



The Brief

Vol. 6, No. 7

A publication of the NB Media Co-op

April 2015

nbmediacoop.org

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

By SUNNY FREEMAN



Like most towns and cities in Atlantic Canada, nearly everyone in Miramichi knows someone who works “out West.” Photo by Sunny Freeman/HuffPost Canada.

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 boredom of nights in the work camp.

It will be two weeks until he boards a charter flight to make the 4,000-kilometre haul—equivalent to the distance from Germany to Siberia—back home for a week of respite.

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 determined 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 got 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

McMoney” until debts are paid down, then the family will be able to live off a Miramichi income. But everyone he knows who’s worked in the oilpatch told themselves the same at first.

There are so many others like him there that his work camp is like “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 Newfoundland... If it wasn’t for East Coasters, the West wouldn’t be built,” says English.

The relationship is symbiotic: Communities in Eastern Canada supply

labourers 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 global 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 lowest 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.

“You know what they say about New Brunswick’s best export right? Manpower,” Miramichi Airport manager Dale Mattinson quips as he watches eight men with duffle bags trudge toward the propeller plane waiting to transport them to work.

The Miramichi airport, little more than a trailer with 1970s wood panelling and a few plastic seats, is a temporary structure squatting on the runway of an abandoned Canadian Forces fighter training base. Miramichi never needed a commercial airport before, when its economy was built on wood products, cargo too massive to be shipped by air. But now the whole region is paying attention to how the one-room operation is growing into the hub for its new export: labour.

Few of Miramichi’s 18,000 residents are untouched by the fly in/fly out life. Everyone knows someone working away— brothers, fathers, sons, best friends. They have all faced the decision: to stay and eke out a living or to leave and make life easier, financially, for their family. But the choice wasn’t always this stark.

Northern New Brunswick was once home to its own natural resources boom. Miramichi, a densely forested natural port, was the regional centre for fishing, shipping lumber and shipbuilding. Now only scraps of those industries remain.

Read the entire article at nbmediacoop.org

Sunny Freeman is the business reporter for HuffPost Canada. This article first appeared in HuffPost Canada.

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 beech have all declined in New Brunswick’s forests due to the conversion of natural forest to balsam fir, 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)



Leo Goguen and Duma Bernard (left to right) are mobilizing people in Kent County to stop herbicide spraying of the public forest. Photo by Melissa Augustine.

NB part of country-wide mobilizations against Bill C-51

By NIKITA HARTT



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 (NBASGA) 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-petroleum movement.

The RCMP report states that “there is a growing, highly organized and well-financed anti-Canada petroleum movement that consists of peaceful activists, militants and violent extremists who are opposed to society’s reliance on fossil fuels.”

According to the NBAGSA, this report and the Canadian Government’s legislation “come dangerously close to equating dissent with terrorism and opposition to economic policies as extremism.”

These measures, they argue, use “deliberately vague, yet accusatory, language,” which “is an attempt to inhibit or make 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

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.

NBASGA 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 us down a rabbit hole that will stifle dissent, protest and peaceful civil disobedience—all of which are essential features of a democratic society.”

Nikita Hartt is an UNB Arts 3000 intern with the NB Media Co-op. With files from Asaf Rashid.

In Brief

An investigation into the actions of the **RCMP during 2013 shale gas protests** in Kent County heard repeated cries for justice, leavened with tears, in Rexton on March 14. In December 2014, Ian McPhail, Chair of the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission Against the RCMP (CRCC) said that he was “satisfied that there are reasonable grounds” for the investigation, based on the 20 formal complaints against Canada’s national police force. Among the first concerns raised in Rexton was the fact that Aboriginal protesters received harsher treatment than non-Aboriginals from 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 with swing 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 Group Home Workers Union and Fiona Williams, 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-led households in New Brunswick are considered poor. Wendy Johnston, the report’s author, noted some small gains for women in 2014. The gender wage gap closed a little from 11.4% in 2013 to 11.1% in 2014. Unionized women and men in New Brunswick now earn almost the same average hourly salary (\$26.13 for women, \$26.09 for men). Non-unionized women earn much less on average than both unionized women and non-unionized men. In 2014, the average hourly wage of non-unionized women was \$16.53 while for non-unionized men it was \$20.60. The Common Front proposes the following to reduce poverty of women: Raising social assistance rates above the poverty line; addressing the income needs of older women living on their own by increasing the Guaranteed Income Supplement for single individuals; implementing a national public system of early learning and child care; implementing pay equity 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 at their newspapers in early March. “We ask ourselves how a newspaper can exist without professional photographers? Journalists are now being asked to take pictures with their Smartphone, thus adding an extra workload to their already tight schedule of filing their news stories. Furthermore, the quality of the newspaper will undoubtedly not be the same and the readers will pay the price,” read a statement by the New Brunswick Federation of Labour.

Forest herbicides protested
(continued from page 1) Spraying occurs each year in August and September and lasts about 40 days.

Three petitions signed by thousands of New Brunswickers against herbicide spraying in the forest have been tabled in the New Brunswick Legislature in just over a decade, the most recent in 2011. The Lord, Graham and Alward governments as well as the Department of Natural Resources have defended the practice as safe and cost-effective.

The Conservation Council of New Brunswick argues that the practice is not safe, pointing to recent studies of glyphosate, the herbicide sprayed on New Brunswick’s forest. Glyphosate products include Monsanto’s Vision and VisionMax. The studies show glyphosate’s toxic impacts on a wide range of species including humans.

Glyphosates kill broad leaf trees, shrubs and grasses, wiping out the food source and habitats of many forest dependent species, including deer. The impacts concern deer biologist Rod Cumberland, who has been organizing with hunting, fishing and outdoors recreation groups to oppose the herbicide spraying.

“We wonder why there are vacant deer yards on Crown land? Deer have been forced to private land where good deer food still grows,” says Cumberland. Cumberland estimates that New Brunswick’s herbicide program has removed nearly a half a billion tons of deer and moose food from the Crown forest in the past 20 years.

“Herbicide use in our forest is presented to us as the only way but it’s not. It is the most profitable means of removing competing hardwoods for a hungry forest industry,” argues Cumberland. “Thinning crews used to remove hardwoods in New Brunswick and that’s what they do in Quebec today. In a climate where our province is drastically struggling to keep skilled workers from moving west, it’s incredibly ironic that the government of New Brunswick refuses to entertain a method of hardwood removal that will create good paying jobs for New Brunswickers and one that does not carry with it potential health threats and biodiversity damage that herbicides cause.”

Quebec banned herbicide spraying of its public forest over a decade ago in 2001. Nova Scotia recently abandoned the public funding of herbicide spraying of their forest. New Brunswick continues to fund silviculture on Crown land that includes spraying, which according to data from Natural Resources Canada, can cost the province about \$1,000/ha.

The forest plan announced by the Alward government in 2014 guarantees forestry companies like J.D. Irving an additional 660,000 cubic metres of wood every year from Crown land for the next 25 years. Ten First Nations Chiefs in New Brunswick unsuccessfully tried to obtain a court injunction to temporarily halt the 2014 forest plan over failure to consult. Land in New Brunswick was never ceded by the Indigenous Mi’kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot people.

The newly elected Gallant government says that they are reviewing the 2014 forest plan. Critics including conservationists, First Nations, woodlot owners, scientists, economists and others say the plan gives too much of the forest to industry and should be abandoned.

If the 2014 forest plan goes ahead, more forest will be converted to plantations and that will mean more herbicides in the woods. Kent County residents have shown that they are not willing to accept spraying of glyphosates in their woods.

Tracy Glynn is the Conservation Council of New Brunswick’s Forest Campaigner.

Community Calendar

For details and updated event listings, visit nbmediacoop.org. To list your event, email: community@nbmediacoop.org.

NB Media Co-op Story Meetings. Join us at our monthly story meetings in Fredericton where we discuss politics and current events and decide what to put in this paper every month. To find out the meeting time and venue, email info@nbmediacoop.org.

Cinema Politica believes in the power of art not only to entertain but to engage, inform, inspire, and provoke social change. Cinema Politica is the largest volunteer-run, community and campus-based documentary-screening network in the world. Cinema Politica Fredericton screens films on Friday nights. Check out film schedules and venues, or start your own chapter at: cinemapolitica.org.

Join the NB Media Co-op today!

The NB Media Co-op relies on the financial support of its members to fund high-quality, independent journalism by and for New Brunswickers. **Sign up here!**

Name: _____

Address: _____
Street City/Town Province Postal Code

Phone: _____ Email: _____

☐ Annual membership fee: \$30.00 ☐ Other: _____

Send to NB Media Co-op, 180 St. John St., Fredericton, N.B. E3B 4A9. info@nbmediacoop.org