

Cape Breton unemployed

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people, working people and students. Journalist Susan Perly was with the Cape Breton demonstrators when they struck for the third time, sitting in for 24 hours at the Canada Works office.

[Transcript Begins:]

COMMITTEE MEMBER:—Ladies and gentlemen, I think we're ready to go now. We're going to drive down to the college parking lot, right behind the post office building which is close to Charlotte Street, and we'll walk down Charlotte Street to the Canada Works office which is about—which is in the Eaton's building. Okay? So we're going to leave now.

SUSAN PERLY:—These people are about to walk through the doors of a federal Canada Works office here in Sydney. On this sunny morning, about two dozen protestors marched down Charlotte Street, the main street in Sydney, with the intention of occupying another office of the federal government.

This is the third time in a week the people concerned about unemployment in Cape Breton have moved in to occupy a federal office in Sydney. They are fed up with the lack of jobs in the industrial area, and they are fed up with the lack of attention from Ottawa. They feel this is the most effective way of getting the government to sit up and take notice.

We're inside the Canada Works office and the demonstrators have spread out their sleeping bags and settled in. They've come well supplied with food and books, radios and a TV set. They're planning to spend the night camped on the carpeted floors of this government office.

The workers in this office don't seem to mind the sit-in, well in progress at their feet. That makes sense. The Canada Works office is part of the Manpower program to create jobs, and the people sitting at the desks here share many of the feelings of the people sitting on the floor. They know that Ottawa is more than 1000 miles away and that the politicians making decisions about their future and future employment on the island don't really care what happens to Cape Breton.

In some people's eyes, the policies of central Canada towards Cape Breton Island could be called economic genocide. Father Al Maroun, a Roman Catholic priest, is the leader of today's demonstration.

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AL MAROUN:—We are being violated. There is actually... the government is practising violence on us. The government has a policy of unemployment to lower the rate of inflation. Now, they are also, I think, deliberately putting the money they do have into the larger centres, where they want to keep the level of unemployment down because there's a lot of votes there—in those larger centres.

There's just no way you could be kind and gentle and nice to people who are violating you. The violence is coming from Ottawa and Halifax. There's a form of violence that they're imposing on us—lack of work, and causing us to lose... to break up our families, to commit suicide, lose our homes. And if a person commits suicide because of a deliberate government policy which drives him to suicide, that is almost, I would say, a murderous act, where you force people to kill themselves.

PERLY:—Across town from the Canada Works office in Sydney is the Steel City Tavern. After a 24 hour sit-in at a government office, it's to this big, busy tavern that Ernie Lewis has come. Ernie is 21 years old and he hasn't worked for the last four months. He's had the typical experience of leaving Cape Breton Island to find work anywhere he can find it in Canada, and he has also, typically, been drawn back to Cape Breton. But, as far as job prospects go, it might be the worst decision he could have made. Ernie Lewis is not

very optimistic about finding work at home.

ERNIE LEWIS:—I've been as far as Thompson, Manitoba with Inco Mines up there, because there was no work here then. That was three years ago. I've been to Toronto and Niagara Falls for a short time, but I always come back because this is my home and I'd like to stay here. Now, my wife has to work. It's a big strain on the wife and children of the family.

PERLY:—If it's this bad now, what do you see in the future?

LEWIS:—The future is very, very dim. I don't plan on the future. If I can feed my family today, then I feed them today. If I can't tomorrow, then somebody's got to answer why I can't. If I'm able and willing to work any time, any time day or night, I don't see why I can't feed my family in Canada.

PERLY:—To most people, Sydney means steel, specifically Sysco, the Sydney Steel Corporation.



The steel plant was taken over by the province of Nova Scotia in 1967 when Hawker Siddeley pulled out. That pullout, and the economic insecurity it heightened, reminded Sydney residents how closely their personal fates are tied to the industrial fate of the steel plant. So they put up with the pink billowing pollution and an outdated plant which limps along, because it still manages to put money into the pockets of thousands of Cape Bretoners.

Without steel, Sydney will die, and people here know that. Some attempts have been made to change that fact and to diversify the economy. About the time the province was taking over Sysco, incentives were being offered to secondary industries to move into the area. One company which came was Canadian Motor Industries. They moved into the Point Edward Industrial Park in 1967 to make Toyotas. They left in 1975.

CMI was the last place that 35 year-old Peter MacNeil worked. He hasn't worked in 21 months, and he hasn't been back to this one-storey white building since he was laid off.

PETER MacNEIL:—I earn \$80 a week now, on unemployment, with four children. Try to outfit two children for school on \$80 a week and maintain rent and lights. I'd like to see some of our politicians do it. They speak of the work that's available. Well, there is work available, probably through grants, LIP grants, but that is not, in my opinion, work. To work 10, 12, 14 weeks, whatever, on a grant, you don't plan anything. You just stay on it 'till you're finished, then you get your forms ready, file for unemployment again, you know. It's not very much to look forward to.

PERLY:—How does being unemployed affect your family life, your personal life at home?

MacNEIL:—To read sometimes I pick up a book and read it. You might read a chapter three times and you really don't know what the first page is about. Your concentration is very bad. And to go to a window and be looking out a window and have somebody pass, you wouldn't really know that they passed. You're looking out the window but you're not seeing. Your concentration takes a very bad beating.

And I think it's a very bad thing for children. They're just starting their lives, and they see you doing this, you know, and some of them wonder,

"Is this what it's about? Is this what's going to happen to me?"

PERLY:—Back across Sydney harbour, high above the city at Hardwood Hill, Jack Haley has come to gain a perspective on the problems of the industrial area. Haley wears many hats. He's a social worker, he's president of the Cape Breton Labour Council and he's chairman of the Cape Breton Committee of Concerned for the Unemployed. Haley is normally a friendly, optimistic man, but he has a lot of bitter things to

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say these days. He knows that the government has not been able to end the economic cycles of boom and bust which private capital set in motion here over 100 years ago. He knows that Cape Breton is a sore example of what federal neglect has done to the Maritimes. He knows that the young people have been forced to leave in droves. Most of all, Jack Haley knows that the final price of unemployment will be calculated in human terms, not in statistics reading out of a computer onto the desk of an Ottawa bureaucrat.

JACK HALEY:—Well, as we stand on top of this point, one of the highest points, I suppose, in the city of Sydney, and I look down at the industrial heartland on one side and the very peaceful, tranquil Kelly Mountain on the other side, you know, I can say that you can see what private enterprise has done to a community like Cape Breton. A community with a stunted growth rate, a lot of uncertainty, mass exodus of people leaving the island, and one of every four in the work force is unemployed and has no hope of getting a job unless something is done soon. It makes me feel, you know, very, very sad that the federal government can allow this to go on in a country that's so wealthy.

There are lots of things that can be done. There's a minimum of 3,000 jobs, a minimum of 3,000 jobs that the government can provide, and they're sitting on them simply because they're waiting for an election to be called and it would be opportune to announce the jobs at that time. They're going to come, there's no question about it, but it's timing, and in the meantime people are suffering while politicians play political games, and we're getting damn well fed up about it.

PERLY:—How far are people willing to go?

HALEY:—Wherever this route will take us. And whatever course of action is required to bring this to the attention of a government and make them act, we're going to do it with every bit of blood that runs in our body. We're deeply committed to seeing this through.

PERLY:—Jack Haley has said that the committee concerned about unemployment in Cape Breton is prepared to go to great lengths to get some action from Ottawa. Violent confrontation is a possibility that has crossed the minds of people here many times. But, whatever the strategy, Haley and the other people angry about unemployment see themselves as part of a long

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tradition of Cape Breton militants. The miners and steelworkers of the island went through bitter struggles and the people on the committee are willing to do that themselves.

After all, they ask, how much more unemployment can be tolerated?

How many more people will go onto the UIC roles and then onto the welfare roles?

And how many will give up trying completely, and take off down the road?

A large part of that answer lies with the people here in Cape Breton, but the biggest part of the answer lies with Ottawa.