As the next labour-management conflict in the public sector approaches, it will expose the basic dilemma which state workers have faced for the last ten years. Everywhere in advanced capitalist economies - with the exception of Austria and the Nordic countries - the outbreak of economic crisis in the 1970s, the rise of political conservatism, and challenges to the welfare state have all brought an end to the postwar system of labour relations and undermined the effectiveness of traditional strikes in the public sector.

The dual crisis of the economy and the welfare state threatens to halt progress towards the establishment of 'security' for workers, which has been the cornerstone of union success since the Great Depression. These crises thereby challenge classic union strategies. The context of hostility has provoked an urgent search by public sector unions for new ways of asserting themselves. Unions are trapped between the public, which tends to regard state services as an unconditional right provided by ungrateful servants, and the state, which because of its role as both employer and legislator can put an end to strikes which were previously legal. As a result, public sector unions face a difficult choice between continuing to strike 'illegally' -

an increasingly costly action - or simply accepting that the balance of power does not favour them, that negotiations have failed, and that they must take the employer's final offer. It is hardly surprising, then, that public sector unions since the late 1970s (after 1983 in Quebec) have experienced a crisis of confidence which has simultaneously eroded the relationship between the unions and the public and between the leadership and the rank and file.

The challenge for unions now is to maintain some credibility as the representative of progressive forces at a time when the state so easily disarms them of their principal weapon. In the new conservative political climate, which undermines notions of the social role of the labour, this strategic dilemma has intensified. As delegates to the International Congress of Public Sector Unions in 1983 clearly articulated, unions feel more and more often that they must choose between two types of demands, which had not previously been in zero-sum relationship. They confront a choice between their membership's 'pure and simple' interests in working conditions and more social and transformational goals. Unions now have greater difficulty anchoring their 'corporatist', or particularist, demands in a project of social change.

Concern with this strategic dilemma has led several public sector unions in France, Australia, the United States, Canada and Quebec to reject short-term tactics in favour of more promising medium-term strategies. These involve a dual objective. The first is to recreate solidarity between the public and state workers. Reconstitution of this tie, destroyed by state strategy and by poorly-conceived union tactics in the past, will then provide a new source for union power, which is the second objective.

The 'positive strike' is the label for such efforts at strategic regeneration. Teachers, nurses, bus and metro drivers, hospital and university support staff, skilled workers in the electrical industry and civil servants in Australia, Great Britain, France, the United States and Canada have produced this more refined tool for industrial action. The idea has four basic elements: 1) Classic strikes can no longer achieve collective bargaining goals because the state deploys a judi-
cial and legislative arsenal to prevent successful strikes; 2) Suppliers and clients share a natural interest in the quantity and quality of public services. Unionized workers and the public form and must be seen to form a single community; 3) With a minimum of strategic imagination it is possible to undermine the stance of the state-as-employer while saving citizens from the worst inconveniences of traditional strikes; 4) The implementation of this new strategic perspective has the added advantage of recreating consultative ties between the public and unions.

The ‘positive strike’ is less a fixed strategy than an approach to strategy which is infinitely adaptable to different national contexts and sectors. For example, in August 1989 the workers in the Melbourne public transport system did not collect fares. They refused to deprive riders of this service although they were battling the state government over changes in the accident compensation system. In solidarity with the drivers, the combined electrical trades unions selectively reduced electricity to private businesses but maintained provision to homes, hospitals, and schools. In addition, construction workers walked off building sites of government projects, while continuing to work on selected others.

We can point to numerous other examples as well. Teachers in France, rather than striking in the usual way, closing the schools, and thereby incurring the anger of parents, kept the schools open but refused to perform administrative duties. They also informed parents directly about what was at issue in the labour-management conflict and set up special day-long programmes to discuss community and union matters with their students. In this way the schools stayed open but the unionists controlled the definition of the conflict.

The Vancouver bus drivers provide another example. In several of their strikes they have refused to collect fares and have run the buses for free. Australian nurses in 1986 (and British nurses earlier in the decade) were similarly creative. Threatened by the institutionalization of temporary contract positions, blockages to career advancement, and job cutbacks because of privatization, uniformed nurses
went door-to-door in neighbourhoods most likely to be affected by cutbacks. They also held informational meetings in shopping centres, warning that the national health system was being dismantled. The strikes they did hold were rotating ones, announced well enough in advance so that they never paralysed the whole system. With these methods the nurses gained a great deal of public sympathy which contributed to their victory over the Labour government in the Australian state of Victoria.

The public is aware of the advantages of 'positive strikes'. During a 1984 conflict, again in Australia, this time between the electrical workers and their employer (a public corporation), two opinion surveys found that people preferred such strikes to other forms of industrial action and that they thought the unions were concerned with community interests.

Overall, then, the strategic innovation of the 'positive' strike offers workers in the public sector a promising exit from the present tactical impasse. 'Positive' strikes present the possibility of a real explosion of creative unionism by the rank and file, but they also require structural flexibility on the part of the unions, a willingness to create temporary inter-union alliances which ignore traditional rivalries, a disciplined rather than individualist membership, and an open mind towards the public. If the prize is the reconstitution of a true oppositional voice in our apathetic society, can we afford to disregard it?