



# The Brief

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## Edmundston workers, pensioners and students have many reasons to occupy

By TRACY GLYNN

The Occupy movement has spread to the smaller city of Edmundston in northern New Brunswick. Occupations of public spaces have been ongoing since October 15th in the larger cities of Fredericton, Saint John and Moncton. Around 50 people, mostly students but also workers and retirees, demonstrated in front of Edmundston City Hall during the afternoon of Saturday, October 29th.

"I'm here today because of social and economic inequality," said Nicole Ouellet, a caregiver for the elderly who is making the same salary today in Edmundston that she made thirty years ago in Montreal. "Food prices are going up all the time but not our salaries," remarked Ouellet.

At an age when she should be planning her retirement and enjoying time with her grandchildren, Ouellet has gone back to work in caregiving, a sector traditionally dominated by women that is today considered underpaid by pay equity advocates. Caregivers like Ouellet and her male co-worker who also participated in Occupons Edmundston would benefit from long-awaited pay equity legislation in the province. Pay equity is equal pay for work of equal or comparable value. Skill, responsibility, effort and working conditions are factors long ignored in jobs predominately done by women.

"My husband must work in Alberta. One of our kids is forced to work outside the province. We wish we could live near our kids so that we could get to know our grandkids," said Ouellet.

France Ritchie, Ouellet's friend, who gave some of the students a hug upon her arrival, said, "They take \$30 away from the poor all the time instead of ending the war. I'm old enough so it doesn't affect me to protest. A lot of people are afraid to lose their jobs or their reputation and that's why they're not out in the streets. We're here to support the people occupying Wall Street. We will not take it anymore. It started in Egypt. I knew it was only a matter of time before it spread here."

André Charest, who came out because his 15 year old son, Emmanuel, felt it important to attend, said, "I'm against the model we have. The majority pays while a minority puts it in their pockets." The father and son held signs that conveyed this message. They were greeted with many honks of support from passing motorists. "I may be young but I'm going to feel the consequences," said Emmanuel Charest.

The majority of the people who participated in Occupons Edmundston were students from the Edmundston campus of Université de Moncton. They sang protest songs that warmed the crowd during the chilly October afternoon.

Two targets of protest have appeared at the Occupy sites; one attacks corporate greed and the banks while the other takes aim at the system, namely capitalism. Opponents of the latter target do not feel that equality will result from tweaking the system, regulating the banks or policy reform. They point out that the oppression of workers and crises are inherent to capitalism. The latest crisis, its effect on workers, and now the Occupy movement have created opportunities to question capitalism and discuss another form of economic and social relations in which every worker is able to control their lives and realize their full potential, dreams and

capacities.

"I'm here to protest against capitalism," said Sebastien Levesque, one of the university students studying philosophy, politics and history. "It's an important contemporary problem. The system is destroying everything including the environment." Étienne Rousseau, another university student, who held a sign with the popular Occupy slogan, "Capitalism isn't broken, it was built that way," agreed with Levesque. "I hate the system. The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. It's expensive to study right now. We are the next generation. We have to do something," said Rousseau.

Dominic Duval, an arts and social sciences student, organized Occupons Edmundston after waiting for someone to organize it and no one did. "The Occupy movement has spread to over 80 countries and 1600 cities. It is important for Edmundston to do its part. We don't want to promote the status quo. We want change. We need change," said Duval.

Nicole Ouellet said the Fraser Papers' pensioners in Edmundston who lost about 35 per cent of benefits in their pensions are part of their movement. When Fraser Papers received protection under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act in 2009, Brookfield Asset Management, its controlling shareholder, sold part of the company to itself and divested itself of pension obligations for all their pensioners and current workers.

Brookfield Asset Management, with former New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna on its board, came under fire recently at the original Occupy Wall Street location for threatening to evict Occupy participants in Zucotti Park, which has been renamed Liberty Square by Occupy participants. Brookfield owns Zucotti Park. The company called for the cleaning of the park but their calls were not successful and the occupation continues.

Like Nicole Ouellet, some of the pensioners have been forced to return to work to pay the bills. In a letter published on Canada Newswire on October 27th, Jacques Sarlabous, a Fraser Papers' mill pensioner, said he sent 134 resumes over a five month period and got three part-time jobs at minimum wage. Sarlabous said he had to take the jobs because he and his wife suffer from serious health conditions that require costly medications.

Sarlabous wrote, "I worked at the Fraser Papers' mill in Edmundston, New Brunswick for 36 years. On each pay cheque, I contributed a portion of my wages to the pension fund, which I believed would be a guaranteed investment. In 2009, with talks of a potential bankruptcy at Fraser, I decided to withdraw my pension plan with the aim of securing my assets. I signed documents and withdrew the first pension



**Protesters at the Occupy Edmundston rally join in the global Occupy movement. Edmundston has experienced its fair share of economic hard times, prompting students, pensioners and workers to gather to speak out against the unfairness of the capitalist system.** Photo by Tracy Glynn.

payment that I was entitled to. Unfortunately, I was able to benefit from my full pension for only three months. Having given 36 years of my life to Fraser Papers, I got a full pension for three months. In other words, one month of pension for every 10 years of service!"

Edmundston pensioners were among the first to participate in Occupy actions in Canada. Organized as the Victims of Brookfield Association, with a membership of 800 retirees, four Edmundston pensioners and two Thurso, Quebec pensioners participated in Occupy Toronto and demonstrated in front of the Toronto offices of Brookfield Asset Management on October 15th. They shared their stories of losing their hard-earned pensions.

It's not the first time that the pensioners occupied Brookfield Asset Management's head offices in Toronto. On January 2010, union leader Gaétan Ménard and Fraser Papers' pensioners occupied the company's office. According to the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers' Union, the union representing the pensioners and workers, CEO Bruce Flatt was "not concerned" that pensioners could lose 40% of their pensions as a result of the company's restructuring plan. A year later, the pensioners and union leaders occupied the office again in an attempt to have the company reinstate the workers' pensions. The workers were escorted out of the office both times.

"Why the Occupy movement? Because too many laws in this country are about protecting big corporations, not workers," wrote Sarlabous.

## Why I am participating in Occupy Fredericton

By TAEYON KIM

"Knowing what is enough is true wealth." The Tao Te Ching

As we prepared to head out to Occupy Fredericton's rally, I asked my 9-year-old if he understood what the whole occupation movement was about. Nope.

Ok. I drew a circle and shaded in a small segment. "Oh!" He looked excited. He'd seen this before in his math class, and before I could explain, he said, "I know, I know, it's a pie!"

Yes. Ok. Imagine you're at a birthday party and there are ten kids. One kid gets this whole big piece, and the rest of the nine kids have to split what's left. Is that fair? He looked offended, "No way."

Any kid can understand this. We take so much pains to nurture sharing and fairness in our children. But then, when we send them off into the big wide world, suddenly they're confronted with a system where sharing is suspect and fairness is naive. If you want to get ahead and "succeed" in this system, otherwise known as capitalism,

then you'd better unlearn the values you learned as a child.

But in that birthday cake scenario, our family would probably have gotten a pretty decent piece of that cake, though not as much as that 1% kid. We would probably have enough. Because within the 99%, some of us are still better off than others, some of us still have a job, a home, and a decent income. So if we're doing so well, why did I go to the Occupy Fredericton rally?

Call me naive and my motives suspect, but I still hold to those values I grew up with as a child: sharing and fairness. Only now, as an adult, I call them equity and justice. Any movement for justice must rely on more than self-interest. It must tap into the conscience of those who are not directly suffering to recognize that we cannot live a moral life while others suffer because of us.

For years, we didn't see how people in other parts of the world suffered at our expense. Because of our foreign policies fashioned by multinational corporations, because of our insatiable desire for cheap consumer goods, because of our careless destruction of the environment and overuse of natural resources, because of... *(continued on page 2)*



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