Fredericton: the next sanctuary city?

By TRACY GLYNN

After organizing the Rally Against Islamophobia and Deportations in Fredericton on Feb. 4, 2017 (seen here), No One Is Illegal Fredericton is focusing their efforts on making Fredericton a sanctuary city so that all people can access services without fear. Photo by Biff Mitchell.

Fredericton - A group of university students, professors and community organizers are hoping to make Fredericton the next sanctuary city.

The group, No One Is Illegal Fredericton, decided to focus on this initiative in light of U.S. President Donald Trump’s anti-immigration policies and Canada’s failure to budge on policies make life more difficult and dangerous for immigrants and asylum seekers.

“A sanctuary city is where undocumented people or people with uncertain immigration status should feel safe, where they can access city services without fear of being reported by service providers or the police to Canada Border Services Agency, and detained and deported as a consequence,” says Asaf Rashid, a third year law student at the University of New Brunswick and one of the organizers of the sanctuary city effort in Fredericton.

“Undocumented people number in the hundreds of thousands in Canada. They are refugee claimants who did not succeed in their applications. They are migrant workers, international students and visitors whose statuses expired. They are even permanent residents who lost their status on account of errors in trying to sponsor family members. They are our neighbours and friends,” says Rashid.

Over 250 people have signed an online petition supporting Fredericton becoming a sanctuary city and over 40 organizations are backing the initiative including New Brunswick’s largest public sector union, CUPE NB, faculty unions at the University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University, the New Brunswick Refugee Clinic in Moncton and service providers such as Clinic 554 and Grace House.

No One is Illegal Fredericton members have met with Fredericton city councillors Greg Ericson and Eric Megarity and service providers such as Clinic 554 and Grace House.

The organizers behind the Fredericton initiative say a sanctuary city should be a place where undocumented people or people with uncertain immigration status feel safe and where they can access city services without fear of being reported by service providers or the police to Canada Border Services Agency, and detained and deported as a consequence. According to George MacLean, Vice-President (Academic), "People seeking asylum from all kinds of dire situations deserve, and have the right, to access services in our city without fear of racial profiling, discrimination or undue questioning about their status. If I didn't support and advocate for Fredericton to become a sanctuary city, I would not be adhering to my profession's values and principles," says MacLean.

The University of New Brunswick issued a statement in March saying that it will welcome students from countries that are affected by Trump’s travel ban. “We played an integral part in welcoming refugees to New Brunswick last year, and UNB’s campuses are recognized by our staff, students, and communities as caring and friendly environments,” according to George MacLean, Vice-President (Academic).

While attention is focused on Trump’s anti-immigration policies, Canada has its own discriminatory policies that need to be eliminated, according to No One Is Illegal chapters and migrant justice organizers across the country. The groups are calling for the end of the Third Safe Country Agreement that denies people who enter the U.S. or what’s considered a “safe country” from seeking asylum in Canada. Another target for elimination for the groups is the Designated Countries of Origin list that prohibits people from entering Canada if they are from a country considered to be “safe” on the list. Canada signed the 1951 Refugee Convention that states that all people fleeing persecution should be granted asylum.

No One Is Illegal Fredericton expressed these concerns to Fredericton MP Matt DeCourcey on Feb. 4, the day of the cross-country rally against Islamophobia and deportations, asking him to support the scrapping of the Third Safe Country Agreement and the Designated Countries of Origin list. However, the MP has yet to respond to their concerns, making sanctuary cities an even more important goal for the organizers who says lives will continue to be lost if immigration border policies are not abandoned.

Sanctuary cities are an affirmation that no one is illegal. All people who desire to stay should be allowed to stay, to live with their families and be a part of our communities,” says Rashid.

Fighting to keep New Brunswick's health care system public

By SUSAN O’DONELL

A new report from the New Brunswick Health Coalition documents how the province’s public health care system is on a slippery slope towards privatization and also that many advocacy groups are fighting to keep the system intact.

The report, “The Creeping Privatization of Health Care in New Brunswick,” outlines the belief that everyone should have equal access to high quality health care, with health care being a fundamental human right. The report says that while Canada’s universal health care system is the result of numerous hard-fought battles won by many groups and individuals in the not-too-distant past, even with its flaws, Canada’s health care system remains a model for many countries around the world.

The New Brunswick Health Coalition report documents the trend in the province away from public health care and toward corporate provision of health services. Information in the report includes examples of privatization occurring across New Brunswick in primary health care, senior care, extra-mural care, prescription drug coverage, blood plasma, and hospital laundry, cleaning and food services.

The report calls for corporate health service provision to be ended and instead reinvigorated and expanded the provincial health care system.

The government’s search for ways to cut the costs of health care will become more intense in the coming years. The provincial government made New Brunswick the first among the provinces to sign a health transfer deal with the federal government that many critics have called inadequate. One of the recommendations of the NB Health Coalition report is adequate health transfers to the provinces.

Jean-Claude Boquet, co-chair of the NB Health Coalition, says the current provincial government is moving more rapidly towards privatization than the previous government, and they are pushing a “a real encouragement” of corporate health care. At the same time, he points out that advocacy groups are continuing their fight for universal access to public health care and the profits are the main focus of New Brunswick’s health system.

The report highlights many successes of non-profit advocacy groups in the province fighting the privatization of health care, including labor unions, the New Brunswick Midwives Association, TransAction NB, and citizen groups including the Concerned Citizens of Charlotte County and residents in Caraquet organizing to save their hospital services.

One example of the privatization trend highlighted in the report is the Gallant government’s decision to turn over management of provincial hospital food, cleaning and patient transportation services to an international corporation. This decision is being opposed by public health care advocates.

As reported in an earlier NB Media Co-op story (Feb. 7), the NB Council of Hospital Unions (CUPE local 1252) is leading the struggle to slow down or stop the privatization of these hospital services. CUPE is one of the many unions working together to keep corporations out of hospitals.

Senior care facilities and home support services is another focus of the report. The group advocating for seniors in the province is the Coalition for Seniors and Nursing Facilities and Home Care, which includes the Concerned Citizens of Charlotte County and the Concerned Citizens of Caraquet, who are fighting to keep these services public.

The NB Council of Hospital Unions, CUPE 1252, opposes the privatization of health care. CUPE 1252 members, shown here, were rallying to save public health care at MP Robert Goguen’s office in Moncton in 2015. Photo from CUPE 1252.

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Mount Allison University students stage protests to demand fossil fuel divestment. Mount Allison University students in Sackville occupied the quad on their campus on March 24 then staged a "die-in" at the university’s administration building on March 22 to demand that the university divest from fossil fuels. The "die-in" was done to represent the victims of oil and gas exploitation. Before the "die-in," Divest MTA leaders Tina Oh and Abram Lutes were given a meeting with Mount Allison President, Paul Campbell, his vice president, to begin the process of divestment. Campbell responded, "It’s not my role."

Irving vs. Poitras. J.D. Irving legal counsel, William McDowell, sent a letter of complaint to CBC’s Ombudsman about Jacques Poitras, CBC’s provincial affairs correspondent’s Twitter activity. McDowell alleged that activity on Poitras’ CBC Twitter account and the account that he uses to promote his books place him in a conflict of interest because he was using his reputation and influence to publicize his books. Poitras responded, "It’s not my role."

Fighting to keep health care system public

Home Residents’ Rights, Cecile Cassista, the Coalition’s executive director, believes that the fight to stop privatization of health services is critical. "No question, if the government reduces the quality of services it will affect seniors," she says. "When seniors are in the hospital they need good food to get better."

The Coalition for Seniors and Nursing Home Residents’ Rights has demonstrated what sustained advocacy can accomplish. The group formed in 2004 to begin a successful fight to change the formula for fees for nursing home residents. Ten years since then, it has accomplished much more. "Look at the program for seniors on the province’s website. There are there because we advocated for it," said Cassista. "She believes big struggle now for seniors is in the province is home care.

The NB Health Coalition report’s recommendations for seniors and home support services include investing in public long-term care facilities and abandoning the public-private partnership model in long-term care facilities, supporting the different needs of seniors including dementia care, increasing funding for healthy food for seniors in nursing homes, better coordination of care for seniors, and investing in the implementing the Home First strategy so that more seniors can stay in their homes. Each of these recommendations will save costs by supporting wellbeing as an alternative to treating ill health by profit-centred corporations.

Another current example of advocacy to fight privatization of health services is the collective response to the plan to operate corporate plasma collection clinics in the province. The NB Health Coalition is coordinating a letter opposing the plans to send to government. There are also other groups, such as ACTA, religious groups, seniors groups, among others. All these organizations agree that a corporate model should not be used.

To access the full text, please visit the NB Media Co-op website: nbmediacoop.org