



# The Brief

Vol. 9 No. 4

A publication of the NB Media Co-op

December/January 2018

nbmediacoop.org

## Guatemalan feminist hip hop artist raises voice against state femicide

By JACKIE MCVICAR



Rebeca Lane joins a demonstration in Buenos Aires. Photo courtesy: China Diaz.

“Who knows what March 8 is?” Rebeca Lane is half-way through her hip hop show in Fredericton and the question seems almost trite after 30 minutes of singing about reclaiming identity and feminism. Everyone looks around; it’s a no-brainer.

“International Women’s Day.”  
“And what do you do on International Women’s Day?”  
People mention flowers, marches, and a feminist dance party.  
“I’m going to tell you about one of the most iconic cases in the last few years,” says Lane.

At each of her four performances on Canada’s east coast during her first tour in the country, Lane dedicates a song to the 56 girls who were burned in a fire while stuck under lock and key at a state-run safe-house in Guatemala on March 8, 2017. Forty-one of the girls caught in the blaze died, some immediately from smoke inhalation and injuries, others in the hours and days following the fire.

Lane tells the story of how youth who had been taken into the care of the state and placed in the shelter — both boys and girls — had reported torture, sexual abuse, forced prostitution, and violence while in the safe house. “Nine of the 56 girls were pregnant at the time they were killed. And they didn’t come pregnant to the shelter,” says Lane. They were made to eat rotten food and lived in inhumane conditions.

On March 7, the guards at the safe house opened the gates – for reasons still unknown – and those in custody left. “It looks almost like they were framing this, it was like they wanted this to happen,” said Lane, who knows the minute details of the case. They were hunted down by hundreds of police and forced back into care. The police separated the boys into the cafeteria and the girls were locked up into a small classroom (about 13 by 33 feet) with 22 mattresses.

After being cramped up for more than 12 hours with no food and not allowed to go to the bathroom, the girls lit one of the mattresses on fire to call on the police to open the doors. But the police didn’t respond. Instead, according to some of the survivors, police taunted the girls, calling them whores and saying that if they were brave enough to escape the night before, they should be brave enough to withstand the fire. Later, police claimed they couldn’t find the key to release the victims. Lane explains that the girls were locked up for nine minutes before the door was finally opened

“This has completely changed March 8 for us. We have a state that still massacres people,” says Lane, drawing a connection to Guatemala’s 36-year internal armed conflict. She compares the fire in 2017 to the burning of the Spanish embassy in the country and almost everyone in it in 1982. Lane has been working with a small group of women to support the survivors and their struggle for justice and to give some happiness back to the girls – there is a go-fund-me campaign to pay for an upcoming birthday party.

But Lane is quick to add that while the state upholds and perpetuates the system of violence, most of the attacks against women are at the hands of their boyfriends, husbands, fathers, brothers, and lovers. “They are killed in the name of love,” she says.

These murders are often framed as crimes of passion, but Lane and other feminists aim to shift the narrative to recognize

them as femicides. Activists also labeled the death of the 41 girls in the shelter fire last year a state femicide, drawing attention to role in the tragedy of government negligence and neoliberal policies that disenfranchise the most vulnerable.

“Every month, 62 women are killed violently. That means 15 women per week. Last year, there were 739 violent deaths. This year alone, until the end of September, there have been 588 — 373 by gunfire, 144 were strangled, 63 killed by knife. Eight women were dismembered and 1,034 young girls under the age of 14 were raped and left pregnant, unable to get a legal abortion,” Lane reads from a recent report by one of Guatemala’s largest national newspapers from her phone.

“We are living this post-war moment. But it’s weird, because living there, you feel the war never ended,” she says. “There are so many armed groups in Guatemala, you don’t even know where the violence is coming from sometimes. But the Guatemalan state has a lot of responsibility in violence against women.”

Lane is a self-described “artist” who uses music and poetry to expose and condemn state violence in Guatemala from the genocidal internal armed conflict in the 1980s to today.

During her first Canadian tour, organized by the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network with stops in Halifax, Antigonish, Charlottetown, Fredericton, Toronto, and Montreal, she highlighted shocking statistics of violence against women in the Central American country and the role of the state in perpetuating misogyny. “There’s a very schizophrenic way of seeing us either as saints when we’re mothers and whores when we are not,” she says. She also drew parallels between state violence in the 1980s to what is happening today, through songs like “Cumbia de la memoria” (Cumbia of Memory).

“Sexual violence in a war is evil. When there were massacres in Guatemala, they slaughtered all the men and raped the women and let them live because they wanted them to bear their children,” Lane explains. “And many women were forced to bear the children of the enemy. Coming back to the community was a thing of shame.” There has been a very long process to support women victims of sexual assault from over 30 years ago, says Lane, to help the women in their healing and to free themselves from guilt and shame.

Lane lives as an outspoken feminist activist in a country that is both unsafe for women and hostile toward human rights defenders. When asked about her work in the face of these dangers, Lane expresses that she sees no other option but to raise her voice in the face of injustice, even though she knows she could be risking her life.

“I want to live, not survive. Go out on the street and not feel like I have to defend myself and that your words can’t offend me and your weapons can’t attack me,” she sings. “I want to build a country that allows me to laugh, smile, dream, sing, dance, live.”

Jackie McVicar coordinated Rebeca Lane’s tour to Canada through her work with the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network. She has worked closely with human rights defenders in Guatemala since 2004.

This article was first published by Upside Down World. Read the full story at nbmediacoop.org.

## East Saint John residents offered gift cards instead of answers on “snow” from Irving Oil refinery

By TRACY GLYNN

Residents of an East Saint John community are concerned about the release of a mysterious snow-like substance from the Irving Oil refinery on Nov. 12.

Two days after the release, Irving Oil sent a letter to some Red Head residents revealing that the white powder was particulate matter from Canada’s largest oil refinery.

In the letter, Irving Oil’s Community Relations Specialist Rebecca Belliveau apologized for a technical issue during the start-up of the Fluidized Catalytic Cracking Unit that resulted in the release of particulate matter. The letter did not disclose what was in the particulate matter, the amount or the extent of the release or whether it was a public health concern. Enclosed in the letter was a \$30 Irving gift card.

Lynana Astephen, a Red Head resident, says she is waiting for a response from Irving Oil about what exactly was released.

“The letters do not reveal what toxic chemicals were released and what harm it is to their health. Was this in violation to any environmental regulations and are residents being bribed with a measly gift card?” says Astephen.

Department of Environment spokesperson Marc André Chiasson told CBC on Nov. 15 that his department is investigating while noting that the release is probably more of “nuisance” than cause for any real concern. However, lung health advocates point to how particulate matter can damage lungs.

Particulate matter is not the only environmental health concern weighing heavily on the residents of Red Head and other East Saint John communities, including Champlain Heights and Forest Hills, located next to a cluster of industrial polluters.

Residents there breathe air with benzene and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs) at levels that exceed safe human health guidelines. Air quality monitoring in 2012 and 2013 revealed benzene levels of around 0.45 ppb, which exceeds Ontario’s safe benzene level of 0.14 ppb. New Brunswick has yet to establish a safe guideline for the carcinogen in the air.

“Residents of Saint John are already subject to 38 times the industrial pollution released in Fredericton and 243 times the amount released in Moncton,” according to Inka Milewski in a story by the NB Media Co-op.

Milewski conducted a study on cancer in New Brunswick’s communities in 2009. Her research found that lung cancer rates in Saint John were 40 to 50 per cent higher than in Fredericton and Moncton while smoking rates in the city were lower than not only the provincial rate but also the national rate.

Beyond advocating for a community health assessment in Saint John, Milewski wants environmental regulations in the province to be strengthened and enforced to better protect public health. However, the largest industrial interest in the province is considered the largest roadblock to better regulations.



The Irving Oil refinery in Saint John, Canada’s largest oil refinery. Photo by Pete Johnston.



# Workers demonstrate against increasing employer control of WorkSafe NB

By NORM KNIGHT



**CUPE NB, representing public sector workers in New Brunswick, organized a rally on Oct. 24 to call for restoration of funds to workers’ compensation at pre-1992 levels.** Photo by Simon Ouellette/CUPE NB.

One front-line staff person, Tamara Elisseou, spoke to the rally about issues that she and her colleagues are facing in the workplace when it comes to processing claims and dealing with injured workers who are in crisis.

WorkSafe NB, the program responsible for compensating workers in this province who are hurt on the job, has buckled under employer pressures to reduce contributions to the system, said Daniel Légère, president of CUPE New Brunswick, the union that organized the rally.

According to Légère, this has led to a decrease in the rate of compensation received by the worker, excessive and continually increasing wait times for workers in getting their claims processed, and the loss of some rehabilitation services formerly available to injured workers.

Patrick Colford, president of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, in a passionate address to the rally said: “For too long, WorkSafe New Brunswick has bowed down to the demands of the employers. Workers have given up way too much. It’s time for us to stand shoulder to shoulder, unite all workers, and demand better of the people who are put in these positions to represent us.”

Labour leaders say that recent decisions by the WorkSafe NB board of directors have been biased in favour of employers.

New Brunswick New Democratic Party leader Jennifer McKenzie told the crowd that “For about 30 years now, employers have benefited from some of the lowest premiums in this country, while workers suffer from the deeming process, the three-day waiting period, and other Work Safe policies that do not follow the spirit of workers’ compensation legislation.”

WorkSafe NB is the inheritor of workers’ compensation schemes going back to 1918 legislation, which took away worker’s rights to sue their employers over injuries and substituted instead a guaranteed, collective insurance program.

The program is funded entirely by mandatory

employer contributions calculated as a percentage of a worker’s salary.

Workers’ compensation in New Brunswick almost went bankrupt in the early 1990s because employer contributions were too low relative to pay-outs to injured workers. In 1993, the Liberal government of Frank McKenna responded to the problem by passing Bill 55, which slashed the amounts workers were entitled to receive, as well as placing a heavier onus of proof on the shoulders of the worker.

Légère recalled that this marked a serious downturn in the position of injured workers: “Everybody involved in the reform in 1993 did the workers of New Brunswick a disfavou... McKenna had two options: he could make the employers pay the premium they had to pay in order to maintain the services to injured workers; or cut services to injured workers. He chose the latter.”

Since then there have been opportunities to restore the position of workers but these have been passed up by successive governments.

“Since the 1990s, there have been years when Work Safe has had massive surpluses, but instead of using those surpluses to give benefits back to workers, they’ve lowered the employers’ rates even further,” said Légère. “Even with a fifty percent increase, the employers’ rates would be lower than they were in 1992.”

The employer contribution rate for 2017 is \$1.48 per \$100 of assessable payroll. In 1991, it was \$2.40 per \$100 of assessable payroll.

The union leaders say that the reduction in employer contributions has put WorkSafe once again on the brink of insolvency. They say that recently the executive board of WorkSafe, a Crown corporation supposedly operating at arms-length from the provincial government, found that a 30 to 50 percent increase in employer contributions would be needed to maintain worker benefits at their current levels. The fact that the board then announced on Oct. 2 a much lower increase of only 15 percent appears to the unions as evidence of inability or unwillingness on the part of the board to exercise its mandate in the face of government or employer pressure.

While the economies at WorkSafe mainly impact injured workers, front-line staff of WorkSafe itself are also feeling an effect.

Légère said that due to the lengthening of times for claim processing, staff are interacting with injured workers who are increasingly frustrated and, at times “nasty.” “It’s a very stressful environment to work in,” he said.

One front-line staff person, Tamara Elisseou, spoke to the rally about issues that she and her colleagues are facing in the workplace when it comes to processing claims and dealing with injured workers who are in crisis. “My members are coming to me on a daily basis and they’re reporting that they’re overworked, they’re burnt out, and they’re not being replaced when they’re absent.” This further impairs the ability of the company to serve workers in a “timely manner.”

Elisseou, president of CUPE Local 1866, reported that, “We have been bringing these issues to the executive leadership at WorkSafe NB for over two years and we have been told that they have no intention of adding any more front-line staff.”

Deploing the general deterioration of the program, Légère said: “We’re drawing the line in the sand now. It’s time to push this back.”

*Norm Knight is a Fredericton activist who writes about labour and environmental issues*

continued from page 1

## Gift cards instead of answers on “snow” from Irving Oil refinery

Irving Oil has a track record of not complying with environmental regulations and for causing a number of “environmental emergencies” at its facilities in Saint John and elsewhere in eastern Canada. The emergencies include petroleum spills of up to 3,000 barrels and refinery emissions of sulfur dioxide that exceed allowable levels.

The provincial government has also been blamed for not forcing the company to comply or do environmental impact assessments, such as on its oil-by-rail terminal that emit VOCs.

Operational problems have plagued the Irving Oil refinery since at least 2010, causing the release of ash-like substances into Saint John’s air, which worry residents, as reported by *The National Observer* in their 2016 House of Irvings series.

Meanwhile, Astephen, as she awaits a response from Irving Oil and the provincial government, has been researching the release of white powder at oil refineries in other places. She notes that a Caltex Refinery in Australia was fined \$60,000 after white dust and waste gas was released from their facility in two separate incidents in 2014. The white dust that fell there also covered cars as well as workers.

“Refineries are located in so-called cancer alleys. This is no exception,” says Astephen.

*Tracy Glynn is a contributor and editor with the NB Media Co-op.*

## NB Media Co-op’s Dallas McQuarrie wins Beth McLaughlin Environmental Journalism Award

Dallas McQuarrie of the NB Media Co-op was chosen as the 2016 first-place award winner of the Beth McLaughlin Environmental Journalism Award.

The judges, Bruce Wark, Erin Steuter and Roland Chiasson, noted McQuarrie’s “detailed coverage of the sharply declining health of New Brunswick’s forests citing experts such as wildlife biologist Rod Cumberland on decreasing deer populations due to clearcutting and herbicide spraying. Dallas also focused attention on activists such as Peter Gilbert of Stop Spraying New Brunswick who is campaigning for sustainable forestry practices that protect and create jobs.”

Sarah Kardash nominated McQuarrie. She wrote:

“Dallas shares a similar spirit, heart and conviction that drove Beth McLaughlin to join environmental movements and write about environmental problems. He is committed to the environment and respect for indigenous rights as evident by the news stories he chooses to cover and how he covers them. He lifts the voices of the indigenous land defenders and the local environmentalists so they can be clearly heard.”



**CBC’s Gabrielle Fahmy and NB Media Co-op’s Dallas McQuarrie were recognized for their environmental reporting at the Conservation Council’s awards ceremony in honour of the late Beth McLaughlin on Nov. 19, 2017.** Photo by Nancy Arsenault.

## Community Calendar

To list your community event, email **info@nbmediacoop.org**. For an updated listing of events, check **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. In Fredericton, films are screened on Fridays during the fall and winter at 7:00 pm at Conserver House, 180 St. John St. Check out film schedules and venues, or start your own chapter at: [cinemapolitica.org](http://cinemapolitica.org).

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