

Atlantic unemployed organize

by Mark King
of Canadian University Press

One out of every ten people in Canada's four Atlantic provinces is out of a job this winter. On an average, one in every four adults ready, able and willing to work will not find a job. In some communities only one out of four will find work.

Figures and statistics stand as mute but revealing testimony to years of government indifference and relentless corporate gouging of Atlantic Canada's resources. Behind the numbers are thousands of people, entire communities, left with rising costs at low wages, few jobs, and the nagging uncertainty of not knowing what the next day may bring.

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Yet, while the reality of a near catastrophic situation is bantered around each day in the press and elsewhere, governments can do little more than provide token make-work projects at starvation wages, as the corporations continue to ravage the land and sea, giving jobs only as long as the profit margin is acceptable.

Little wonder that the working people of the region, intolerant of indignant disrespect, are taking matters into their own hands.

Over the last eight months, small groups of people throughout the Atlantic provinces have been meeting, sharing their bitterness and disenchantment, forming "full employment" committees in their communities. For some it's hard to digest: that in this day and age society is faced with the kind of activity reminiscent of the dole lines of the thirties; but for many others, it is the only choice.

The first unemployment concern group in the Atlantic began in Halifax early last spring. Largely through the initiative of student organizers, the National Union of Students (NUS), and organized labor, a dozen or so groups of varied interest and activity banded together to form the Halifax-Dartmouth Metro Coalition of Support for the Unemployed.

A sundry mixture of moderate to extreme educational, research and political organizations, the coalition initially formed around one undisputed precept: the right of anyone willing and able to have meaningful employment. Following a summer of organizing and meetings, the coalition brought its point to the public in late September when 700 people demonstrated through the streets of Halifax in a sombre but poignant display of their concern for the economic plight of Atlantic Canada.

The coalition's attempts to develop broad-based community support has led to some differences within the group, understandable for an organization dealing with as sweeping a problem as unemployment. Although actual support has waned slightly since the demonstration, coalition chairperson Sharon Reilly says the coalition remains solidly united on the full employment issue.

The coalition doesn't have a solid political line, Reilly says, but the right to full employment is recognized even within the diverse elements that make up the association. The coalition is trying to make the facts about unemployment better known to the public, she says, and in doing so plays an educational and agitative role.

Reilly maintains the coalition tries to provide an alternate source of information and support for employed and unemployed people alike, and counters misinformed attitudes. She cites the latest jobless figures for the Atlantic as an example of the kind of misinformation the public is receiving. The latest statistics indicate an actual reduction in the unemployment rate for the region, but she noted that with the layoff of hundreds of workers from the Bendex facility in Amherst and the Hawker Siddeley dockyards in Halifax, those figures are obviously misleading.

The coalition's agitative role, she says, entails action similar to the September demonstration, with continued displays of public support for the coalition and its aims.

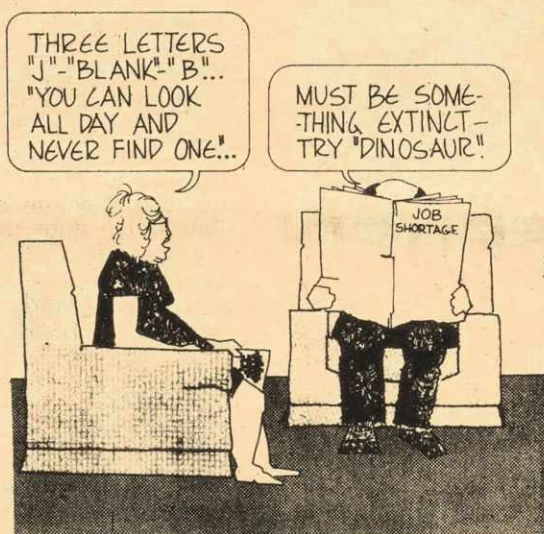
In the long term the coalition will attempt to organize a wide base of support among the

employed and unemployed through local organizing and contact with similar groups in other areas. Reilly believes the coalition could then begin a thorough analysis of unemployment and other related problems, and assist the unemployed to organize themselves to protect their own interests and collectively voice their concerns.

About 200 miles north of Halifax lies Cape Breton, an island separated from mainland Nova Scotia by just a mile, which often bears more resemblance in culture, character, and economic despondency to its island neighbour to the northeast than the province on the other side of the Canso Causeway.

Cape Breton has a long militant labor history dating back to the early part of this century when coal miners incited violent riots protesting food shortages and low wages. Such attitudes and convictions run deep in Cape Breton, and not surprisingly have once again found their vent in the latest bout of economic depression.

Following fast on the heels of organizing efforts in the Halifax area, the Nova Scotia Federation of Labor (NSFL) began the impetus for coordinated action on unemployment in Cape Breton by calling for a public meeting of the unemployed and concerned citizens last June. With assistance from



NSFL president Gerald Yetman, and District Labor Council President Jack Haley, the Cape Breton Committee of Concern for the Unemployed formed at that meeting.

The committee, all volunteers, started by developing ideas for job creation in the area and requested meetings with government officials, including deputy prime minister and island MP Allan MacEachen. After MacEachen and others refused to meet with the committee, they decided to get their point across somewhat more forcefully.

The St. John's conference on unemployment will attempt to confront the broad issue of unemployment, and examine resource and economic questions in the province to try and reach some alternate viewpoints and solutions.

In mid-August, a group of unemployed residents organized with the committee and spent five days occupying federal offices: first the federal government offices in Sydney for 48 hours, then the Sydney Manpower and Immigration office for a day, and finally the Canada Works office for another day.

The government tune changed quickly. Shortly afterwards MacEachen met with the committee and heard their proposals for federal job creation; Nova Scotia premier Gerald Regan was offered some suggestions for provincial employment initiatives, and the committee has been in consultation with various government agencies on specific job creation projects ever since.

The committee opened a storefront in Sydney this fall, and chairperson Tom Patterson says the concern group is now involved in other matters connected with the unemployment problem. The committee now provides personal assistance to

people having problems with welfare and unemployment insurance, and is willing to listen to any suggestions the general public might have for new programs or ideas that could make work.

The committee is also decentralizing its organization from Sydney into the outlying areas. "Instead of the unemployed coming to Sydney, we want them to organize groups in their own communities," Patterson says. The concern committee is in the process of forming smaller sub-committees in island communities such as North Sydney, Glace Bay, and Port Hawkesbury, and Patterson says they hope the local groups will start exploring ideas for potential employment and development in their communities.

He doesn't rule out further civil disobedience similar to the action the committee undertook during the summer. The concern group will continue organizing around the island he says, and if government responsiveness shows little improvement, the committee will have no hesitation taking militant action again, quite possibly in the near future.

While most organizations of concern for the unemployed play a supportive role, voicing the concern of employed and unemployed citizens and providing personal assistance, the Newfoundland Association for Full Employment (NAFE) sees little, short of assuming political power in the province, as an ultimate means to achieve their long term objective of full employment.

Association president Jim Payne says, however, the immediate short term activities of NAFE will try to bring the seriousness of the unemployment problem into the public eye and eventually form a union of the unemployed.

The group that is now NAFE began late last summer in St. John's when a small group of concerned individuals met secretly and drafted a brief that was to be presented to the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labor. The brief was submitted to labor but received little support. After a month of meeting and planning, the committee called a public meeting, attended by over 200 people from St. John's and vicinity, and formed NAFE.

The association rapidly created sub-committees to work on organizing, research, policy and publicity and almost immediately began receiving high profile press coverage from the local media. As NAFE became more stable, the group started holding regular meetings and volunteers undertook research exposing the real gravity of the province's unemployment situation.

NAFE held two demonstrations last fall: one expressing protest over unemployment to Prime Minister Trudeau during a visit to St. John's in November, and the other coinciding with a NAFE presentation to the National Unity Task Force hearings in St. John's in October.

According to Payne, the Association had for a while avoided publicity, preferring to smooth out some internal problems and prepare for a conference on unemployment to be held in St. John's in February. The conference, Payne says, will attempt to confront the broad issue of unemployment and examine resource and economic questions in the province to try and reach some alternate viewpoints and solutions.

The Association does not have a strong base in St. John's, but does have a reliable membership and is organizing branches around the province. "NAFE is a pressure group at this point", he declares, adding, "we could become a political party, if that's what it takes."

The organizational work, however, is just beginning. Now and over the next few months, small pockets of people in Atlantic Canada, in places like Bathurst, New Brunswick, and Swift Current, Newfoundland, will be holding meetings, voicing their pent-up anger and forming action committees.

Where it will lead no one can say for sure. But one thing is clear: when government officials refer to unemployment in future, they will not be able to disguise the reality with the anonymity of numbers, but will have to face the unemployed, the people without the jobs.