payments for the underwriting of health, education and welfare is increasingly apparent as the federal government slowly attempts to whittle them down and gain greater control over the allocation of money to the province.

The manufacturing industries which continued to exist in Nova Scotia were old and increasingly less productive than their competitors. In the context of increasing inter-capitalist rivalry, an international surplus of steel and ship-building, international competition and low relative productivity, traditional manufacturing industries in the Maritimes either failed or were kept marginally alive by the injection of large amounts of federal and provincial aid--Sydney Steel, Enheat in Amherst and the Halifax Shipyards come immediately to mind. These traditional industries began a long descent towards oblivion in the absence of the substantial re-investment which was required to make them even close to viable. In this respect Nova Scotia fared as badly as any of the old-line industrial regions, with a considerably smaller base to fall back upon. In another respect, in the post-war restructuring of industries, Nova Scotia fared ambivalently. One of the responses related to the increased pressure on profits in the central regions of the country, as well as internationally, was a process of relocation of industry (Wolfe 1983: 13). While it is a considerable exaggeration of the everyday weather patterns in Nova Scotia to say that the province constitutes a "sun-belt", the region did possess some of the other attributes which made it a desirable place for run-away industries to locate. As Wolfe summarizes these, they include significantly lower wage levels, less extensive unionization and fewer legal protections (1983). If Nova Scotia could not match the otherwise enviable records of dictatorial South Korea and Taiwan on these scores, the differences could be compensated by massive government give-aways in the form of no-interest loans, free construction and infrastructure developments and other subsidies. Industrial Estates Limited was

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organized to attract foreign and central Canadian capital to the region on the most favourable terms (for capital), with the government willingly plunging into the international debt pool to mortgage this development in the belief that such an industrial strategy would pay off in the long run.

The results have been mixed with respect to the interests of capital. There were some spectacular failures: Claireton, the Glace Bay Heavy Water Plant. Some companies took what they could get and then ran farther away to areas even more subservient to the wishes of capital, leaving an impoverished work force. The result has been the coming and going of various development fiascos (Thomson 1977). Many of these developments took place in the resource sector, with pulp and paper being one of the most important. The result has been the development of a "resource proletariat" which is especially susceptible to boom and bust cycles (Clement 1979: 92)--witness the near collapse of Corner Brook. There have also been some cases of foreign investment which the provincial government trumpets as successes, with the Michelin Company at the top of the very short list. Michelin set up plants in rural parts of the province, paying wages in excess of local rates (not a difficult feat in rural Nova Scotia). They exercise numerous paternalistic employer practices, such as purchasing homes and furniture for senior personnel--practices that strike responsive chords in traditional and conservative rural areas--and have extracted numerous concessions from the government, principal of which is the determination that there will be no union at Michelin (Belliveau and da Marsh 1977). Despite the efforts of the Citizens Coalition Against the Michelin Bill, the successful organization of the Granton plant was voided by the Act which retroactively made it necessary to organize both the Granton and Bridgewater plants in one bargaining unit (cf. Sacouman 1981). Immediately following this Act, Michelin announced the construction of a third plant in the province.

If relocation has been one manifestation of the crisis (and the tendency for capital to relocate extends back to the prosperous fifties as part of a regional plan for attracting foreign capital), the second aspect with important implications for Nova Scotia has been restructuring. The most significant current development is undoubtedly in the fishing industry, where restructuring amounts to a huge government bail-out of private interests--fishing interests have enormous political influence in the province. The result is the closing of fish plants, increasing unemployment and under-employment, and no long-term solution. At best, precipitous actions will result in more spontaneous occupations, demonstrations and co-operative efforts on the part of fishermen (see Neis 1984).

Among the other problems associated with restructuring is the effect of the technological revolution which replaces workers with capital. This may be less important in Nova Scotia simply because the scale of industries is smaller. However, any restructuring which takes place in Nova Scotia will be significant because of the weak base of employment upon which it will occur. The 1983 N.S. Federation of Labour Convention was organized around the theme "N. S. Labour in the 1980s" and delegates

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discussed such defensive reactions to these developments as the demand for more secure pensions, early retirement and re-training schemes, and more positively in the area of negotiations on technological change. Few significant resolutions were passed, however, and even fewer concrete initiatives have come from the union central in the province.

Unionism in Nova Scotia

In none of the organized sectors of the working population has the tradition of union conservatism, respect for the supposed neutrality of the state, and the absence of militant unionism been as apparent as in the civil service. In general the absence of rights reflects in part the absence of organized struggle to obtain them. With respect to union rights, the cliché of events in the Maritimes lagging a decade behind the rest of Canada has a basis in fact. Even so, there have been significant changes in the trade union orientation of provincial civil servants reflected in the complex interplay between membership attitudes and leadership, two inter-dependent if distinct entities. In the early 1970s the leadership of the Civil Service Association had passed from the hands of senior supervisory staff to those of senior non-supervisory professionals who adopted a more unionist frame of reference in keeping with the dissatisfaction and alienation of increasing numbers of government employees. If a conservatism still prevails among civil servants, it is less the traditional subservience to legitimate authority and the service ethic and more a cynicism about the possibilities of progressive change, a cynicism which has been encouraged by the weakness of the labour movement in its confrontations with the government.

The traditional timidity of civil servants was slowly eroded in the 1960s from two directions: unions of private sector workers were successful in obtaining better benefits than those long enjoyed by the civil service. At the same time the bargaining mechanism provided organized workers with a mechanism to ensure rises in real wages in the face of the persistent inflation which accompanied Keynesianism. This inflation worsened in the 1960s and greatly affected those receiving salaries. With the worsening of their relative and absolute market conditions came the implementation of government programmes to make public sector work more narrowly rational and bureaucratic. Public employees were being placed in a position where a collective response of some type was increasingly possible and increasingly necessary. There was a direct and recognized connection between the increased economic responsibilities of government and the importance of the role played by the civil service, a role which emphasized the creation of an efficient body of employees recruited and promoted on the basis of merit. Rationalization of the federal civil service was implemented in 1918 during the national war effort and in anticipation of the problems of post-war reconstruction. Similarly, rationalization was advocated in Nova Scotia more through an official recognition of economic necessity than through pressure from employees for an end to discrimination and patronage. A 1934 Royal Commission informed the provincial government that, notions of a self-regulating economy being

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obsolete, only a policy of additional public regulation and provincial control over natural resources could ensure an intensive development. Since the implementation of this policy required a permanent and efficient civil service, the practice of political patronage had become an obstacle to economic progress (Jones, Johnston and Innis 1934: 83-88). Consequently a Civil Service Act was passed in 1935 which left much to be desired in practice (Nova Scotia 1944: 9-13).

In Nova Scotia, not only had there been very little civil service pressure for reforms, but historical circumstances had provided provincial employees with a special security of tenure. Between 1882 and 1957, with the exception of one eight-year span, the Liberal party had held a monopoly of formal political power and civil service appointments. The public sector was a growth industry during the decades immediately following the second world war. With traditionally secure employment, expanding career prospects and fringe benefits which far surpassed most other workers, the conditions of public employment fostered deep feelings of conservatism among government workers which was justified by an ideological commitment to serving the needs of the community. This entrenched timidity and absence of trade union consciousness was slowly eroded in the 1960s from two directions: unions of private sector workers were successful in obtaining those benefits and conditions long enjoyed by public employees, thereby undermining one of the historical bases for the superior status of public employees. At the same time unions provided the organized working class with a mechanism to ensure rises in real wages in the face of the persistent inflation which accompanied Keynesianism.

Not all provincial employees are subject to the provisions of the various Civil Service Acts, and legislation divides the public sector into two distinct components: those departments directly under Cabinet responsibility, the Civil Service, and a second sector consisting of institutions headed by semi-independent Commissions or Boards exercising important discretionary rights over personnel management and policy formation. It was among the latter group of public service workers in Canada that unionization had begun to spread shortly after the Second World War, in association with the decision of the federal government to extend collective bargaining rights to these employees. In Nova Scotia, similar pressure from employees of provincially owned Commissions led first to the passing of an amendment to the Trade Union Act in 1947 which explicitly excluded all provincial employees from the provisions of the Act, a policy which was opposed by organized labour (Labour Canada 1951). In the long run, this continued pressure succeeded in inducing the government to alter its policy with respect to employees of Boards and Commissions. This decision followed hard on the heels of a successful campaign by the province's teachers for similar rights. Demanding a general salary increase, the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union had begun a systematic campaign to recoup salaries which had been eroded by the inflation of the early 1950s associated with the war in Korea. Following strikes in Cape Breton and Antigonish counties in 1951, the first steps were taken for the establishment of more appropriate

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negotiating and collective bargaining machinery for teachers (Parker 1965).

The Liberal government announced its decision to grant union rights to public service workers in Nova Scotia during the election campaign of 1956. Those employed under the Civil Service Act were, however, excluded (Fraser 1956). The regulations regarded any withdrawal of services by public employees to be 'incompatible with the basic principle of public service' (Nova Scotia 1957). Although they were excluded from these limited provisions for negotiating with their employer, the Civil Servants were given permission to form an Association, provided that its constitution and by-laws were approved by the Cabinet. Another decade was to pass before substantial changes were made in the legislation affecting civil servants in Nova Scotia.

Disappointment with the results of a supposedly scientific re-classification of the service was sharply felt by civil servants. The resulting sense of grievance, if not sufficient in the Nova Scotian case to produce a militant response, emphasized the gulf between employees and management and lay as a reservoir of mistrust which was a potential well-spring of discontent.

The salary question became increasingly predominant as inflation worsened in the 1960s and civil servants lacked bargaining rights or organizations. The traditional wage disparity was now perceived as a discrimination and civil servants sought the remedy through collective bargaining. Consistent with the recommendations of two official bodies appointed to study labour legislation (Nova Scotia 1962; Nova Scotia 1963), the Trade Union Act was amended to bring the public service workers under the Act while civil servants continued to be excluded (Nova Scotia 1967). Shortly thereafter a Civil Service Joint Council was formed in Nova Scotia at a time when their counterparts in Quebec and in the Federal service had been granted collective bargaining, and a Royal Commission in New Brunswick had recommended similar rights, which were granted in 1968 (New Brunswick 1967). In that year a Royal Commission was appointed in Newfoundland and eventually supported bargaining legislation in that province for civil servants (Newfoundland 1972).

Departments under Cabinet responsibility still came under the Civil Service Act. Nova Scotia government employees did not receive bargaining rights until 1978 under the Civil Service Collective Bargaining Act and, even then, it was one of the most restrictive in the country, with numerous exclusions and arbitration as the sole means of dispute resolution. In the early 1970s, however, teachers had been given a separate Act which included the right to strike. The remainder of the employees in the public sector, including hospital and municipal workers, were granted rights under the Trade Union Act. Agency employees working for Boards and Commissions had been granted limited rights in 1956. Consistent with the recommendations of two official bodies appointed to study labour legislation in the province (Fact-Finding Body 1962; Select Committee 1963), the Trade Union Act was amended to bring these public agency workers under its jurisdiction.

While many of the rights of collective bargaining had been won in stages, each step of

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the process entailed a change in the memberships' conception of its relationship to the state and a new emphasis on its status as a body of employees. The high-light of this understanding and the event which precipitated a transformation in the leaderships of many unions, was the imposition of selective wage controls on government workers. The Liberal government announced in 1972 that fiscal restraint required the imposition of a five per cent ceiling on salary increases in the public sector. It was the weak response of the Executive of the Nova Scotia Civil Service Association to this provocation that led directly to a membership revolt and a massive turn-over of leadership.

The Executive of the Association voted overwhelmingly to reject the policy (NSGEA Minutes of Emergency Session, Provincial Executive Committee, 9 Feb. 1972, NSGEA Archives, 7: 3.7 4C), but almost immediately began to back-pedal. Responses elsewhere in Canada to similar selective policies varied with the characteristics of the employees involved and on their leadership, and in Nova Scotia the executive acted in the interests of the government. Through a controversial and biased campaign, which informed the civil servants they had either to accept the guidelines or go on illegal strike, members voted there to one to accept Johnson to Riley 28 April 1972, NSGEA Archives 9: 3.8.0.18). As the Association Newsletter informed them, the civil servant was also a citizen and taxpayer concerned about the 'Province's financial exigencies'. This placed a heavy burden of responsibility on the government employee, and they should do their part to ease the financial burden. Militancy had given way to patience 'and to a sympathetic appreciation of the Province's' position (NSGEA Newsletter, X, 1 (1972). This action, in the face of substantial pockets of militancy in the provincial hospital, the successes achieved nationally by the public sector workers and the escalation in the cost of living which meant the civil servant was accepting a wage cut, marked the low point of the Association's history. Within a year changes in leadership occurred and the new executive was prepared to take a more adversary approach to labour-management relations.

What the Association achieved in its traditional cap-in-hand approach to the government had been dependent on the political will of the governing party rather than on collective strength. In the other Canadian jurisdictions when bargaining legislation was first passed considerable advances were made as contracts became more uniform in language and benefits and as some of the more extreme inequalities between jurisdictions were lessened. As there was a subsequent decline in what the representatives were able to achieve in the absence of the minimal participation of the rank and file which is allowed under normal collective bargaining, direct action became necessary.

Elsewhere in Canada, the new found militancy in the public sector was more dramatic. By 1970 public sector strikes in Canada no longer occurred exclusively among municipal workers or employees of Boards and Commissions, but had spread to the so-called white collar occupations in health, education and the civil service. Since then public

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sector strikes have become an important ingredient in the Canadian class struggle. This new spirit of militancy, fostered by increasingly oppressive governments and persistent inflation, spread to Atlantic Canada. In this region, service employees (a composite group which includes government workers as a major component) have substantially increased their militancy. Although the total number of strikes remains lower than the Canadian average, the increase has been considerable since the middle 1960s.

Table 1

Proportion of Disputes and Days Lost in the Service Sector Relative to the Total Disputes and Days Lost, Atlantic Canada, 1969-1981

Date	No. of Disputes (%)	Days Lost (%)
1966	2.9	8.5
1967	8.9	1.3
1968	3.7	28.6
1969	9.8	0.5
1970	9.3	8.0
1971	22.6	12.3
1972	15.9	5.2
1973	26.9	8.0
1974	22.5	14.2
1975	32.4	21.9
1976	30.2	11.0
1977	35.6	40.0
1978	23.5	9.7
1979	31.6	34.4

Source: Labour Canada, Strikes and Lockouts in Canada (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1967-1982).

In Atlantic Canada, service employees (a composite figure which includes the public sector as a major component) have increased their proportion of strike activity even more dramatically than the Canadian average, although the difference results from a larger base number in 1966. (In Canada as a whole the increase was from 18 percent in 1966 to 35.6 percent in 1979).

Over the 1966-1979 period the proportion of all Canadian strikes taking place in the Atlantic provinces has remained relatively constant, peaking in 1972. The region accounts for about eight per cent of the Canadian labour force. While the total proportion of strikes is generally higher than this figure (between 9.7 and 19.2%), the region has the lowest proportion of estimated working time lost in the country. For example, in 1979 this figure was 0.12 per cent compared with 0.31 in Ontario and 0.61 in Quebec (Labour Canada 1980: 3). Although Nova Scotia has a larger workforce than New Brunswick and about one third larger than Newfoundland, it does not have a consistently higher level of trade union militancy. Newfoundland, which now frequently experiences a higher number of strikes than Nova Scotia, as does New Brunswick, have both generally reversed the situation in the early 1970s when they lagged behind. Similarly, the number of strikes in New Brunswick did not decline as precipitously as they did in Nova Scotia following the imposition of federal wage controls.

Table 2

Public Sector Strikes and Days Lost in Nova Scotia as Proportion of Total Strikes and Days Lost

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Date	Util.	Service	PubAd m	TotPub	% Pub	TotINS	DaysLo st	%Lost	NSLost
1966	0	0	0	0	0.0	34	0	0.0	53770
1967	0	1	0	1	2.8	36	30	0.0	69290
1968	0	1	0	1	3.1	32	110	0.6	18660
1969	3	0	2	5	8.6	58	720	0.8	86840
1970	2	0	1	3	4.8	62	21210	8.2	257240
1971	4	4	5	13	39.4	33	25250	21.5	117580
1972	3	4	3	10	40.0	25	12580	14.6	86020
1973	3	3	2	8	26.7	30	3530	1.7	211960
1974	7	1	4	12	22.2	54	2420	3.2	15430
1975	4	11	5	20	31.2	64	136960	50.2	272920
1976	0	3	2	5	22.7	22	44990	22.9	196680
1977	0	4	1	5	23.8	21	4840	21.1	22930
1978	2	5	5	12	44.4	27	13600	20.8	65390
1979	1	7	8	16	48.5	33	29610	73.1	40527

Source: Labour Canada, Strikes and Lockouts in Canada (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1968-1982).

Since 1971 in Nova Scotia, the public and service sector has contributed a significant proportion of the total number of strikes in the province. The number peaked in 1975. In that year lengthy strikes took place in the Telephone Industry (IBEW), among N.S. Liquor Commission Employees, in the Power Commission (IBEW), among school board maintenance personnel (CUPE) and among para-medical workers at the Pathology Institute in Halifax (NSGEA) (Para-Med Group 1975).

This last walk-out was the most dramatic. Employed under the Civil Service Act, these technicians were denied the right to strike. following the example of nurses in 1973 who had been in an identical position, the technicians adopted a mass resignation tactic. In the earlier case, the nurses had been granted their major demands after only a few days on the picket lines. In contrast, the government kept the para-medical workers on the pavement for a month. Despite an intransigent government intent on dividing the workers (they had initially offered higher salaried technicians a better

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settlement than the lower in an attempt to push the agreement through), with excellent local leadership and high spirit throughout, the technicians eventually returned en masse and accepted a compromise settlement.

It was in 1975 that the wage control programme was imposed by the federal government. State workers in all jurisdictions were brought under the Board's powers. As was true for the country as a whole, the immediate response of organized labour in Nova Scotia, including the government sector, was to reduce the level of militancy. It is only recently that the unions have recovered and the spirit of militancy has revived among the workers. Since 1979, important confrontations have developed among university maintenance workers in Halifax, school bus drivers in Digby (who have been on strike for over a year) and hospital workers represented by a 'common front' of a half dozen, often poorly coordinated, trade unions. In addition the Nova local of the Postal Workers Union is consistently one of the more militant and progressive in the country.

The movement which had the greatest potential for mobilizing the public service and for building a coalition with private sector labour bodies as well as sympathetic groups in the community, emerged in 1981 as a response to the government's threat to take away the right to strike from all public employees.

By 1979 the unions had recovered some of their militancy following the lifting of controls. Since then, more actions have been taken, among University caretakers (Thomson 1979), hospital workers (Clare 1977), and bus drivers in Digby (Earle 1983). In addition the Nova local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers is consistently one of the most militant in the country. Labour confrontations in the 1980s, however, have been hard fought. The conditions of struggle have changed, especially for those in the public sector (Panitch and Savitch 1982; Calvert 1983).

If this recent activity has high-lighted any significant aspects of the labour-capital-state relationship in Nova Scotia, it is, first, the arrogance of the state and second, the weakness of the Federation of Labour. This is the government that was able to undermine the attempts of the United Rubber Workers to unionize the three Michelin plants in the Province by amending the Trade Union Act to suit the multi-national (Labour's Side" Nov. 1982; Burgwin and Crawley 1983). Slow to leap on the union reform movement for its own employees, the Nova Scotia government--whether Liberal or Conservative--has been quick to adopt repressive legislation. Meanwhile the Federation of Labour has done nothing but expound rhetoric and engage in dramatic bouts of moral posturing. There is a fine tradition of class struggle unionism in industrial Cape Breton (Frank 1977; Cameron 1983; Mellor 1983), and pockets of militancy elsewhere (Reilly 1977; 1980; Calhoun and Lynk 1983; Barrett 1979; Sacouman 1979; Williams 1979), but there is no co-ordination and no organizational framework to sustain action. Public sector workers are taking an increasing share of the direct confrontation with management and the state, which reflects their special position vis-a-vis the current crisis in the state. But the special contradictions of state

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employment make them a potentially weak reed upon which to rely in the absence of the mobilization of the industrial working class and the potential community allies of labour.

The Crisis in the State

The viability of the Keynesian solution to economic crises has evaporated. Deficit financing provided, in theory, a necessary short-term boost for an otherwise sound economy, re-establishing the conditions of profitable investment and increasing tax revenues which could then be used to balance the budget, re-pay the debt and possibly expand social services. The premise upon which the affluent welfare state was gerry-built was, and remains, a healthy private enterprise economy. There had been money to expand social services beyond the minimum requirements of capitalism for a trained and not unhealthy workforce, to keep obsolescent plants open to support local economies and local workforces, and to maintain high levels of consumption.

The long-term crisis of capitalism, however, has been worsening and throughout the 1970s the now traditional remedies of pump priming and government deficits have become chronic. In 1970 the outstanding federal debt was only 25% higher than at the end of the Second World War. In the next decade it soared, expanding six-fold in 1982, reaching a record level (Burgwin 1982). The deficit had maintained services at a reasonably stable equilibrium, provided vast sums to bail out corporations, and generally postponed a severe recession for a decade. But massive borrowing is not a bottomless pit, especially in the context of a private enterprise economy. The crunch for the provinces came in the early 1980s when the federal government decided to cut back on transfer payments. The social sectors in provinces such as Nova Scotia had grown on the basis of financial under-writing from the federal government. When the 1981 budget reduced the level of transfer payments, the N.S. government was thrown into turmoil. Citing concern about the growing deficit, the amounts spent on education and health, the power subsidies and the growing debt of the Sydney Steel plant, both Standard and Poole as well as Moody Investors lowered the Province's credit rating, making it more difficult and expensive to borrow money in the international markets and finance the deficits. The "confidence of business" was being eroded. Even the banks, whose enormous profits in 1981 had prompted a federal commission of inquiry, faced difficulties as small and big businesses (such as National Sea/Nickerson) defaulted.

In this situation the approach of neo-conservative economists had considerable appeal. The federal Liberal government has not gone as far to redistribute income in favour of the wealthy and the corporations as some on the right would wish. Nevertheless, the outcome of the governments's policies has been to create a recession the depth of which has been unprecedented since the 1930s. Both unemployment and interest rates remain high, and the conditions for profitable reinvestment in Canada's economy seems to require that the former, if not the latter, must remain high. The contradiction of the state as agent for the reproduction of capitalism and for the reproduction of "society in

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general" are exacerbated despite the claims of the neo-conservatives that higher incomes for corporations and reduced income demands and standards of living for workers will lead to more investment and hence lower unemployment and higher wages in the long run (Labour Focus" Jan. 1982).

In periods of government restraint, it is the public sector worker who bears the brunt of the policies of restraint as an advanced expeditionary force (Balfour 1972), although the logic of the recession has meant that the hardships have spread to the private sector. The government sector wage bill is an important component of the share of national wealth going to labour, so a reduction in this one sector will have other ripple effects. The public sector is least restrained by market forces (although there are real boundaries to the freedom of governments to act in the context of a private sector economy) and it is also the area which can be used directly by the government to effect the economy overall and act as an example to other businesses. In 1980, as had been the case a decade previously, the public employee was singled out for special discriminatory treatment. However, the context had changed drastically. Rather than being on the crest of a wave of growth, prosperity and militancy, the public sector has gone through a decade of difficult strikes, retrenchment and opposition. They have seen public support eroded by a combination of government propaganda and real difficulties faced by the public in service strikes. They have been at the apex of the social crisis and the initial impulse to control and weaken the working class has public sector employees as its first target.

This has meant three policy directives: the threat to remove collective bargaining rights, including the right to strike (U.E. News" 24 August 1981); the imposition of discriminatory wage controls against public employees, and the reduction in the level of services afforded the public (Labour Focus" May 1983; Labour's Side" March 1983). Wage controls were applied in the mid-1970s at a time when the government knew they would be resisted. The Liberals even won an election partly on the promise not to impose controls. Because of this opposition, the imposition of controls followed a careful plan to create some semblance of legitimacy, primarily in the guise of a "wage and price" scheme. Even the Chronicle-Herald" admits that the latter aspect was ineffective. It did, however, create the appearance of equitability. Currently only the public sector is under legislated wage guidelines; the private sector workers are expected to follow the restraint voluntarily. This amounts in practice to a demonstration effect in which the employers use the government programme and the current recession to justify maintaining a hard line against their employees. The Liberals argued that pay restraint in the public sector was equitable at a time when private sector employees faced the prospects of unemployment and negotiations to give-back past concessions.

Before the imposition of the 6 and 5 programme, which also suspended collective bargaining--Treasury Board reserved for itself the right to change the conditions and terms of labour, including sick leave, vacations, overtime, work schedules and health

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and safety provisions (Chronicle-Herald" 6 July 1982)-- legislated wage guidelines had already been imposed on provincial government workers in British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, New Brunswick and Newfoundland. Ontario's Restraint Board had ordered roll-backs of some settlements, including one among the lowest-paid hospital workers in the province. In Alberta, where all public servants are deemed essential and denied the right to strike, workers faced the prospect of pay cuts in 1984. Alberta nurses, who had gone on strike twice in four years, had their right to strike removed and a twelve-month wage freeze imposed. In New Brunswick the Conservative government announced a policy of "zero" increases for public sector workers. Peckford's Newfoundland conservatives instituted the same program for two years, and included the fishing industry under the mandate. As had been the case a decade earlier, however, the most dramatic confrontations occurred in Quebec and British Columbia.

Confrontations in Quebec and British Columbia

In British Columbia the Social Credit Government imposed a "dirty dozen" bills giving, among other things, public sector employers the rights to fire at will, to roll back salaries up to 5%, and to remove bargaining rights. It ended rent controls and assistance to consumers, substantially reduced help to families and children and drastically revised human rights legislation. The response was powerful and significant. An unprecedented alliance of labour unions, social and church groups was formed (Palmer 1983). The largest protest rallies in the province's history were set in motion and two weeks of public sector strikes occurred, joined by secondary and university teachers in a powerful demonstration of unity. The contradictions within the Solidarity Coalition, however, were immediately apparent and they were used by the government to attain its more crucial ends. The hypothetical alliance between consumer groups and workers was broken by the public sector unions when they received some assurances that they would be able to consult with the government on layoffs, and when the government promised to modify the public services labour relations act (Labour Focus" Jan. 1984). The split, then, was between those who focussed on the narrow interests of public sector workers for an orderly reduction in services and those who were willing to fight to maintain or improve existing services. The latter group was undermined by the settlement. A further contradiction surfaced between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition. The NDP under Barrett tried to deflect opposition into the next election campaign and did not support the direct action. This was understandable in the light of his own government's earlier confrontations with labour. The upshot was that Solidarity disintegrated on the eve of a possible escalation of extra-parliamentary opposition, undermined by the labour bureaucrats and the politicians (Canadian Dimension" March 1984).

In Quebec the provocation from the government was equally intense. Here the difficulty was the failure of the unions to form a new Common Front as they had done a decade previously (Vaillancourt 1983). Although an escalating strike had been called in January 1983 in response to a demand that civil servants receive a 20% cut in pay for the first

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two months of the year, most unions did not respond and settled individually with the government. It was a stunning defeat for the labour movement in the province and a dismal end to the Common Front which had appeared in 1972 to represent a significantly new social movement.

Employer Offensive in Nova Scotia

In Nova Scotia, there is a long history of trade union militancy (Bell 1977). Although isolated episodes of exemplary resistance occur throughout the history of the province, such as the Lockport Lockout of 1937 (Calhoun and Lynk 1983) and the Canso Fishermens' Strike of 1970-71 (Cameron 1977), the tradition of union militancy in Nova Scotia extends farthest back among the miners of Cape Breton (see *People's History of Cape Breton* 1972; Macgillvray 1983). From the height of militancy in the 1920s, under the leadership of J. B. MacLachlan, the coal industry has been in trouble. The number of workers in the mines has shrunk from an earlier total of 12,000, who battled the companies at the end of World War One, to today's 3200 or so. Weakened numerically, the miners also face threats to the industry as a whole. In the late 1960s the Dominion Steel and Coal Company pulled out, potentially leaving the mines and the miners high and dry. Through the efforts of the United Mine Workers, the federal government intervened and organized the Cape Breton Development Corporation (DEVCO) which took over the running of the mines. The coal industry, then, was nationalized as a way to save it from extinction, but the threat remains despite the recent revival in the use of coal for generating electricity and the opening or reopening of some mines.

This resurgence of the industry also revived some of the spirit of militancy. The mines have always had more than their share of wild-cats as the miners walked off the job over collective grievances such as shift arrangements and health and safety violations. In 1981 UMW District 26 went on strike against DEVCO. The three-month strike was only a partial success. The international union had an empty strike fund and, despite paying about \$400,000 per year in dues to the U.S., the strikers were left with no strike pay from the UMW. This weakened the strike, but before the company managed to starve the workers out, two notable events emerged from the struggle. The miners' wives organized a strong and vocal group to support the strikers which was instrumental in giving the miners a chance to wage economic warfare. Second, the absence of support from the International led directly to a severe split in the ranks of the miners. The outcome had been a long strike, a poor settlement, and much bitterness. Into this vacuum stepped the Canadian Mineworkers Union which began an organizing raid against the UMW (Wanamaker 1983a, 1983b; MacKinnon 1983). This drive is now being rekindled for a third time, following two ballots in which the CMU had a majority of miners going into the vote and each time lost, the first time by 300 ballots. Subsequently with the disastrous fire in No. 26, and the prospect that the mine will never re-open, real conditions for militancy have been substantially eroded. Glace Bay is once again faced with the spectacle of receiving charity from more prosperous regions in the form of donations of clothing. The result, in the short run, has been a

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weakened and divided local. The mineworkers still represent the heart of the union movement in Nova Scotia, but they are mostly pre-occupied with internal issues and divisions.

The steelworkers in Cape Breton are in an equally precarious position. The steel company has been on the skids for a long time (Crawley and Desrosiers 1977). With the exception of the rail shop and periodic orders which makes the plant break even (if the massive debt servicing is not taken into consideration), Sysco is operating with out-dated equipment. Since becoming a provincial corporation, the annual deficit has been covered by the province which has refused to allocate the money needed to fully modernize the plant (Crawley 1982). A Save Sydney Steel Movement had been successful in pressuring the government to keep the plant open and keep it under public ownership, but this short-term respite has not prevented the continuation of the "run down/shut down" process (Sacouman 1981: 4). the government is slowly trying to kill the plant. In the process, it is the workers who are dying. Old and dangerous equipment means severe accidents, such as the recent explosion which killed and injured several steelworkers. Although the militancy of these workers also goes a long way back to the first decades of this century, until recently the plant had been strike-free for decades. The last attempt of the steelworkers to use strength in their negotiations came to nothing because the plant was then shut-down. Objectively the traditional working class in the province is not in a position to fight even sectional battles and win.

Other conditions in the province similarly compel workers to react conservatively to government provocations. Long strikes have become a trademark of the province's recent labour history. Everywhere, it seems, employers are on the offensive. The paperworkers of Scott Maritimes were kept on the picket line for half a year, causing considerable hardships for the workers and their families as well as disruptions to the local economy (Earle and Caine 1983). The Digby school-bus drivers strike was perhaps the most important example of the severity of the employers' offensive. The most remarkable thing about it was that the workers manned the picket lines for three years and demonstrated a determination to win against all odds (Earle 1983). It is this spirit in individual struggles that is the raw material of the labour movement. The organizational question is whether it can be expanded to become an expression of a more general trade union consciousness (leaving aside the issue of class consciousness). The School Board had been found guilty of unfair labour practices but the Trade Union Act did not specify appropriate remedies. It was not until municipal elections removed the most anti-union councillors from office that a settlement was reached. The Minister of Labour is now making a concession that the Act will be changed to give the Labour Relations Board more power to compel employers to bargain in good faith. Given the track record of the Buchanan government, any changes are unlikely to be substantial.

But Digby quickly ceased to be an isolated episode. The Keddy/ Glades nursing home

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strike lasted more than two years during which there appeared to be no end, either from the point of view of workers morale or of employer intransigence. The 73 striking workers maintained their picket lines, held benefit dances, organized secondary picketing at a building site in Amherst owned by Glades, and survived the disappointment caused by a change in ownership mid-way through the dispute which proved to be no less intransigent than Keddy (Clare and Clare 1984).

Not to be out-done in anti-labour actions, EPA's Harry Steele was prepared to alienate everyone, including the Newfoundland provincial government, as long as he maintained control over his airline at least up to the point where he made an extremely advantageous sale of the "regional airline" to CP (Burgwin 1983; Rowe 1983). This dispute extends back well over a year. The pilots, represented by CALPA, were on strike for five and a half months during which time EPA hired 34 replacement pilots. Since CALPA agreed that the pilots would return to work, the Canada Labour Relations Board has ruled twice that EPA was guilty of unfair labour practices and was ordered to reinstate the former pilots. While EPA's first appeal of this ruling had been successful, the second provided for the rehiring of the pilots. What this has meant is that many of the former strike-breakers continue to work.

The upshot of these recent developments in Nova Scotia and elsewhere in the country is that workers are increasingly on the defensive. One aspect of the current crisis is a "dramatic shift towards reliance on coercion to secure the subordination of trade unions to the new imperatives of capital accumulation" (Studies in Political Economy, No. 11: 49). The recession and the high level of unemployment has meant that, from a material point of view, workers have lost more than they have gained in these disputes.

Whether they have gained considerably more in terms of trade union or class consciousness is a second question, but the evidence in Nova Scotia is not encouraging. One key fact about these disputes is that they have involved isolated groups of workers striking over immediate work-place issues. Their militancy reveals an implicit possibility of extending their union consciousness to a more general concern and awareness but this potential needs to be drawn out by effective leadership, and opportunities have to exist for any new found union consciousness to be expressed. The formal Nova Scotia labour movement, represented most importantly by the Federation of Labour, has been vocal in its support of these strikes and has put in appearances at the appropriate times on the picket lines. But they have failed to organize significant support and seem to be content with moral posturing.

Coalition Building

One area in which there has been some building of coalitions across the country is in the area of public service employment (Hartman 1983). The most prominent examples, I have argued above, have been in Quebec with the Common Front and in B.C. with Operation Solidarity. In the latter case the coalition went beyond labour unions per se and included a host of allies such as church groups. In Nova Scotia the creation of broadly-based coalitions to oppose government restraint is still in the conceptual stage.

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Events elsewhere in the country have dramatically indicated that such coalitions have their own internal contradictions which can break them apart. Nevertheless, it is among some of the public sector unions in Nova Scotia that there has been some efforts at unity.

Coalitions of unions are generally based on interests which are shared. All unions have an interest in the maintenance of the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the 1976 day-of-protest was a multi-union effort based on a common interest. One of the most significant cleavages in the labour movement occurs along the public/private sector axis. This is so for a very substantial material reason: much of the public sector is sustained out of money taken individually from tax payers. Consequently the threat to remove bargaining rights from public sector workers may often have at least some degree of passive support from other workers. Their own longer-term interests may suggest the importance of defending the rights of all workers.

One effect of the control programme aimed specifically at public sector workers has been to remove their rights to bargain collectively and to strike. Federal union leaders are in a dilemma because an effective response will require alliances and solidarity, but they have been publically sceptical of their ability to lead a general walk-out in the country. Consequently the burden of militancy has fallen on those unions or locals with most experience and confidence, which provides a possible setting for a Reagan-type solution to an illegal strike: massive firings. However, even if the strike involved the postal workers, a persistent target of government media propaganda and consequently misunderstood by many rank and file workers, the Canadian labour movement would respond with some force, in contrast to the implicit acquiescence of the AFL-CIO to the dismissal of the air traffic controllers.

The right to strike in the public sector is generally a very controversial matter (Johnston 1978; Katz and McDermott 1979; Levine 1977). It is argued by some that strikes "have become such a normal, legitimate, routinized part of legitimation" that they "are ineffective" and "ultimately of little value" (Vaillancourt 1982:30). In the context of the need for profound social change, the possibilities of the labour movement in general are restricted. It is one thing to recognize the difficulties of essential services strikes in the present conjuncture, and quite another thing to provide a "left-wing" legitimation for the removal of this right. The same kinds of arguments have appeared in the past with respect to trade unionism in general, which has been regarded as only one more oppressive institution, fully integrated into the control structure of capitalism. The problem is in only seeing one side of a contradictory situation, only the "functional" or unintended outcomes, and never the possibilities inherent in the movement for reforms. Recognizing the divisive effects of public sector strikes is important and indicates the need to use the tactic skilfully and be cognizant of the struggle for public opinion. But the demand for public services is not a simple datum. The public response to service strikes is not automatically negative. Situations of contradictory interests do not have a necessary and single evaluative component; no single ideology, politics or response

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must be determined to occur. People can respond to public service strikes in many ways, even when they are directly affected. Recipients of services pay for them, directly or indirectly, in some fashion more or less willingly. They are interested in the quality of these services and the quality of the relationship with those who provide the services. The legitimacy of the workers' claims, the perceived intransigence of the government or employer, the level of personal hardship experienced by the workers, all enter this public evaluation for which the outcome is not given. Hence the desire for a new, progressive unionism which would unite clients and employees in a campaign for the maintenance of quality services at a price that will secure them. In Nova Scotia, however, this objective has been little more than an idea. At best some tentative steps have been taken to create united action around a coalition of public sector unions. This unity has emerged against a background of sectionalism and a history of raiding. As the various associations have evolved towards more union-like bodies, however, the conditions of direct competition have given way to some common objectives and alliances. Still, differences remain. The experience of joint actions is an 80s phenomenon, and this paper is concerned with analysing the outcome of attempts to forge some temporary alliances among public sector unions in Nova Scotia.

Campaign to Free Collective Bargaining

In 1981 corporate and government voices were raised threatening to remove the right to strike from so-called "essential services". The Canadian Chamber of Commerce had argued for the removal of this right, a position which was echoed by the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities which called on the government "to end the right to strike in essential services" (Mail Star" 14 September 1981). Several government ministers, including Gerald Sheehey, Minister of Health, Ron Giffin, Chairman of the Treasury Board and Harry How, Attorney General, spoke in support of the proposal. Similar calls came from potential allies of labour. The Maritime Conference of the United Church expressed great concern about strikes in essential services and urged governments to find an alternative "in correlation with the workers" and "with the provision that human rights of labour not be eliminated" (Chronicle-Herald" 31 May 1982). A similar sentiment existed within certain sectors of the union movement. Joe Ross, President of the Police Association of Nova Scotia, asked that the government consider replacing the right to strike with compulsory arbitration. This was after the police in the province had been very successfully in using the strike selectively to advance their memberships interests

The issue had come to a head in 1981 during a province-wide hospital strike. Demonstrating the rudimentary beginnings of a unity which had not existed previously, five public sector unions formed a united bargaining committee to approach the individual hospital boards on behalf of 7500 non-medical workers in the province. The unions included CUPE, IUOE, CBRT, PSAC and some independent associations. Their demand for a 27% rise for two years would still have left them the second-lowest group in the country, next to employees in New Brunswick who were just beginning to

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negotiate. Despite problems of coordination, selective back-to-work orders (the federal employees at the Camp Hill Hospital were out for only two days), and differences in trade union consciousness among the various workers, from North Sydney to Yarmouth to Amherst, the strike lasted at some places for three weeks. In contrast to the non-teaching school staff in New Brunswick, who went on strike and eventually were forced back to work by legislation, there was not a large publicity campaign against the strikers. Their grievances were perceived as relatively legitimate, essential services were maintained and no deaths were attributed to the action.

One of the outcomes of the strike, however, was to give a renewed impetus to those who wished to deny the right to strike in essential services. In December 1981 Premier John Buchanan announced that his government was seriously considering replacing the right to strike with compulsory arbitration. This would affect at least 30,000 public workers in the province, including nurses, firemen, hospital technicians, caretakers, teachers, police and municipal workers. The official representatives of the labour movement in the province reacted swiftly. Former President of the NSFL, Gerald Yetman, said the government "will be confronted with more opposition than it ever imagined if it brings in legislation to limit the right to strike....The campaign launched in opposition to the Michelin Bill will look like a Sunday school picnic compared to opposition to any new legislation" (Chronicle-Herald" 19 December 1981). On December 22 an organizing meeting was held with representatives from the NSFL and eight of the affected public sector unions. They formed a United Front for Free Collective Bargaining and drew up a plan of action including an advertising and lobbying campaign and a conference scheduled for February 6. According to NSFL President Chester Sanford: "Labour will be 'much better prepared' to fight changes in collective bargaining legislation than it was to oppose amendments to the Trade Union Act" (the Michelin Bill). "Strikes", he argued, "have never caused any major problems in the province....Little time has been lost." (Chronicle-Herald" 6,8 January 1982).

Buchanan later agreed that Nova Scotia "has not fared too badly" with service strikes, and pledged "to tread softly in taking that right away". He announced that his government had no intention of introducing legislation at that time. In the Speech from the Throne in February 1982, reference was made to an investigation of unspecified aspects of labour legislation, implying that the terms of reference would be broader than only the question of the right to strike in essential services. Among labour circles, the United Front was credited with having been "sufficient to cause the Premier to backstep" (N.S. Worker" Jan.- Feb. 1982:5).

Again the issue for the labour movement became one of the specificity of the goals of the United Front. The immediate issue appeared to be smoothed over by the Premier's assertion that a study would replace quick legislation. But in its original terms of reference, the United Front had a number of more general goals of interest to the labour movement. According to President Sanford, "the goal of the United Front is not only to fight off bad legislation. We want to push forward and win long promised

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changes in Nova Scotia labour laws, including reform of workers' compensation laws, legislation protecting workers' health and safety, enactment of collective bargaining rights for fishermen and highways workers, etc.'" (Ibid.: 1).

There was no agreement within the United Front on whether these wider issues came under the terms of reference of the Front. Some unions expressed considerable militancy in arguing in favour of the more general goals. Al Cunningham told CUPE that "workers may have to march to province house to 'stop the government from passing legislation that will tear us apart....We may have to shut down the entire province to prevent passage of any bill that will take away any of our bargaining rights. If not we are dead'" (Chronicle-Herald" 3 June 1982). Others neither expressed militancy nor supported the general goals. At the initial organizing meeting representatives from the N.S. Teachers' Union had been most eager to talk to the Ministers to make sure that there was a definite attempt to bring in restrictive legislation. They expressed the narrow focus and put less emphasis on using the United Front to promote the wider issues of trade unionism in the province. For some, then, the struggle was a single-issue affair. For others the United Front was a tool to organize unions and members to apply direct pressure on the government on a number of labour issues. N.S. Nurses' Union President Lois Hall expressed this latter sentiment in a special supplement of the Nova Scotia Worker: "This victory should be the beginning of a movement aimed at promoting positive changes to the labour relations system in this Province rather than a one-shot effort at preventing or postponing unfavourable legislation. To achieve a better labour relations system requires drastic attitudinal changes on the part of rank and file union members, the general public, and ultimately those elected representatives who have the power to initiate changes. Attitudes are developed over a long period of time through the educational system, the media and through the experiences of individuals". If the required time, money, public relations and advertising were not done, "organized labour will be lucky if the status quo is maintained, the odds certainly appear to be against it" (Jan.- Feb. 1982: 6).

Wage Controls and Bill 71

In addition to attempting to limit the right to strike, a measure which was shuffled off the political agenda and handed over to a commission, the government responded to the crisis by cutting expenditures directly through a dual program of wage controls and lay-offs affecting public sector workers. Given the perceived relationship between the government's deficit and both high interest and inflation rates, the short-term government response has been to adopt austerity measures, which has meant a reduction in government spending where it will apparently do the least harm to businesses. Here the state is caught in a very contradictory position because policies of restraint, cut-backs and a balanced budget--exactly the script of the state's disastrous response to the 1929 crash--have a depressing impact on the level of business activity. The state is an important consumer of business products and in Nova Scotia, restraint has meant a sharp reduction in capital expenditures for schools and health care

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facilities, which has done some damage to local economies. Furthermore, money transferred to individuals expands purchasing power and sales. Recently, optimism over the prospects of off-shore oil--more hype than reality--have fuelled a minor building boom which has kept the NS economy afloat. But this is a precarious base for economic growth.

In the early 1980s several provinces had implemented wage control programmes designed exclusively for the public sector. In Nova Scotia, however, Buchanan was still "ruling out" the imposition of controls on provincial employees. He argued that settlements in Nova Scotia were "already within the guidelines". Such controls were acceptable in other provinces where "labour and management...have [not] been able to reach reasonable settlements" (Mail Star" 18 June 1982). This may have been consistent with a position he had taken a year earlier, but it was about to change suddenly as a result of conditions within as well as outside Nova Scotia.

The November 1981 federal budget had contained provisions to limit the amount of money transferred to the provinces. These reductions were subsequently passed into legislation when the provinces failed to reach agreement with Ottawa. With the June 1982 budget there was a substantial shortfall in provincial revenue, since 40% of the budget of the Atlantic provinces comes from Ottawa. This decline was exacerbated by lower revenue generated from corporate taxes and sales taxes, a measure of the effects of the recession on businesses and consumers. This came on top of the decision of the international money markets to lower the provincial rating. That same month, Finance Minister MacEachen announced the imposition of selective wage controls on 500,000 federal employees. He called it the "six-and-five" programme and asked provincial governments to take a similar approach with their employees.

Buchanan used the federal announcement in order to reverse his position on controls on provincial employees. He argued that the federal programme had forced his government to take a "thorough look" at the question of civil service salary increases, although "he felt the Nova Scotia civil service 'has not been over dramatic in wage demands'" (Chronicle-Herald" 1 July 1982). Two days later the "thorough look" had apparently been taken. The 6/5 programme was extended to the 3500 non-unionized civil servants. The programme was not extended to the 16,500 unionized provincial employees, but the intention was to hold down salary increases for this group as well. According to Buchanan, this would not be difficult: "the government could refuse to negotiate with them, or use legislation to extend existing contract agreements with wage restrictions" (3 July 1982). The union response, again, was immediate. Chester Sanford declared that the wage limit would be resisted by civil servants. NSGEU President Greg Blanchard argued that controls would destroy collective bargaining. Given that Nova Scotian workers were already paid less than those in other provinces, he said, controls in N.S. would lead to an exodus of some groups of civil servants. The NSGEU planned to initiate a publicity campaign and take out advertisements comparing the salaries of civil servants in Nova Scotia with those elsewhere in the country. (With

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this plan the union employed a tactic utilized by Levesque in Quebec to demonstrate how well off provincial workers were in that province). The Director of the Institute of Public Affairs, the sponsor of the joint labour-management study group which had been abandoned by labour as a protest against the Michelin Bill, argued that the absence of cooperation and consultation would "increase the already high level of hostility that exists between labour and government" (Chronicle Herald" 3 July 1982).

The public sector wage controls were only one part of a double thrust. The second stage of this offensive was to threaten cuts to government services. The first step was the announcement of a moratorium on the hiring of civil servants to fill vacancies pending a review of department expenditures and of some civil service positions. Buchanan said: "There is no question there will be lots of cuts", although they would "not be finalized until more information has been received from Ottawa" (9 July 1982). On the next day he announced that the PC government was "embarking on a program of harsh expenditure cutbacks which will probably affect services and programs and which will include layoffs among government employees". There was no guarantee that casuals would be laid off before permanent workers, thereby establishing a fall-back position for negotiating with the unions. Subsequently the NSGEU was able to obtain the concession that permanent employees would be laid-off only as a last resort. In addition to threatening lay-offs, Health Minister Sheehy advanced the idea of introducing user-pay schemes including a per diem fee for the use of hospital beds. The legal aid budget was slashed and one-third of the total employed, were laid off over the next two months. These precipitous actions were taken when the House was not in session.

The NSGEU met in "emergency session", but their approach was conciliatory. Although there was talk about "gearing up for the struggle", the main point was that the union wished to be consulted about the actual layoffs before they were announced. Union President Greg Blanchard accepted that it was simply good management to look for areas for possible spending cuts and agreed that the province had "a right to terminate civil servants" (21 July 1982). Very quickly, however, the government deflated the restraint balloon and began to back-track. The government began to talk about the necessity of being "thorough", of "moving carefully" and about "people's lives". Apparently the details would take some time to iron out. They agreed to meet with NSGEU and gave assurances that massive layoffs would be unlikely. Some people would be redundant, but the numbers would not be large. The concern of the labour movement had resulted from the Ministers' comments being "taken out of context." As NDP leader Alexa McDonough put it: "Almost as fast as threatening announcements are made, they are withdrawn and admitted to be exaggerated and premature" (24 July 1982).

In November Buchanan gave some indication of what the labour movement could expect. In contrast to what came later, his remarks were deceptive. Plans did not include imposition of the six-and-five guidelines; no permanent civil servant would be

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laid off and reductions in staff would occur through attrition (Chronicle-Herald" 14 August 1982). The public rejection of controls, however, was only a bargaining tactic to be used against Ottawa. The province was planning its own wage restraint program for civil servants. When announced, it was the usual government "bombshell." A six-per-cent ceiling was placed on all public sector salaries for the year, affecting 45,500 employees in the province. Any collective agreement that had been signed prior to September 15 would be honoured until its expiration, but any new agreements had to be concluded by February 28th, or the government would impose a settlement by legislation, continuing the previous contract while allowing a pay increase of only six per cent. In addition, cuts were earmarked for Education, Health, Social Services, Transportation and Universities. The Attorney General's Department applied a good proportion of its budget reductions to legal aid. Meanwhile, the Chairman of the Management Board complained that the Board "found its cutting hands somewhat tied with the government's commitment to the unions not to dismiss any government employees as part of the restraint program" (28 September 1982).

The trade union response was to reactivate the United Front which had been put into moth balls when the government had removed the immediate threat to impose restrictions on the right to strike. It had been resurrected during the summer and had organized a rally and demonstration to coincide with the meeting of the First Ministers in Halifax during August. With the government's Order-in-Council imposing restraint, a new focus for activity brought with it a renewed response. Members of the Front, announcing that they would fight the ceiling "with everything we have", Promised to conduct a "united fight". Unions representing the 45,000 public sector workers "vowed to ignore the ultimatum" and collectively refused to negotiate with the government. They argued that it was better to have the government impose restraint by legislation than appear to willingly acquiesce to government pressure. Despite these strong words and sentiments, the Front did not stay united for long. Before much time passed, individual unions settled with the government and broke the unity of the Front.

The first to break ranks was the NSTU which had opened talks prior to the expiration of their contract. They quickly reached a tentative agreement and submitted it to their 11,400 members for ratification. This was the first crack in the union front. The other unions, including NSGEU, only one half of whose 8,000 members had open contracts, all "refused to negotiate a new, restraint-minded pact before the end of the month" (24 February 1982). At the beginning of the struggle they had agreed not to reopen contracts for early negotiations. Very quickly, however, NSGEU waltzed through the crack made by NSTU. Agreement was reached with all 9 bargaining units and the executive recommended acceptance to the membership. A third agreement was reached by 2,000 highways workers represented by CUPE. The United Front was "taken aback" and Sanford, expressing "surprise" at the settlements, pledged that the Front would continue its fight "against the government over the restraint program and the removal of collective bargaining rights" (26 February 1982).

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The result of these defections was that the government was able to claim "a majority win in its battle to apply government wage restraint guidelines". Nevertheless, 20,000 workers had not signed agreements. These were primarily hospital and municipal workers. The government relaxed its strict deadline hoping to avoid use of legislation and have unions voluntarily submit to controls. These plans were undermined early in April when the government announced that there would be further cuts to the money given to the municipalities. This heightened the resistance of these employers in their negotiations with the public sector unions. These bargaining difficulties, coupled with the unions' resolve to force a legislated settlement, forced the government's hand. In May Bill 71 was announced, imposing wage restraint on the 20,000 public sector workers who had still not settled. The United Front had not achieved its short-term goal of preventing government interference in the collective bargaining process.

The United Front had been torn apart by an internal contradiction between the general demands of the unions as a whole and the sectional interests of the individual unions which composed the Front. One of the problems was that the legislated settlement would effectively reimpose the previous contract, plus six per cent. This would mean that unions would lose all the non-monetary benefits they had won through bargaining up to that point, such as sick-leave or union security. While some employers stalled for time, it was to the government's interest to have the unions reach agreements. This also met the sectional interests of individual unions some of which put their specific gains ahead of solidarity with the United Front. For example, NSGEU's Blanchard expressed pleasure that most of his union's bargaining objectives had been reached. He was able to argue that the fact his union accepted a contract which gave poorly- paid employees a raise of 11% and well-paid employees only a raise of 3% "proves our membership is willing to put aside individual demands for the good of everyone" (22 March 1983). Unfortunately for the United Front, "everyone" did not include other public sector workers in the province.

A further problem was the fatalism of some of the union leadership. While promising to fight restraint with "everything", Blanchard said "the reality of the situation is that the government will legislate a six-per-cent increase and his union will be forced to accept it." Although the NSGEU would make it "as hot as we can" for government, "after legislation is passed we'll pack our bags and go home" (19 November 1982). Earlier he had responded to the possibility of the imposition of cutbacks and departmental reviews by saying that it sounded like "good management" (8 July 1982). He was worried because, if controls were imposed, "our executive will have to deal with it and with 9,000 angry and frustrated government employees" (30 June 1982). Rather than seeing the discriminatory attacks on the public sector as an opportunity to mobilize the membership, it was seen as adding to executive headaches and as a threat to the union hierarchy, at whom much of the worker discontent would be directed.

After signing the settlement, the NSGEU did not have long to wait to see how well the government would respect its previous word. Thirty-two vocational school instructors

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were laid off, causing moral outrage among members of the union executive who claimed that they had negotiated with restraint and on the understanding that permanent employees would not be laid off. At best NSGEU was able to get a number of the laid-off employees transferred to other jobs.

Conclusion

During the early 1970s, a strong case was made for the view that public sector workers straddled the fault line of the contemporary economic crisis and consequently represented a progressive force in the labour movement. Whatever potential they had for occupying this role, however, has been undermined by a combination of government propaganda, economic recession and the very real powers of legislation and legitimation vested in governments.

In Nova Scotia there is a combination of exceptional local level militancy coupled with a general absence of a wider trade union consciousness. Long and bitterly fought strikes are fought at various points in the province--often among public sector employees--with little concrete support from other workers or potential allies in the province. The heart of the industrial proletariat has also become one component of the public sector, through nationalization of the mines and provincialization of Sydney Steel. But this has occurred in the context of a seemingly permanent decline which tends to emphasize the overt expression of instrumental interests and immediate trade union consciousness.

Among public sector unions there is some basis for united action. This paper has attempted to place the recent formation of a united front by public sector workers in the context of this general situation of employer offensive and worker retrenchment. I have argued that the Nova Scotian government is at least as blatant as any in demonstrating its class character. The recent free enterprise solution to the crisis in the fishery is a recent blatant example. This direct and obvious subservience to capital is something that needs pointing out. But it is not all that needs emphasis, and other aspects of the labour-capital-state triad are important for analysis and political practice. In particular it is useful to include space for the consensual model of the state.

Within the various competing conceptions of the state which emerged in the early 1970s, one notion with some considerable utility was the functional argument that the state served the potentially opposite functions of coercion and legitimacy. I accept the political importance of emphasizing the coercive nature of the state and its defence of dominant group interests. I also agree that the state has become increasingly coercive with respect to labour. This coercion, as Swartz and Panitch have argued, has changed. Early in this century, coercion took the form of haphazard and sporadic use of force, epitomized by sending the army into the Cape Breton coal towns in the 1920s to provoke and then control the miners. In the present, coercion is becoming institutionalized, for example, with legal penalties including fines and jail sentences for non-compliance with the new collective bargaining laws. It is a question of systematization, coherence and rationality.

Because it is these developments however, the change is not only a return to coercion.

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The incorporation of restrictive laws and repressive penalties brought systematically under the rule of law gives them an aura of consent. The state will always resort to extraordinary powers sanctioning political intervention during periods of threatening social crises, so there will always be some element of inconsistency and sporadic enforcement. But the direction of evolution appears to be towards making these interventions normal.

It is one thing to legalize the right to strike in the public sector, and then legislate it away in an ad hoc manner in case after case by extraordinary legislation. It is another thing to legislate away this new right, once this becomes normal, have the new institutionalized rules be accepted as the new rule of law, and then enforce them through the legal channels. The parallel I have in mind is the banning of wild-cat strikes during the terms of a contract. This form of working class defence has become illegitimate in the wider meaning of the term. Such repressive legislation would amount to a further erosion of workers' rights and, perhaps more importantly, workers' normal exercise of dissent and collective refusal.

Through institutionalization, then, consent comes to incorporate a greater degree of coercion. So, while the analytical distinction between constraint and consent is important, in some circumstances there is consent for coercion, acquiescence in the face of coups d'etat, acceptance of the peace-time imposition of the War Measures Act, implicit endorsement of the American invasion of small Caribbean islands, and so on. What this suggests is the importance of emphasizing the need to protest the exceptional uses of coercion and defence of the existing rights--with respect to the case study, retaining the right to relatively free collective bargaining.

Another reason it is useful to remember the importance of manufacturing consent is in relation to the process with which rights are taken away. During dramatic confrontations the state can be visibly seen to be intervening in the interests of capital (although complications of national legitimations obscures this point). Often, however, the loss of rights is a back-room game in which the state entices compliance with certain concessions. Perhaps during periods of prosperity the available rewards are more numerous, but in periods of retrenchment and restructuring, the needs of labour are acute and the immediate costs of combativeness are great. So there may be overwhelming objective pressures to accept accommodation, acquiesce to pay ceilings, help administer lay-offs, as long as seniority is protected thereby protecting the union as an organization; in short, to give in to the new labour policy in return for short-term benefits. An example in Nova Scotia concerns the weaknesses of the Labour Relations Board, which were underscored by the disasters of the Digby and now the Keddy/Glades strikes. Consequently there is now talk from the N. S. government of a review of the Act. Here is a potential carrot for the labour movement.

The case study which I began to describe in this paper also gives an example of changes in the labour-state relationship. One interpretation of the apparent success of the United Front-- the government declined to bring in restrictive legislation about the

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right to strike--is that the state has decided to replace ad hoc and precipitous changes with longer range, more rational and equally threatening changes. So it has been announced that there will be a comprehensive review of the Trade Union Act. In retrospect, there was no need to impose legislation at the time. The hospital strike was over, and in the absence of tremendous public disapproval of public sector unions at the time, removing the right to strike would have been blatant and discriminatory. From the point of view of the state, it is better to manufacture the appearance of consent, to give certain concessions in return for more strict guide-lines and regulations on labour. An example may be the attempt to have the public sector unions acquiesce to compulsory arbitration in return for state guarantees that the whittling down of the public service will be by attrition or, at worst, by seniority.

The final point to make is that such a trade-off is far more complicated than a simple sell-out of the workers by trade union leadership. It involves real issues of particular versus general as well as short-term versus long-term interests. Again, one of the main points in the case study was that divisions in the United Front were brought about by unions meeting members particularistic and short-term interests.

The brief introduction to the transformation of trade union consciousness among civil servants in Nova Scotia demonstrates the need to relate structural position with tradition and history, and to assess the complex interplay between membership and leadership. Although it contains pockets of militancy, and hospital technicians come readily to mind, the Nova Scotian civil service is not in the forefront of militant labour in the province. This is partly a reflection of local conditions inter-mixed with the service ethic in its pro-state form and with the real benefits, such as job security, which government employees have won in the past. While the threatened loss of these privileges may have a radicalizing effect on civil servants, the direction this radicalism takes will be determined by the economic and political context. In the absence of effective left leadership, a conservative response is a definite possibility. Anything that serves to further divide public from private sector workers feeds this response. This potential unity is weakened both by those who implicitly or explicitly support the removal of the right to strike from essential services, and by those who fail to recognize the constraints imposed by the contradictions of public employee unionism.

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