June 1992: General Strike in New Brunswick

By DAVID FRANK

“A McKenna No Trust/Aucune confiance en McKenna”: The slogan was widely distributed during the weeks leading up to the 1992 general strike. Photo from Provincial Solidarities: A History of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour by David Frank.

As it turned out, mediators were at work behind the scenes. And when the general strike came, it did not go beyond the membership of CUPE. The first week of June saw picket lines at government offices, schools, hospitals, highway garages, liquor stores and other operations. The government quickly issued injunctions against mass picketing. And the premier did not hesitate to escalate the situation by calling for the dissolution of CUPE as a bargaining agent and threatening to sue the union for millions of dollars in lost sales at the liquor stores.

But McKenna had underestimated the support for the unions among the general public. As the strike continued, several of his closest advisors convinced him to sit down with CUPE national president Judy Derry. Under a complicated arrangement, the government agreed to exempt CUPE from the wage freeze while the union agreed to a contract extension and a modest wage increase at a later date. Also, there would be no fines or other reprisals against union members who went out on the illegal strike. The deal allowed the province to claim the settlement was fiscally responsible, while the union could say they had fought the government to a standstill and defended union rights.

Technically, the four-day general strike that took place in 1992 was a sectoral strike involving workers in a large province-wide union where many groups had a shared grievance against their employer. But the political element was obvious, as these workers were taking drastic action to prove their point. McKenna’s government passed an Expenditure Management Act that suspended scheduled public sector wage increases. Thousands of people turned out to protest in front of the legislature. A Coalition of Public Employees was formed, bringing together several of the affected unions, including nurses and teachers. A complaint that tampering with collective agreements was a violation of international labour standards went to the International Labor Organization, and eventually there would be a decision in favour of the unions.

But McKenna did not wait before deciding to repeat the experiment the next year, after winning re-election against a divided opposition. A second Expenditure Management Act was introduced in 1992, extending existing contracts for two more years, with pay increases limited to no more than 1 and 2 per cent. It looked like the “exceptional” measures of 1991 would not be enough.

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Rental review highlights need for strengthened tenant protections

By ADITYA RAO

Imagine getting an eviction notice on the second day after you move into your new apartment. That’s what happened to one tenant who contacted the New Brunswick Coalition for Tenants Rights after moving to New Brunswick from Nova Scotia at the beginning of this year. After struggling to find a place to rent, they took possession of a unit in a state of some disrepair. A decade later, there is little threat that the new cleaners will ever form a union. The office of a unionized employee is now cleaned by a part-time student. The female who is employed by the contracted cleaning company, wrote Workman. Noting that as he was writing, a cleaner entered his office, he pointed out “the cleanliness and disrepair, the landlord simply asked them to leave, relying on the eviction notice.

Another tenant told us about a rent increase notice they received. The landlord gave them a notice, but the tenant knew that the legal notice requirement for a rent increase is two months on a month-to-month lease. Upon pointing this out to the landlord and demanding legal notice, the tenant was promptly handed one-month eviction notice.

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