

## **These are the faces of poverty and social injustices in New Brunswick**

C7 (March 3, 2010)

By AURÉA CORMIER

For *The Daily Gleaner*

Feb. 20 was the International Day for Social Justice.

The United Nations has set aside the day to promote national efforts to tackle issues such as poverty, exclusion and unemployment. As a member state of the UN, Canada recognizes the need to consolidate our efforts in poverty eradication, in promoting full employment, in gender equality and in achieving a reasonable level of social well-being and justice for all.

As Canadians, we have a long way to go before we can affirm that social justice is applied everywhere and poverty is practically non-existent. In New Brunswick, there are more than 100,000 people living below the low income cut-off line (after tax), as defined by Statistics Canada.

Who are these poor people? They include those earning \$8.25 or barely more. Then there are the part-time workers and those on social assistance, since our welfare rates are among the lowest in the country.

Poverty tends to have a feminine face. In 2007, nearly 65,000 women in New Brunswick lived below the low income cut-off. To have a better picture of the impact of poverty on women, the following real cases are presented, with false names.

Susan is a 44-year-old single mother living with her 20-year old daughter, Brigit. The latter works at \$8.25 per hour 4.5 days per week and has to pay back her student loan.

With the remainder of her salary, Brigit buys groceries, pays for the telephone and other apartment expenses.

Last June, Susan had to resign from her waitress job when she became severely ill. She underwent a series of medical examinations but doctors did not uncover the cause of her health problems.

Susan had to apply for social assistance. Normally, she would be entitled to \$537 per month, but because Brigit lives with her, the Department of Social Development deducted \$125 per month, saying the daughter should help her mother financially.

With only \$412 per month, Susan is unable to fully pay the \$650 monthly rent and her landlord is threatening to evict her. At the end of January, their unpaid NB Power bill was \$379.

There is very little food in the house.

In recent months, Susan's eyesight has deteriorated so much that she requires a magnifying glass to decipher numbers in the telephone book.

If we lived in a province which had a fairer distribution of wealth through its taxation system, Susan would experience less distress.

The second case is that of Norma, a 26-year-old mother of three children (6, 4 and 2 years old), and pregnant with her fourth child.

She works in a fast-food restaurant at \$8.60 per hour. Her partner babysits the children at home.

In one month, Norma earns approximately \$1,000. The government provides her with \$900 in children's benefits. Their rent is \$685 per month.

Norma has desperately asked for a subsidized apartment, but these are very hard to get. The tax cuts voted in the 2009-2010 provincial budget leave very little manoeuvring room to create more subsidized dwellings for low income people.

In spite of her sense of pride, Norma has to ask help from strangers when food runs out. Is this not a breach of Article 25 of the Declaration of Human Rights which states that everyone has the right to food and housing?

For these two cases, the New Brunswick Poverty Reduction Plan unveiled last November does not offer immediate relief. There are no increases in social assistance rates in sight.

Several government policies hurting the poor need to be changed. The government said some changes will occur in the mid-2011.

It looks like we will have to wait for more compassion for the poor. But even if the hope of a fairer society is not in sight, many citizens long for it.

Their inner voice whispers to them to continue fighting for more justice, and suggests they do it more often than one day a year.

*Aur a Cormier is with the Justice and Solidarity Committee and Common Front for Social Justice in Moncton.*