30 groups call on New Brunswick to protect tenants during pandemic

Lynaya Astephen is a candidate in the Saint John municipal election, running in Ward 4 (Saint John East). Here, Astephen is at the rally for tenant rights in Saint John on March 11. Tenants gathered in Saint John’s King’s Square to call on the Higgs government to increase tenant protections by implementing a two per cent rent increase cap, a moratorium on rent increases and a moratorium on evictions until New Brunswick’s renter households experience the beginning of the pandemic, say the tenant advocates.

“New Brunswick tenants face exorbitant rent hikes, as high as 50 and 62 per cent, more than 30 organizations, including service providers, labour unions, and anti-poverty, Indigenous, multicultural and student groups are calling on the province to put into place immediate rent caps and support for tenants who are struggling during the COVID pandemic.”

“We know that this pandemic exacerbates existing inequalities. In a province so profoundly impacted by socio-economic poverty, and where the social safety net is badly torn, there is an urgent need for housing security while we try to weather this storm,” said Tobin Haley, an organizer with the New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights who is also a sociologist at Ryerson University.

The New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights, Saint John’s Human Development Council and other groups released the open letter to Premier Blaine Higgs and Services of New Brunswick Minister Mary Wilson at a media conference on February 9.

“The letter calls for an immediate two per cent cap on rent increases and a moratorium on evictions until New Brunswick returns to the green phase. They also recommend the establishment of a rent bank, the rollout of a Canada-New Brunswick Housing Benefit under the National Housing Strategy, and a provincial affordable housing commission. The tenant advocates say that rent increases are far outpacing median incomes in the province and that housing is becoming less affordable. They are also drawing attention to how tenants have little to no protection from rent increases and evictions, a condition that puts more people at risk of being homeless during a pandemic.”

The challenges tenants faced were happening well before the beginning of the pandemic, say the tenant advocates.

According to the Canadian Rental Housing Index, 36 per cent of New Brunswick’s renter households experience unaffordable housing where they spend 30 per cent or more on rent and utilities. Fourteen per cent of renter households in the province experience severe unaffordable housing.

Tenant Mel Theriault told the media conference that he wants to see the facts before considering rent control. New Brunswickers are being forced out of their homes by out of control rent increases during a pandemic.

The open letter notes that the province’s vacancy rate has dropped while tenant shelter costs have risen 14 per cent between the last two censuses. The letter goes on to state that this instability is disproportionately experienced by lone female parents, people with disabilities, Black and Indigenous People, and People of Colour.

At the public release of the letter, Randy Hatfield of the Human Development Council noted that vacancy rates in the province are dropping, employment rates have not recovered, and monthly rent rates are increasing.

“We’ve been told to stay home and be safe, avoiding the virus means needing a safe place to live,” Hatfield said. “We need to concentrate on homelessness prevention, and getting more people out of the shelter system than are going in, it’s that simple.”

Haley recommended that the province use the $25 million in unclaimed security deposits to establish a Rent Bank similar to those in other provinces. A rent bank would allow tenants with that kind of support. We know that the pandemic exacerbates existing inequalities, I think that landlords would be in favour of a rent bank because they still get their rent,” Haley explained.

Companies like Historica Developments in Saint John recently acquired Hazen Property Management properties. In November of 2020, Hazen was known by tenants for its well maintained, affordable apartments. Luxury-apartment brand Historica has come under scrutiny in recent months, with tenants voicing concern over formerly affordable listings being advertised as more expensive, sometimes with as much as a 30 per cent increase.

Suffolk Fog is currently researching the surveillance of Indigenous rights activists, land defenders, and others who might be opposed to mining activities near the Hammond River in rural Upham. The project was funded by the Ontario Anti-Oil Sands Campaign and MiningWatch Canada, an organization that supports communities affected by mining.

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For author Kuyek, the visit was not entirely surprising. The second activist was a woman by the name of Ian Adams, who was researching a book on police surveillance of activists at the time, that the RCMP had a file on her. Kuyek helped co-found and establish the Ontario Tenants Association and MiningWatch Canada, an organization that supports communities affected by mining.

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Kuyek’s book tour in New Brunswick occurred the same week that New Brunswick announced it was giving a conditional approval to a J.D. Irving-owned gypsum mine near the Hammond River in rural Upham. The project was criticized by local residents who feared the mine would affect their well water and roads. Earlier that year, Sarah Blisen and her neighbours were dismissed to learn that their opposition to the mine had made them targets of RCMP surveillance.

In 2017, Wolastoq Grand Council Chief Ron Tremblay and activists against the Energy East pipeline expressed concern over Constable Spacek’s presence at meetings. Spacek told The National Observer that her job is “liaisoning with First Nations groups and with industry. Just regular, normal information.”

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Growing support to end New Brunswick’s punitive social assistance policies

By DALLAS MCKARRIE

30 groups demand tenant protections

affordable, and they can increase their profits by competing with the price of new builds,” Hayes said.

Hayes, a sociologist who studies social inequality at St. Thomas University, argues that beyond the measures outlined in the open letter, broader tenant reform is needed.

“No Hot Cargo” action in Saint John in July 1979, dubbed “the single most “dramatic example of Canadian trade union solidarity” with workers in developing nations, was carried out by Saint John’s branch of International Longshoremen Association (Local 273) in collaboration with anti-nuclear and Argentinian human rights activists. The protests opposed shipments of Ontario-made combat vehicles called Light Armoured Vehicles (LAVs) to Saudi Arabia to be used in the war on Yemen.

In 1976, a military junta launched a coup to overthrow the democratically-elected Peron government in Argentina. It carried out widespread tortures and forced disappearance against tens of thousands of activists and political opponents. As a result of Saint John protest, future nuclear sales to Argentina were cancelled and the junta released 14 political prisoners.

In 2003, the Saint John Longshoremen joined other Longshoremen to declared “hot cargo” to military shipments as a protest against the War on Iraq. Most recently in 2018, Saint John dock workers honoured the picket line made by peace activists in Argentina. The dock workers refused to unload Light Armoured Vehicles (LAVs) from a ship called Light Armoured Vehicles (LAVs) from a ship bound for New Brunswick.

Photo by Burny Johnston.

Johnston: “The words were inspired by the most recent protests in Saint John against Canada’s arms trade and the New Brunswick government’s support of human rights violations in Argentina. The song is a call to action and a reminder to Saint Johners who might be listening about their powerful history of collective action and demanding better for each other. We need that spirit now more than ever.”