



# The Brief

Vol. 7 No. 7

A publication of the NB Media Co-op

April 2016

[nbmediacoop.org](http://nbmediacoop.org)

## Resolve of Covered Bridge Potato Chip workers remains strong, despite the cold : \$15/hour minimum wage campaign launches in NB

BY ASAF RASHID



**UFCW Canada National President Paul Meinema visits the striking Covered Bridge workers holding the picket line on March 3, 2016.**  
Photo courtesy of UFCW.

Covered Bridge Potato Chip Workers have been on strike since January 5, spending most of the coldest winter months outside their workplace in Hartland. “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 of 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 workers at a visit to the picket on March 3.

The company has received more than \$700,000 in funding from the provincial government. This money has helped the company expand, yet the workers have not reaped benefits accordingly.

“While you are undergoing your fourth expansion please remember that your employees need to make a decent living,” said the United Campus Labour Council of the University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University in a letter to company president Ryan Albright in January.

Albright has pointedly refused to deal with unionized workers. At a June 23 mediation meeting with the union, Albright made a speech, saying, “I will give to my employees the things they are looking for, but never in a union environment where I feel trapped to communicate to my employees on a daily basis for fear of unfair labour practice against myself and the company ... The union wants you to feel like they’re your friend, they’re here for you. It’s bullshit... I will tell you this: the employees do not want this. We at Covered Bridge do not want this... Carl, screw you and your fucking Union.”

He repeated the speech at the workplace the same day, and again the next day, June 24. That was the day of a strike vote, where the workers voted in favour.

Albright’s statement to his workers was found to be an unfair labour practice by the New Brunswick Labour and Employment Board in August 2015 because he used, “intimidation, threat, 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 desire” from employees, who allegedly no longer wanted to be union members, were involuntary statements induced by the employer.

“After the decision, we approached the government, saying that we’re still the union. We also sent a message to the employer to come to the bargaining table, but he refused,” says Flanagan

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 Chips 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 UNB, the Graduate 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 return 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. It 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.

BY TRACY GLYNN

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 anti-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.

Thérèse (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 Uhlman is studying to be a social worker at St. Thomas University. The Nova Scotia native with a \$50,000 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.”



**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 Glynn.

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# Cuts to NB civil service costly: healthcare advocate, opposition leaders

BY CHRISTOPHER PEARSON



**Marilyn Merritt-Gray, advocate for accessible healthcare in New Brunswick, at the Act on Climate March in Quebec City in March 2015.**  
Photo by Bonnie Glynn.

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-Gray, 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-Gray, 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-Gray said.

Merritt-Gray 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 CUPE, the province’s largest public sector union representing hospital workers. Finance Minister Roger Melanson claimed that the government did choose to protect healthcare. However, Merritt-Gray remains skeptical.

“The Budget announcement reads like a ‘bean counter’s’ tally of ways to administratively streamline government services,” Merritt-Gray 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 out of the system, we should be looking at broader perspectives.” He added that telling departments to cut back the number of jobs and reducing the budget is essentially pulling pieces of departments down that are “necessary for that department to function.”

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

She stated that this “clear-cut of NB government health program 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 “in many cases, those hospitals were built more as political monuments rather than ways to deliver good healthcare.” He mentioned that this 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 needs of 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 politics.”

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 hiring more staff.

Coon added that health care is “fundamentally about healthier people” and prevention, “which we are not doing” to help 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 the waitlist.

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 as patients of 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 powers of the medical profession so that it is not so completely dependent on the doctors to provide care.”

The provincial government has decided to run a \$347 million dollar deficit this year, and projects that the Strategic Program Review will yield \$296 million in expenditure reductions and \$293 million in revenue measures.

*Christopher Pearson is a fourth year psychology and philosophy at the University of New Brunswick doing an Arts 3000 placement with the NB Media Co-op.*

## \$15/hour minimum wage

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The Common Front argues that the province’s minimum wage is not enough for individuals or single parent families or couples with children to survive: “We have analyzed the economic situation of seven different types of families, and we have discovered that their annual deficit falls between \$1,501 and \$12,661.”

The \$15/hour wage became a 2015 federal election issue when the NDP promised to implement a \$15/hour wage. The Liberals responded to the NDP promise saying that such a plan would not benefit workers since the provinces regulate minimum wage. The NDP pointed out that it would benefit some 100,000 minimum wage earners in federal sectors, including rail and air transportation, telecommunications, banks, uranium mining, Crown corporations and those on First Nation reserves.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the organization that lobbies on behalf of small business owners, is actively opposing a minimum wage increase.

The \$15/hour wage has been implemented in Seattle, Washington, and Los Angeles, California. The State of New York has promised to phase in a \$15/hour wage for fast food workers.

The Common Front welcomes endorsements for their \$15/hour campaign from groups as well as individuals. Individuals are being asked to sign a symbolic cheque from the Government of New Brunswick owing its workers a \$15/hour minimum wage and fair employment standards. These cheques will be sent to all provincial ministers throughout the year-long campaign.

*Tracy Glynn is an editorial board member of the NB Media Co-op.*

## In Brief

**Berta Caceres’ murder sparks international outrage.** The brazen murder of one of Honduras’ leading environmentalists at her home on March 3 has sparked worldwide protest and acts of solidarity. Days after the assassination of 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 6. The vigil honoured people who have been killed opposing Canadian mining projects around the world. Cáceres’ organization opposes large dams that are destined to power numerous Canadian mining projects. 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 legitimating and institutionalizing the 2009 coup that led to a militarized regime in her country. Since the 2009 coup, the murder rate in Honduras has risen by 50%. Many of those murdered are environmental defenders and lesbian, gay and trans rights activists. Another member of Cáceres’ organization, Nelson Garcia, was assassinated two weeks later on March 15. Groups around the world continue to call for justice for the slain environmental defenders.

**Colombian coal miners and company sign collective agreement.** Francisco Ramirez, the Colombian union leader who visited the Maritimes in November 2015 to talk about the coal that NB Power buys and burns at its Belledune power plant, reports that El Cerrejón, the mining company, and the union signed a collective agreement on March 15, 2016. NB Power has been buying approximately 500,000 tonnes of coal from Cerrejón, the world’s largest open-pit coal mine, since the mid-nineties. NB Power CEO Gaëtan Thomas wrote to Cerrejón President Roberto Junguito on Feb. 16, 2016, acknowledging problems at the mine and requesting that the rights of labour and indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities be respected by the company. The letter from NB Power was requested after Ramirez, who has survived eight known assassination attempts for his union activity, met with NB Power and requested such a letter and that the public utility put conditions on their purchase of coal from the mine.



**St. Thomas University Social Work students working with Refugees Welcome Fredericton drew attention to Colombian blood coal at their Social Action Fair on March 14, 2016** Blood coal is a term used to describe the violent displacements of communities for the coal and the murders of union leaders in Colombia.  
Photo by Rebekah Reid.

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