4,000 kilometre commute: how the struggle for a living wage gave rise to Canada’s own temporary migrant workers

By SUNNY FREEMAN

Mark English draws out every sip of coffee, savouring the last few hours at home before a six-hour commute to work. His life straddles two provinces, three time zones apart. But his heart remains steadfastly in one.

One foot is in the pockmarked frontier of Alberta’s oil sands. The other is planted in the rolling hills that frame the mighty Miramichi river in northern New Brunswick, where he was born and wants to be buried.

He sets his brain to “autopilot” to grind out 70-hour work weeks at an oil refinery in Fort McMurray, Alberta, and dreams up home renovations to relieve the pain of long-distance commuters in August, when he would be “out West.”

“McMoney” until debts are paid down, then the family will be able to live a “lifes” away from the Miramichi income. But everyone he knows who’s worked in the oil patch is the same at first.

There are so many others like him there that his work camp is “a little home.”

“I could throw a rock and hit five Miramichiers in the hallway because there’s that many of us out there. And if you’re not from New Brunswick, you’re from Nova Scotia... it wasn’t for East Coasters, the West wouldn’t be the same,” says English.

The relationship is symbiotic: Communities in Eastern Canada supply cheap labour for the resource-rich West, while western paycheques build new homes and buy new trucks in the Maritimes. But it is also a tenuous connection: If plunging oil prices result in stoppages in Alberta, demand for workers will collapse, resulting in mass layoffs. There would be little to keep Miramichi from becoming the next Canadian ghost town.

Oil sands money breathes life into an economy desperately in need of resuscitation. Half of downtown Miramichi’s shops and restaurants are closed and church signs that once posted Sunday services are now “for sale” signs. There is a shortage of volunteer firefighters and a decline in the number of parents who coach little league sports.

The unemployment rate is twice the national average; homelessness and addiction are on the rise, and scraping by on minimum wage is a reality for many. New Brunswick has the country’s median family income at $59,300. It’s also home to seven of the 10 poorest postal code regions and the highest consumer debt levels in Canada.

“Do you know what they say about New Brunswick’s Falstaffian workforce? ‘Manpower,’” says English. “It’s a Mickey Mouse corporate headquarters in the West that needs to double its labour force to double its profits.”

English became one of New Brunswick’s thousands of long-distance commuters in August, when he jumped ship from his sinking Miramichi employer rather than risk being next in another round of layoffs.

He braves the distance, the tedium and the detachment to earn more than triple what he did at home, enough finally to save for his daughter’s university tuition and his own retirement. But the decision to join the growing class of commuter dads has taken a toll on his relationships.

Broken families, broken communities. Here, what is broken about Canada’s labour system comes into sharp focus and sheds light on the sacrifices some endure to earn a living wage in the shifting 21st century labour market.

Miramichi reflects the reality of communities in decline across Canada—from once-thriving mining outposts in British Columbia to the rust belt of Ontario to the shuttered mill towns of New Brunswick—all of which have seen good jobs disappear. The fortunes of families here are interwoven by the ups and downs of the global oil market, not the local economy.

With few prospects at home, workers are forced to leave their families in search of quality jobs at work camps across the country to give their loved ones a more stable life.

They are Canada’s own temporary migrant workers.

When English worked in New Brunswick, his family lived paycheque-to-paycheque. He worried about how he could afford to pay for things like his daughter’s out-of-town basketball tournaments.

“Before it was like: ‘OK, we got to go to Moncton, so we go to get a hotel, and that’s $150, so, all right, we’ll only pay half the power bill this month.’”

It was his 13-year-old daughter who suggested he try the commute. He tells himself he’s only in “Fort

Forest herbicide listed as “probable carcinogen” as protesters face fines for blocking its spray

By TRACY GLYNN

Two men and one woman from Kent County are facing fines of approximately $7,500 for their role in a protest against forest herbicide spraying as the International Agency for Research on Cancer has listed the forest herbicide, glyphosate, as a probable carcinogen.

A dozen people blocked a Forest Protection Ltd. vehicle for several hours in Village Saint-Pierre, near Rogersville, on Sept. 8, 2014. While opposed to spraying herbicides in the woods, they were immediately concerned that the tractor trailer carrying the toxins had expired plates, a cracked frame and worn out tires.

“The clearcuts in our area are unreal. I don’t support spraying the forest because so many people are getting cancer. We’re trying to protect people, the animals, the moose and deer, the partridge and the rabbits that we eat,” says Leo Goguen of Rogersville who has worked in the woods all his life. Goguen is named in the court documents filed against the three people facing fines.

Four RCMP vehicles came to the blockade site and Forest Protection Ltd. agreed to have their truck towed to their headquarters at the Miramichi Airport.

Forest Protection Ltd. provides services and aircraft for herbicide and pest management as well as forest fire fighting services. According to the company’s website, the private company is owned by “a group of New Brunswick forest stakeholders.”

The protest moved to Forest Protection Ltd.’s office along Highway 11 the next day on September 9. The highway protest was meant to raise awareness with passersby about the opposition to forest herbicide spraying.

Critics charge that the abundance of maple, oak, birch and beechnut have all declined in New Brunswick’s forests due to the conversion of natural forest to balsam fit, spruce and pine plantations by J.D. Irving and other forestry companies that hold licenses to harvest wood on New Brunswick’s Crown land, which covers about half of the province.

New Brunswick has been spraying herbicides on its forest since the 1970s when it first permitted pulp and paper companies to clearcut natural forest and replace it with plantations. Spraying usually occurs one to two years after a plantation has been established. Herbicides are sprayed once or twice over plantations to poison hardwood trees and shrubs that compete with the planted softwood trees for space and nutrients. (continued page 2)
Harper government) has been frustrated by citizen opposition to things like shale gas ... and now this Bill comes out that could easily be aimed at stopping dissent, including the kinds of things we do," says group spokesperson Jim Emberger. NBAGSA believes that “civil disobedience, which is accepted as a citizen’s right in democratic countries around the world, could be criminalized.”

Green Party Leader Elizabeth May agrees: “Bill C-51 will take our country down a path that will stifle dissent, protest and peaceful civil disobedience—all of which are essential features of a democratic society.”

Ian Stewart closed the rally against Bill C-51 in Fredericton with the civil rights song, We Shall Overcome, on March 14, 2015. Photo by Joan Green.

Fredericton — About 100 people rallied on March 14 against Bill C-51 in Fredericton as part of a national day of action against Harper’s controversial security bill. Rallies were also held in Moncton, Saint John and at least 55 locations across the country.

“Today, hundreds of university-educated legal scholars, former Supreme Court Justices, former Prime Ministers, every Privacy Commissioner in Canada, and even former members of the review body the government insists will prevent abuse, are all opposing C-51, with the environmental activists, First Nations, and us here... If the government still thinks they have enough support to ram this bill through, it’s time we show them they’re wrong,” read Asaf Rashid on behalf of a government employee in the Department of Justice who wished to remain anonymous.

Ron Tremblay from the Maliseet Grand Council and the Peace and Friendship Alliance, newly formed to oppose the Energy East pipeline, opened the rally. Gail Paul from Woodstock spoke about the need to direct resources towards justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, Alex Bailey from the Fredericton District Labour Council led a human mic of voices against Bill C-51.

The New Brunswick Anti-Shale Gas Alliance (NBAGSA) is one of many organizations condemning the Canadian government’s new anti-terrorism legislation, Bill C-51, as well as a recently revealed RCMP intelligence report on the anti-pipeline movement.

The RCMP report states that “there is a growing, highly organized and well-financed anti-Canada movement. Examples of this movement include the New Brunswick Anti-Shale Gas Alliance (NBASGA) is one of many organizations condemning Canada’s national police force. Among the first concerns raised in Repton was the fact that Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginals are treated differently by police. There was anger that no RCMP officers were ever charged for illegal actions described. The meeting heard that police were told about a SWN truck that hit three women protesters, but refused to take any action.

About 100 people celebrated International Women’s Day in Fredericton while dancing to the Alex Bailey Swing Band and raising over $1,000 for the NB Coalition for Pay Equity, an organization that had its funding cut by the Harper government in 2010. Romana Sehic with CUPE’s Council of Alberta Public Employees said, “We’re left with women, with Liberty Lane, a transition home for women in Fredericton, spoke about the pay equity struggles of workers in their sectors. Workers in their sectors make just above the minimum wage. The Fredericton Youth Feminists and Reproductive Justice NB were also applauded for their achievements.

The Common Front for Social Justice released the report, “2015 Update: Women and Poverty in New Brunswick” for International Women’s Day. Almost one-third of women in New Brunswick are considered poor. Wendy Johnston, the report’s author, noted some small gains for women in 2014: Social assistance rates for men increased by 4.1% and for women, by 4.3%. Unionized women and in New Brunswick now earn almost the same average hourly wage as men; non-unionized women earn much less on average than both unionized women and non-unionized men. In 2014, the gender wage gap for New Brunswick narrowed slightly, from 11.4% in 2013 to 11.1% in 2014. Unionized women and men in New Brunswick earn almost the same average hourly wage of $16.53 while for non-unionized men it was $20.60. Unionized men and women are not alone in struggling to reduce poverty of women: Raising social assistance rates above the poverty line; addressing the income needs of women living with poverty; increasing the Guaranteed Income Supplement for single individuals; implementing a national public system of early learning and child care; implementing the introduction of a basic income in the public and private sectors; and implementing a monitoring system to measure progress on poverty and gender.

Irving’s Brunswick News laid off all six of their photographers in newspapers in early March, “We attempt an attempt to make or suspect any kind of legitimate dissent. It is the kind of language that governments use when a movement for change conflicts with their vested interests.”

“We’re the target of the day. It’s no secret that (the}