



The Brief

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30 groups call on New Brunswick to protect tenants during pandemic

By ABIGAIL SMITH



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 evictions during COVID and a full revision of the Residential Tenancies Act. Photo by Mark Cunningham.

As 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 income 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 face 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 saw his mother’s uptown Saint John apartment increase in price in September of 2020 after the building’s change in ownership. In order to find a place she could afford, she was forced to move to an unfamiliar neighborhood, much farther away from where she works. Theriault added that this is not an individual issue.

“This is not just my own experience, but that of everyone around me in this wage bracket. I am trying to speak for everyone in this position,” Theriault said.

Angus Fletcher, another organizer with the tenants coalition, says the statistics and tenant stories like Theriault’s should force the government to act: “Premier Higgs says he needs

‘to understand 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 into it, 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 for tenants to apply for small, low interest or interest-free loans to bridge difficult financial periods. Rent Banks like the ones in British Columbia are provincially funded, and their loans are often less than \$1000.

“We are asking that tenant money be used to provide tenants with that kind of support. We know that the pandemic exacerbates existing inequalities. I would 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.

Similar stories are found in Moncton and Fredericton, with tenants complaining of sudden rent hikes from companies like Canada Homes for Rent and Killam Properties, a real estate investment trust that owns approximately 5,000 rental units in New Brunswick alone.

Matthew Hayes, another organizer with the New Brunswick Coalition for Tenant Rights, says the rent hikes are a response to a dip in vacancy while newer, more expensive apartment buildings are being developed.

“Real estate investment trusts are bringing a lot of money to the table and are competing with each other. They realize the supply is limited, it’s increasing but limited. There’s a middle spot in the market that is -from their perspective- relatively

Did the RCMP attend a university book launch to stop a crime?

By TRACY GLYNN

It was not your typical book launch. Now, a formal information request of the RCMP has revealed that police intended to “stop a crime” when they attended a book launch at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick on October 23, 2019.

Two RCMP officers made their presence known at the event, at which the author discussed how communities can defend themselves from mining companies. According to the information request, the RCMP officers were Joanne Spacek and Sebastien LeBlanc.

Dave Thomas is a Mount Allison professor in the politics and international relations department. He organized the book launch of *Unearthing Justice: How to Protect Your Community from the Mining Industry* with author Joan Kuyek. The RCMP visit to the book launch where they introduced themselves to Kuyek at the end of the event prompted Thomas to file an information request on the nature of the visit.

“The information revealed through the access to information request is startling, especially the fact that they cited an exemption to providing the information because the information pertained to the detection, prevention or suppression of crime,” said Thomas.

“On the one hand it is totally absurd to frame an academic discussion of a book as in some way being connected to criminal activity,” said Thomas. “On the other hand, this conforms to existing patterns of police surveillance directed at activists, land defenders, and others who might be opposed to resource extraction.”

For author Kuyek, the visit was not entirely surprising. The seasoned activist says she was told in the 1960s by 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.

“Over the decades, I have tried on occasion to get a copy of any file they might have on me. I was told there was no file under ‘National Security,’ and that I could only get a record of Criminal files, if I told them what crime I had committed, when and where, so of course, I didn’t pursue it,” said Kuyek.

Kuyek said she has been arrested a couple of times for protesting, but the charges were subsequently dropped.

Thomas calls the RCMP presence on campus a threat to academic freedom: “The RCMP showing up to the event was an unwelcome intrusion into an academic space on our campus, and constitutes a serious threat to our academic freedom. Students and faculty need to feel comfortable engaging with all kinds of ideas, even those that challenge dominant paradigms, without fear of being watched by police.”

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 Blenis and her neighbours were dismayed 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 RCMP Constable Joanne Spacek’s presence at meetings. Spacek told The National Observer that her job is “liasioning with First Nations groups and with industry. Just sharing information. And when they organize events that everyone is safe and when they do it, they do it lawfully as well. So, really, my role is liasioning with them... It’s to build relations with industry and First Nations. On a positive note.”

Governments in Canada have a long history of using the RCMP to attack critics of the state and capital and of violating the civil rights of Canadians. The RCMP spied on Tommy Douglas, Canada’s father of Medicare, for three decades. In 1999, activists were blamed for bombing an Alberta oil site but it was later revealed that the RCMP had bombed the site on the instructions of Alberta Energy Company.

Miles Howe, a journalist arrested three times during his coverage of the anti-shale protests near Elsipogtog in 2013, is currently researching the surveillance of Indigenous rights

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RCMP at book launch to stop a crime?

activists and Project SITKA, an RCMP investigation carried out between 2014-2015.

According to Howe, 313 people were originally put on Project Sitka’s list of “suspects, persons of interest or associates of someone who may have committed a crime.” The list of 313 was run through the RCMP’s ‘socio-psychological profiling matrix,’ and further reduced to 89 Indigenous rights activists who were classified as ‘volatile’ or ‘disruptive.’ Forty-five of the 89 Indigenous rights activists were linked to the Elsipogtog protests against shale gas in 2013 and 35 were from New Brunswick.

As documented in the 2018 book, *Policing Indigenous Movements*, by Andrew Crosby and Jeffrey Monaghan, the RCMP is monitoring environmental groups and Indigenous land defenders and communities across Canada.

According to Monaghan, “the police are monitoring and aggregating data from social media that can be used for specific interventions such as crowd control and criminalization of dissent.”

“I have always assumed that left-wing activists in this country were under surveillance, so I don’t find the RCMP presence at my book launch particularly surprising. The mining industry will do everything it can to discredit its critics,” said Kuyek.

Tracy Glynn is a NB Media Co-op editorial board member.

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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.

“New Brunswick’s Landlord and Tenant Act offers some of the worst protections for tenants in all of Canada. Things like reasonable enjoyment of one’s home is something tenants in New Brunswick cannot rely on. We are at the mercy of whether or not we have a good landlord to do things like hang pictures on a wall. The Landlord and Tenant Act needs to be updated because more people are renting and we want to make sure we have the same protections that are available to renters in other parts of the country,” said Hayes.

At the State of the Province address on Feb. 10, Higgs said he would take 90 days to review the housing situation. The tenants’ coalition fears that this signals to landlords that if they were thinking of raising rents, they had better do it now. In response to Higgs’ announcement, the coalition said, “After all, 90 days happens to be the exact amount of time for landlords to provide notice to increase rents.”

“Why wait 90 days for something that’s urgently needed right now?” said Hayes.

Abigail Smith is an event planner, theatre technician, and writer. She works and rents in Saint John.

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

By DALLAS MCQUARRIE



Social assistance recipient Robert MacKay says the wage clawback policy hurts both employers and people receiving social assistance who want to work. Photo by Dallas McQuarrie.

Support is growing for changes to a provincial policy that penalizes people who try to get off social assistance by working. New Brunswick’s wage clawback policy means that a minimum wage earner with no dependents sees their pay slashed from \$11.70 an hour to a mere \$3.51 an hour after only 13 hours of work a month.

Reg. 95-61 art. 8 (2)(i) & (ii) of New Brunswick’s Family Income Security Act authorizes the province to seize 70 per cent of all wages in excess of \$150 a month earned by a single social assistance recipient. Families of two or more people are allowed to earn \$200 a month before the province begins seizing 70 per cent of their wages.

“The proposed reform would allow all people on social assistance to earn \$500 a month before their social assistance payments are reduced,” said Auréa Cormier, a spokesperson for the Moncton Chapter of the Common Front for Social Justice. “So far, more than 25 provincial organizations have endorsed the proposed reform.”

Common Front members, including Auréa Cormier, met with Social Development Minister Bruce Fitch in January to discuss the issue.

“The wage clawback policy needs be changed so that people living in poverty have a chance to get off social assistance and

become financially independent,” Cormier said, “reforming the policy will really help businesses, notably small ones, to find the workers they need.”

“Rather than helping people become financially independent, clawing back 70 per cent of their wages after such a few hours of work actually penalizes people on social assistance for working and has the effect of locking individuals and families into perpetual poverty.”

“As well as encouraging more people to work, allowing all social assistance recipients to keep the first \$500 a month they earn would eliminate their fear that earnings subject to the claw back might cause the loss of their social assistance, medicare card, and other benefits,” Cormier added.

“Even when social assistance people are able to work, the current regulation only allows them to keep a small part of their earnings and so ensures their income will remain below the poverty line,” she said, “The proposed change would allow social assistance recipients to improve their lives.”

Robert MacKay is a social assistance recipient living in Moncton who currently receives \$567 a month to cover all his living costs, including rent, food, clothing, utilities, telephone, and incidentals like toiletries.

“The current wage claw back policy hurts me, hurts potential employers and it breeds cynicism,” MacKay said, “Why should people who already live in poverty give the government 70 percent of all wages after their first \$150 in earnings?”

MacKay points out that studies have shown that people with low or no incomes generally have poorer health and live shorter lives than those with adequate incomes. He notes that allowing people on social assistance to earn \$500 before their social assistance is reduced would allow them to have healthier diets, and to increase their security and self-esteem.

Cormier thinks the government will give serious consideration to the proposed reform because it would benefit the community generally, and businesses in particular.

“All the wages earned by social assistance recipients are spent in their local communities,” she said, “and increased local spending means increased income for local businesses, which helps create new jobs and strengthens the provincial economy.”

“As well, health care costs will be reduced as recipients’ mental and physical health improves,” she said, “Many employers need temporary workers at peak times, and social assistance recipients can fill this gap, if the wage exemption policy is increased to \$500.”

The proposed reform would greatly simplify matters for small businesses. Since a 20 hour a week, half-time job is slightly more than 80 hours a month, an employer currently needs to hire six or more recipients to avoid the claw back which limits each recipient to fewer than 13 hours a month.

Like MacKay, Eddie (not his real name) is a social assistance recipient. He says the current system is a big deterrent to people on social assistance willing to work.

“A clawback of 70 per cent traps us in the system, but a fair system would give people a chance to escape living in poverty,” Eddie said, “Very few people would choose to be dependent [on social assistance] if another option was available.”

Dallas McQuarrie is a retired journalist living in St. Ignace on the unceded Mi’kmaq territory of Siksnihtuk.

“No Hot Cargo”: An ode to Saint John port worker solidarity

By DATA BRAINATA

Saint John’s The Backstays just released a new ode to labour with “No Hot Cargo.” The track will be included on the band’s new album Tributaries due out this spring.

Longshoremen, the port workers who load and unload ships, historically declare “hot cargo” to any shipment they refuse to load or move based on ethical grounds and solidarity.

The “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 Argentine expatriate civil rights activists. The action shut down the port of Saint John to block the shipment of heavy water needed for a Canadian-made nuclear reactor (CANDU) to Argentina, when it was ruled by a military dictatorship.

In 1976, a military junta launched a coup to overthrow the democratically-elected Perón 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 protesting the shipment of Light-Armoured Vehicles (LAVs) to Saudi Arabia to be used in the war on Yemen.

Pete Johnston formed The Backstays in 2018 and is a member of the NB Media Co-op’s editorial board. The NB Media Co-op interviewed Johnston about the song and his influences.

Can you tell me more about The Backstays’ latest single “No Hot Cargo?” What inspired it and what is it trying to say?

Johnston: The words were inspired by the most recent protests in Saint John against Canada’s arms trade and the sale and shipment of Ontario-made combat vehicles called Light Armoured Vehicles or LAVs. In part, the song is sort of grappling with the ruthless sort of attacks on organized labour and other democratizing forces and institutions since the hot cargo strike in Saint John in 1979.

Can you also tell me more about The Backstays, e.g. the background story behind it and the music that influences it?

Johnston: So many varied influences and it changes all the time. We’re a local band. But even if in a small way, one thing I hope we are doing with this song is helping to remind 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.



Photo from The Backstays bandcamp site.

What are the local features that you like to bring to your music?

Johnston: I’m not really sure but it feels feudal doesn’t it? New Brunswick governments don’t really seem to care that much about people. They restrict or defund anything that helps people. Politicians are more interested in market abstractions and old ideas and lies to try to justify existing illegitimate hierarchies. They watch these few billionaires siphon all the wealth out and grant whatever egregious demands they have, no matter how harmful to the people or land for what? Some twisted sense of economic stability or protection in return? As if this is our only option. We need a Green New Deal in New Brunswick and the kind of wartime-esque state mobilization to get us out of this pandemic and out from under this horrendous, but fragile oligarchy.

Data Brainata is a permaculturalist-in-training with an interest in politics.

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