

Book review

Chronicle of NFLD's Serious unemployment

by Valerie Mansour,
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"Now that we've burned our boats..."

The Report of the People's Commission on Unemployment

Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour
Room 206, 77 Bond Street,
St. John's, Newfoundland.

At the annual meeting of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour in the fall of 1977, the People's Commission on Unemployment was formed. Its task was to talk with the people of Newfoundland; the employed and the unemployed, the business people, the politicians, and anyone else who had something to say about the problems with Newfoundland's economy and what might be done about them.

The unemployment situation in Newfoundland is the most severe in the country. Despite Statistics Canada's talent of covering up the real rate, it is generally accepted that the level of unemployment in the province is around 34.9% (March 1978) and increasing all the time.

The Commission spent eight months examining the situation. People, many totally frustrated, spoke candidly about what unemployment was doing to their own lives and to the future of the province. They spoke of the endless list of the government's false promises, the industries that started up and then failed, and the exasperation of not being able to earn their own living. Many Newfoundlanders left home to find work, not because they wanted to explore the wonders of the mainland, but rather because their lives were going nowhere on the island.

There has always been a dream of an industrial Newfoundland—a dream that doesn't make much sense when one considers the province's small population (500,000), its distance from major markets, poor soil, and the high costs of importing raw materials. The Commission points out that the failure of the industrial growth strategy is the root cause of Newfoundland's unemployment problems. There hasn't been enough of a concentration on rural development and fisheries. Instead of supporting the industries that were natural to the province, lifestyles were changed and a process of urbanization took place.

Changes which improved the level of education in the province also resulted in enormous numbers of unemployed teachers and university

graduates. Construction workers were in abundance as well as clerks who were left without jobs when many businesses fell through.

Since the early sixties the Federal government has established a variety of "development" programs. Presently in operation is DREE, the Department of Regional Economic Expansion, which has done little to alleviate the province's unemployment problems. In fact, more than 75% of its budget has gone towards schools and roads. The Commission believes that a program which improves roads to help natural resources leave the province and manufactured good come in, and which builds schools to educate Newfoundlanders so that they can find jobs on the mainland, isn't the main priority. DREE is merely assisting Newfoundland's underdevelopment.

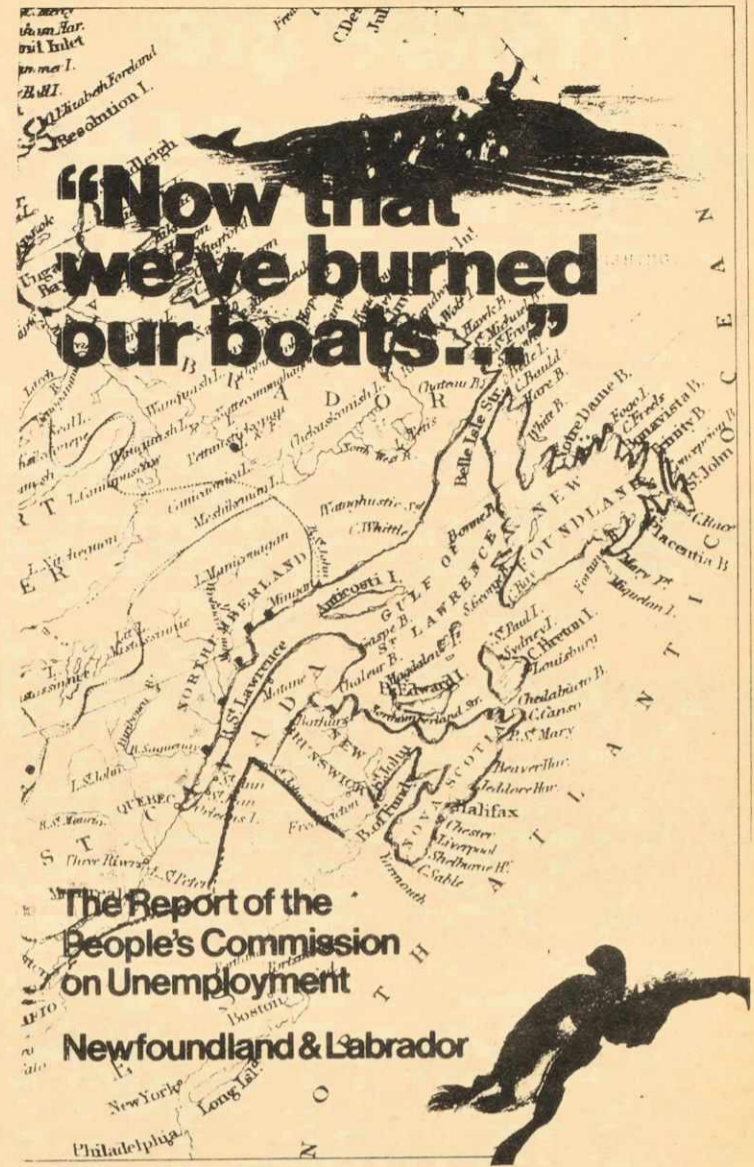
Recent changes in government policy have allowed people to receive UIC without "actively seeking work". People who have given up looking for work out of frustration as well as people who never did enter the job market, are not included in official statistics of the unemployed. The definition of unemployed is narrow and restrictive and does not include all the people who do not have jobs. According to Stats Canada you are only unemployed if you don't have a job and "you have actively looked for a job in the past four weeks, or you have been laid off for less than six months and still expect to return to the same job, or you have terminated employment for any reason and are starting a new job in less than four weeks." This eliminates more than a few Newfoundlanders from being "officially" unemployed. In 1976 a Statistics Canada survey was taken in the province but was never made public. That survey showed there were 25,000 people who met their definition of unemployed while another 28,000 admitted they were in need of a job.

"Now that we've burned our boats..." very effectively chronicles the problems with Newfoundland's economy. We are taught the province's history and what joining confederation meant to Newfoundland's future. Statistical evidence supports statements of the severity of the problems. Newfoundlanders told the Commission precisely what was on their minds and in "Now that we've burned our boats..." the Commission passes that information on to us in a very human way.

The Commission felt it their responsibility to make recommendations for a solution to Newfoundland's troubles.

Naturally they were wary of short-term solutions which help to cover up some effects of unemployment but really don't attack the cause. Instead, they call for the development of a social and economic plan which will suit the needs of the Newfoundland people; a plan which will give Newfoundlanders employment at decent wages. The Commission felt it beyond their bounds to map out in detail precisely how their ideas would work. However, the report ends on a note of optimism that something can be done.

If you want to understand what it means to live in the most underdeveloped part of the country, why it ended up that way, and what can be done about it, "Now that we've burned our boats..." is worthy of reading.



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