

# Miramichi in the midst of a storm In Brief...



**Jean-Guy Comeau of the Northumberland Woodlot Owners Association has expressed concern over the government of New Brunswick locking Miramichi communities out of the 1 million hectares of public forest in their area and re-assigning that wood to distant mills.**  
Photo by Kevin Matthews.

By SYLVAIN SCHETAGNE

Miramichi, located in northeastern New Brunswick, is a relatively small community in Canada, but one of the largest urban communities in New Brunswick. With a population of about 25,000 people, Miramichi had, not too long ago, one of the largest pulp and paper mills in Canada, employing over 1,200 workers.

Five years ago the region also depended upon 60 major employers, and 18,000 Miramichiers were employed. Now, the pulp and paper mill is being demolished, there are only about 40 major employers left in the region, the regional hospital has become the largest employer in town, and only about 10,000 Miramichiers are currently employed.

Jean-Guy Comeau, a woodlot owner and a former mill worker, demonstrates the level of devastation. “Today, in late summer of 2009, there is not a saw or anything being used to produce something from the forest. That is rather serious. If not a saw is turning, this means that no one is at work cutting wood in the area and no one is working in the plants,” said Comeau.

For Dwayne Hancock, a former worker and local union president at one of the mills that was closed in the last 3 years, the situation is serious. “It’s definitely been a difficult time on the River. I think a lot of it has been kind of sugar-coated... The forestry industry died overnight and nobody said anything. Nobody did anything. We were the lowest paid Oriented Strand Board (OSB) mill in North America.... We had good jobs. We thought we had some job security but unfortunately we just didn’t fit into the corporate plan of the company,” said Hancock.

Workers are doing all they can to cope with the rapid deterioration of the labour market in Miramichi. They are surviving with severance pay, Employment Insurance cheques, short-term training support, insecure and low-paid job opportunities in the region or by travelling daily or weekly in and out of the region for job opportunities in the

province or across the country.

According to Elisabeth Murray, a union activist and a worker at the regional hospital, “What we have noticed is that because of the mills closing, there’s a lot of casualties that are coming in that are a spouse of somebody that was in the facility already.” This indicates that men who are forced out of full-time and permanent industrial jobs are finding part-time and casual work in the public and service sector.

John Richard, a worker at the local co-op and local union activist has seen men try to find work anywhere they can. Some have been lucky enough to find jobs at the co-op. “We have 13 or 14 guys that used to work at the mill.”

Georges Estey, a business manager of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, Local 799 in Miramichi, understands the consequences of the mill closures and that it means men will travel long distances to find work. “Most of these guys are 50 or under. Some of them are 55 years old. They still have to work and maintain a living as far as I can tell, and they’re all still working. There are no jobs to be had here so I would say the majority of them are still going out west and back again.”

Dwayne Hancock lost his job at the mill and now works at a call centre. “The call centre I’m at now is \$12 an hour. I can’t plan for the future right now. I’m not contributing anything to my pension. I’m just trying to play catch up for past bills and trying to prepare for the winter. My house needs work. It is an older home and there’s things that need to be done. My car finally died and I had to buy another car. It’s the first time in 15 years that I actually had to go backwards and had to buy an older car as opposed to upgrading but I just couldn’t afford a car payment,” said Hancock.

Male workers are not the only one taking the hits. Families and the community in general also suffer. When asked about usage of their services, women’s shelter representatives say they are now running at full capacity - something that they haven’t seen in recent history. The coordinator of Miramichi’s food bank is seeing a 10% monthly increase in families requesting support.

“It was hard on a lot of families, I received a lot of late night phone calls from members who were just distraught and just didn’t know what they were going to do,” said Hancock.

Bobbie-Jo Metallic is a young Aboriginal woman who recently graduated from culinary art school but is currently unemployed. She said, “I think a lot of people are really struggling. I think a lot of them a very depressed. I see a lot of my friends have turned to drinking which is not great. I mean you need that money for groceries. Why drink it?”

For Delalene Foran and many other Miramichiers, the economic storm in Miramichi is not over. “Myself I don’t think it’s hit here yet, I think maybe next year is going to be tougher because a lot of people are on unemployment now. They got their stamps. They got their severance pay from the mill,” said Foran.

Despite these major issues, Miramichiers are proud of their community and have hopes about the future, but they question the old way of dealing with these challenges. For Inka Milewski, an environmentalist and researcher based in Miramichi, there has to be a better way of doing things. “These mill closures are the opportunity to do things differently and there’s no reason why things can’t happen for the Miramichi that are far better for the community than they have been in the past. But it’s going to take courage.”

*Sylvain Schetagne is a senior economist with the Canadian Labour Congress.*

## Community Calendar

For details and updated event listings, visit [nbmediacoop.org](http://nbmediacoop.org). To list your event or to receive the community calendar by email once per week, email: [community@nbmediacoop.org](mailto:community@nbmediacoop.org)

**Candlelight Vigil: National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.** Mon, Dec. 6 at 6:30 p.m. at Fr. Dan Bohan Centre, 5 Fatima Dr., next to Riverview Town Hall. Followed by a candlelight vigil at the monument at Caseley Park. Organized by: December 6th Committee of the Moncton and District Labour Council. Contact: 859-0692.

**Atlantic Canada Studies Seminars.** 2010-2011 launches an open interdisciplinary seminar series to promote

research and discussion on Atlantic Canada. The series features presentations from scholars from several fields. Upcoming presenters: UNB French Professor Chantal Richard on Dec. 7; UNB Labour Historian Bill Parenteau on Incendiarism and the Transformation of the New Brunswick Forest Industries, 1918-1939 on Jan. 11.

**AIDS NB 2011 Red Tie Affair.** Sat, Feb. 26, 2011 at 7pm-12:00am at the Fredericton Convention Centre. AIDS NB presents the 4th Annual Red Tie Affair with host Steve Patterson of CBC Radio’s The Debaters. The Red Tie Affair will be an elegant social evening of fine dining and entertainment. Following cocktails and appetizers at the Fredericton Convention Centre, guests will enjoy a gourmet meal and an evening of dance with Pretty in Pink: That 80s Band. Tickets start at \$125 each and include a glass of wine, hors d’oeuvres, entrees, dessert and entertainment. Tickets to the dance portion of the evening are \$25 each. Contact: [info@aidsnb.com](mailto:info@aidsnb.com) or call (506) 459-7518.

**Singing Solidarity: Voices of Maritime Artists.** During the 1980s, the Mayan people and social activists in Guatemala became targets of the army in a genocidal war. In 1988, the Tatamagouche Centre initiated a solidarity relationship with groups in Guatemala. This led to the formation in 1992 of the Breaking the Silence Network (BTS). BTS organizes and supports delegations, human rights accompaniment, youth internships and fair trade relationships. All proceeds from sales of the Singing Solidarity CD will contribute to BTS's solidarity work with its Guatemalan partners. This CD is a compilation of songs and spoken word pieces from Maritime artists. The CD, \$20/each, is available in Fredericton at Conserver House (180 St. John St.), the Tatamagouche Centre gift shop (902 657-2231) or by contacting [info@frederictonpeace.org](mailto:info@frederictonpeace.org)

**Cinema Politica** is a network of community and campus locals screening documentaries on issues that matter. In Fredericton, Cinema Politica screens films every Friday night at 7:00pm at Conserver House, 180 St. John St. until December 10 then it will return on January 7. Cinema Politica locals also exist in Fundy, Sackville, Saint John, Moncton and Taymouth. Check out film schedules at [cinemapolitica.org](http://cinemapolitica.org).



**Approximately 50 students rallied at St. Thomas University in Fredericton to oppose cuts to education on Nov. 24. Deregulating tuition in New Brunswick could lead to tuition fees rising to \$11,000 a year on average after five years. At one demonstration in November, around 52,000 students protested in the streets of London, England against government plans to cut university budgets by 40% and to allow universities to nearly triple tuition fees.** Photo by ChoraChroma PhotoGraphic.

We want to hear about what's going on in your community! Send your articles, letters, story ideas, and pictures to [editors@nbmediacoop.org](mailto:editors@nbmediacoop.org).

The NB Media Co-op is a member-funded organization and is completely volunteer-run. Be a part of the movement for a democratic media and become a member today!

There are many ways to get involved. Deliver *The Brief* in your community, write or edit articles, help organize events in your community and help spread the word about independent media in NB!