

Bathurst: one year after

By JEFF DAVIES

In the fall of 1971, massive layoffs occurred at industries throughout Northeastern New Brunswick. Labour organizations, in response, attempted to focus attention on the problems of this area of the province by staging demonstrations in the city of Bathurst. On January 16, 1972, thousands of workers, students, and other interested persons, as well as federal and provincial politicians, converged on Bathurst for what was to be known as the "Day of Concern".

Father Pierre Poulin is a professor of Sociology at College de Bathurst. He was not a participant in the Day of Concern demonstrations but says he merely "walked, like everybody." He wanted to evaluate the incident because he felt it was a "very important social phenomenon". Nevertheless, he is concerned with the plight of the unemployed in northeastern New Brunswick and feels that problems like this should be raised. Father Poulin is sometimes considered a "trouble-maker" in Bathurst.

It's not hard to see why. Many of the people of Bathurst, it seems, but particularly the business community, would rather forget the Day of Concern ever happened, as they feel it brought adverse publicity to their town. They even feel that it discouraged more businesses from coming to their area, and there's some evidence to support this contention.

We had a brief but certainly revealing interview with Bill Davidson, a Bathurst businessman and city councillor, concerning the demonstrations a year ago. "I think the only ones that had a ball with it were the press," said Davidson. He felt that such publicity would kill the town; he doesn't like to hear Bathurst referred to as a "depressed area."

Davidson lashed out at the "radicals"; the college students from Moncton; the people he felt had no business attending the Day of Concern, but did. "Bathurst is a darn good town," said Davidson, "...they're trying to create something here in Bathurst which doesn't exist." He added that 99 percent of the populace weren't concerned (an interesting term of use) with the Day of Concern but that one percent were "bad blood" and caused trouble.

"We get along real fine here for a small area," said Davidson; he asked us not to give Bathurst any more adverse publicity.

Dave Jonah, general manager of the Bathurst Tribune, one of the two weekly newspapers in the town, doesn't deny that there are problems in Bathurst, but like Davidson, he doesn't think the Day of Concern had a positive effect on the town. Jonah blames the press for many of the problems; he feels, for instance, that people in Toronto were given the impression that riots were raging in Bathurst; "The local media played it for everything it was worth; the provincial media fastened on it as an obvious failure of provincial policies and the national media, egging one another on with daily updates of

the Bathurst situation exposed normally close-mouthed citizens to the barrage of the mass media all across Canada."

"Friends, business acquaintances, and a host of expatriate Maritimers asked repeatedly their friends in Bathurst 'What's going on in good old Bathurst?' From that blair of publicity, Bathurst people became revulsed of the whole affair," said Jonah.

He added that the Day of Concern embarrassed the people of Bathurst, and they haven't been allowed to forget it; "People just don't want to talk about it anymore. They don't even want to think about it."

Jonah maintains that the whole Day of Concern was manufactured by the Public Relations Officer for the United Steelworkers of America in Toronto. Everyone accepted the leadership of the PR man, according to Jonah, because they were stunned by the rash of layoffs and nobody was doing anything about it. He feels that the workers were used by the students, who were in turn used by the promoters. And the promoters, according to Jonah, were only interested in the unemployment situation as it affected the United Steelworkers of America, rather than the overall problem. He thinks that the only ones who do not lock upon the Day of Concern as a failure are the intellectuals.

Jonah, in fact, feels that Gloucester County has "the strongest economy anywhere in the province...you can run out of wood, you can run out of ore in the ground, but you'll never run out of welfare cheques."

Interesting thinking.

As we said, some of the people in Bathurst express the belief that the Day of Concern may have discouraged businesses from setting up operations in their town. We contacted Bob Campbell of Keystone Realty concerning this question. Campbell affirmed that his company had experience with one or two firms which had decided not to come to Bathurst as a result of the Day of Concern activities. One of the companies had gone as far as to purchase land in the town. The land now is up for sale again, Campbell has also heard reports that a couple of companies involved in mortgage financing in Bathurst have curtailed their investment.

Campbell felt, however, that some of the effect of the adverse publicity had worn off. He said that 1972 had been "generally a good year" and that the prospects for 1973 were at least as good if not better. With regards to the crisis which prompted the Day of Concern, Campbell felt that once the facts were examined, "certainly the situation wasn't as serious as the press indicated."

The labor situation in the Bathurst area does seem to have improved somewhat during the past year. In August, the Bathurst Tribune said "Around the town these days there is little evidence of depression. Business is brisk, a lot of tourist dollars are left in local registers, and when the stores close, everyone migrates to the wide sandy beaches on the seashore that rings the city. That's the way it is on the surface." Below the surface, things are still unsettled, and there's no assurance that a situation similar to that which occurred last year won't develop again.

Brunswick Mine Future
LePage express great
Jobs didn't
no projects
Government inaction
Levert, Bishop
northern
work stoppage
N.B. Labor Federation
W. Crisis in
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Below: Protesting the holdup of Unemployment Insurance cheques

