Resolve of Covered Bridge Potato Chip workers remains strong, despite the cold

BY ASAF RASHID

Covered Bridge Potato Chip Workers have been on strike since January 5, spending most of the coldest winter in over 80 years outside as they fight for a fair contract. “It has been over 80 days,” says Carl Flanagan, UFCW national representative, who is representing the Covered Bridge workers.

Despite the chilly attitude towards their union by the employer, workers have held their line. Support from the province’s labour movement and its people have enabled them to continue.

The striking workers are members of UFCW Canada Local 1288P. They have been without a first contract for over two years. The workers are seeking a living wage, rather than the minimum that many earn. Starting pay at Covered Bridge is $10.30. In comparison, starting pay at Old Dutch, the other Hartland potato chip company, is $14.50.

The workers are also seeking seniority rights, a common provision in employment relationships. “The people who have been there for five years deserve to have seniority over those who start work tomorrow,” says Flanagan.

“It is shamefully unacceptable that a successful, expanding company that has also received hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxpayers’ money through government grants, so blatantly refuses to respect its workers, its neighbours, and the community,” said UFCW Canada National President Paul Meinema to the striking Covered Bridge workers at a solidarity rally.

After the decision, we approached the government, said Meinema, and said, “We want to be unionized; we want to be treated justly.” The “it has been over 80 days,” says Carl Flanagan, UFCW national representative, who is representing the Covered Bridge workers.

Albright’s statement to his workers was found to be an unfair labour practice by the New Brunswick Labour and Employment Board, August 15, 2015 because he used, “intimidation, threats or promise to induce,” to discourage support for the union.

Since the strike began, the employer has had its treatment of unionized workers rebuked again. In early February, the New Brunswick Court of Queen’s Bench refused to overturn the decision of the Labour Board, which ruled that “statements of desertsion by employees… who allegedly no longer wanted to be union members, were involuntary statements induced by the employer.

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The resolve of the striking workers has been strengthened by support received by other workers and the general public, including visits to the picket line. On February 11, unions from around the province brought members and community supporters to the picket line for a solidarity rally.

The same day the strike began, the union also began a boycott of Covered Bridge Potato Chip products until the employer agrees to bargain in good faith. Much of the public support has come through this avenue.

In Fredericton, volunteers with the Fredericton and District Labour Council have been distributing the leaflet at retail locations where Covered Bridge Potato Chips are sold, and at other busy locations, such as the Boyce Farmers’ Market in Fredericton.

“We’re getting lots of people saying they won’t be buying the chips,” says Flanagan.

Support has also come from campuses. In January, Memorial University of Newfoundland Students’ Union (MUNSU) stopped carrying Covered Bridge Potato Chips at their convenience store, The Attic, sending Albright the message that the boycott would continue until the workers “are valued and respected” through a fair resolution.

At the University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas Universities, the United Campus Labour Council, made up of unions at both campuses, sent a notice to Albright that they are supporting the boycott. At the University of New Brunswick, the Students’ Association’s Grad House bar also stopped carrying the chips until there is a fair resolution to the labour dispute.

The primary message of the workers to the company is that the employer must respond to the bargaining table. The company is responsible by law for negotiating in good faith with the union.

In addition, Flanagan points out that the provincial government ought to show more responsibility. “There is no first contract legislation in New Brunswick, it’s just PEI, NB and Alberta that don’t have it. First contract legislation would have avoided a labour dispute altogether. I would have established a collective agreement in the middle of the road between what we were looking for and what the employer was asking for.”

Asaf Rashid is an editorial board member of the NB Media Co-op and law student at the University of New Brunswick.

$15/hour minimum wage campaign launches in NB

BY TRACY GYLN

The NB Common Front for Social Justice, backed by over 35 community and labour organizations, is calling on the New Brunswick government to implement a $15/hour minimum wage.

New Brunswick’s minimum wage, $10.30/hour, is the lowest in Canada. The province promises to raise the minimum wage to $11/hour by 2017 but the province’s largest poverty organization argues that it is not enough for workers.

The Common Front says raising the minimum wage to a more decent wage of $15/hour would benefit 20,900 minimum wage earners in the province, 13,100 of whom are identified as women.

The province’s minimum wage earners often work in non-unionized workplaces in the retail, cultural, accommodation and food services sectors. However, unionized home support workers are among those making poverty wages.

Theresa (not her real name) is a 65-year-old home support worker with a college education. She makes $13.25/hour at her unionized job but has no medical plan, no pension and no sick days. She has worked her entire adult life but is not able to retire due to her financial situation.

The Common Front stresses that the number of workers receiving minimum wage and working part-time in New Brunswick has more than doubled in a decade, rising from 4,200 in 2004 to 11,200 in 2014.

Half of the province’s minimum wage earners are employed full-time and 65% of them are 20 years old and older. It is a myth that teenagers entering the workforce make up the majority of minimum wage earners.

Many minimum wage earners also have student debt. The average student debt load in New Brunswick is $34,000, with many owing tens of thousands of dollars more than the average. A large number of minimum wage earners work in the retail and service industry, live paycheque to paycheque and go into overdraft every month. Some are able to turn to their families for support while others use the food bank to eat.

Jory Ulhman is studying to be a social worker at St. Thomas University, The Nova Scotia native with a $50,000 student debt load says, “Not a week goes by when I don’t think of the massive monthly payments I will have to make over the next decade or two and this stress accumulates with the everyday stresses of being a full-time student I already am facing. It also has forced me to work over 40 hrs/week in 12 hour shifts in a factory every summer to keep my student debt down as well as pushed me to work during my undergraduate degree.”

The Common Front for Social Justice is a broad-based coalition of community and labour organizations that advocates for the rights of workers in New Brunswick.

A group of St. Thomas University Social Work students drew attention to their student debt load at a Social Action Fair on the Fredericton campus on March 14, 2016. Photo by Tracy Glyn.
The New Brunswick budget announcement of job cuts to middle management positions in the civil service has drawn fire from opposition leaders.

Healthcare advocate Marilyn Merritt-Grey, Fredericton South MLA and NB Green Party leader David Coon, as well as provincial NDP leader Dominic Cardy say there is a good chance the province will be forced to hire middle managers back at a higher cost.

The Budget, which was announced February 2, outlined how the newly elected Liberal government planned to put the province’s finances on the right track. The budget signaled the end of the government’s Strategic Program Review process which resulted in a plan to merge government departments and eliminate what they call waste in government.

Merritt-Grey, a nurse practitioner and the Green Party’s health critic, specified that “several areas of health programming need to address urgent clinical matters and reorganization, particularly health services for rural and small town residents, seniors, families struggling to manage with chronic illnesses, people of all ages with a mental illness, addiction and/or past trauma.”

“several areas of health programming need addressing, particularly health services for rural and small town residents, seniors, families struggling to manage with chronic illnesses, people of all ages with a mental illness, addiction and/or past trauma,” Merritt-Grey said.

Merritt-Grey stressed the need for “new ideas and fresh energy” in health services but concluded that “no hint of this is visible in the budget announcement or the Main Estimates document.”

New Brunswick citizens made it clear that they did not want budget cuts in healthcare at budget consultations and rallies organized by COPE, the province’s largest public sector union representing hospital workers. Finance Minister Roger Melanson claimed that the government did not want to cut healthcare. However, Merritt-Grey remains skeptical.

The Budget announcement reads like a ‘bean counter’s’ tally of ways to administratively streamline the system,” Merritt-Grey said. She worries that with the cuts in senior government and middle managers over the next two years that this will further worsen a deteriorating situation in health expertise.

She added that losing this expertise may cause the government to have to hire back these managers as consultants at a higher cost.

Coon said that this cutback on public servants is “very worrisome” and that we would be “losing the capacity to essentially run our public service well.”

Cardy declared that instead of “cutting arbitrary numbers and people in the system, we should be looking at broader perspectives.” He added that tellings departments to cut back the number of jobs and reducing the budget is essentially telling pieces of departments down that are “necessary for that department to function.”

There is also the risk of the loss of expertise leading to the privatization of NB health services by offshore health corporations such as large home care management companies, warned Merritt-Grey.

She stated that this “clear-cut of NB government health programs and managers may be a decision we could regret for a long time.”

On the closing of rural hospitals, Cardy mentioned that New Brunswick has “got a very large number of hospitals for such a small province” and that most cases where hospitals were built were more as political monuments rather than ways to deliver good healthcare.” He mentioned that there was a common issue across Canada in the sixties and seventies.

Cardy’s view is that “the needs of the citizens have to come before the Ministries of Health and Services and having pieces of infrastructure” and that the only thing lacking is “political will.”

Cardy clarified that, “Folks from small communities will be upset about the changes, but that is part of the nature of decisions.”

Coon argued that rural hospitals meet a real need especially if there is poor access to public transportation for long distance medical appointments. He included that the savings from removing hospitals are not as great as one may think, “because you maintain the same number of patients” and spend more in over occupied hospitals by importing “the right care.”

Coon added that health care is “fundamentally about helping people” and prevention, “which we are not doing well enough: avoid diseases and injury, and manage chronic diseases.”

In New Brunswick, because of the scarcity of family physicians, nurse practitioners have been acting in place of family doctors for families that are on wait lists.

Coon, whose family was on the waitlist for a family physician in Fredericton for over two years, said he was relieved when he learned this family would be taken on by a nurse practitioner. He stated that this provides a gateway to the health system for people.

Cardy affirmed that he is “all in favour for expanding the number of nurses” and said that this is “entirely dependent on the doctors to provide care.”

The provincial government has decided to run a $347 million deficit this year, and projects that the Strategic Program Review will result in $292 million in cuts, translate into $293 million in revenue measures.

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Berta Cáceres’ murder sparks international outrage. The brazen murder of one of Honduras’ most prominent environmentalists, who visited the Maritimes in November 2015 to talk about the coal that NB Power buys and burns at its Belliveau point power plant, reports that El Cerrén, the mining company, and the union signed a collective agreement on March 15, 2016. NB Power has been buying approximately 500,000 tonnes of Colombian coal a year from a mine in Colombia that is responsible for legitimating and institutionalizing the 2009 coup, the murder rate in Honduras has risen by 50%.

N. B. Power, the Liberal government, and indigenous leader Berta Cáceres, a vigil was held by the Mining Injustice Solidarity Network at the Prospectors & Developers Association of Canada’s annual convention in Toronto on March 14, 2016. Cáceres was the first female Indigenous leader to win the Goldman Environmental Prize. The 2nd Annual Climate March in Quebec City in March 2015.

Cáceres’ organization, Caceres’ organization opposes large dams that are damaging both environments and communities. The Canadian government and Blue Energy Canada and HydroSys are Canadian companies with projects that Cáceres’ organization opposes. Before her murder, Cáceres named Hillary Clinton as one of those most responsible for legitimizing and institutionalizing the 2009 coup, the murder rate in Honduras has risen by 50%, and that the only thing lacking is “political will.”

Many of those murdered are environmental defenders and human rights defenders. While the $15/hour wage will be sent to all provincial ministers throughout the year-long campaign.

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