

REPORT ON THE 2nd SUMMIT ON POVERTY

Theme: Justice Before Charity



An event organized by the NB Common Front for Social Justice Inc.

In Moncton on October 17 and 18, 2008

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Introduction

The mission of the New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice Inc. (CFSJ) is to promote alternative social policies in order to create a society where citizens live in solidarity, and work toward building a society particularly concerned by the common good. In October 2006, the CFSJ organized its first Summit around the theme . “Moving out of Poverty”. The dynamism present at the first Summit motivated the CFSJ members to lobby for changes. It encouraged its 30 member groups and its 200 or so individual members to be the voice for poor people by taking a public stand on the issues such as minimum wage and social assistance rates. Two years later, it was decided that a 2nd Summit would be timely and useful to further promote the agenda of the CFSJ

The theme chosen for the 2nd Summit on Poverty was “Justice before Charity”. The event was held at Central United Church, 150 Queen Street from noon on October 17th until 1:p.m. on October 18th. The objectives for the Summit were threefold:

- To show how current emphasis on charitable aid is eroding our social safety net
- To inform the public on the issue of poverty and reveal the underlying hidden forces and current trends
- To offer opportunities for sharing between people involved in social justice work.

Approximately 200 people attended the Summit. There were people living in poverty, representatives of community groups and public servants. About three quarters of those present were women. Deliberations were fruitful. There was a friendly atmosphere throughout. This report is a brief summary of the activities as they unfolded.

Opening Event

The participants were greeted at City Hall by Moncton City Councillor Pierre Boudreau, representative of the City of Moncton. Linda McCaustlin, Co-Chair of the CFSJ presented the theme of the conference in English and Johanne Petitpas presented it in French. The lunch which followed was offered by the City. Councillor Boudreau expressed appreciation for the activities carried out by the CFSJ.



Councillor Pierre Boudreau at the opening event



Johanne Petitpas and Linda McCaustlin presenting the Summit theme

Keynote address by Judy Rebick



Judy Rebick addressing the participants

Ms Judy Rebick holds the Chair in Social Justice and Democracy at Ryerson University, Toronto. At the outset of her conference, she stated Dickens' famous verse: was "Best of times, worst of times". Poverty in Canada is a scandal. According to the 2006 Census, 100,740 people in NB, that is 14 %, live in poverty. It is a shame that so many people live in a country as rich as ours.

Ms Rebick believes that change is possible. Society can be transformed by groups of individuals engaged in raising public awareness.

For that to happen, however, the approach must be one where we work "with the poor" rather than "for them". Hoping that creating wealth will lead to collective prosperity is a pure myth. During the last decades, we have seen that free trade, with a minimum of regulation, only leads to a shameful increase in poverty. Governments have sided with the corporations to create an economy based on greed and fear. Selling unneeded products and making substantial loans to people who are unable to pay are examples of wastefulness. Because of that, the rich have gotten richer while the poor got poorer. Nobody would suffer from a lack of basic resources if the fiscal revenues were better distributed. It is wrong for a rich individual to own a dozen houses while so many people are homeless. The have-nots must make themselves heard. They should tell their story explaining what they are doing to cope with their hardship. They also need to participate in decision making rather than simply be consulted.

Mrs. Rebick concluded by saying that those of us who are more fortunate should stand up with the less fortunate to influence the decision-makers. "I can't be happy unless others in my community have what they need" she said in closing.

Traditional March of October 17th



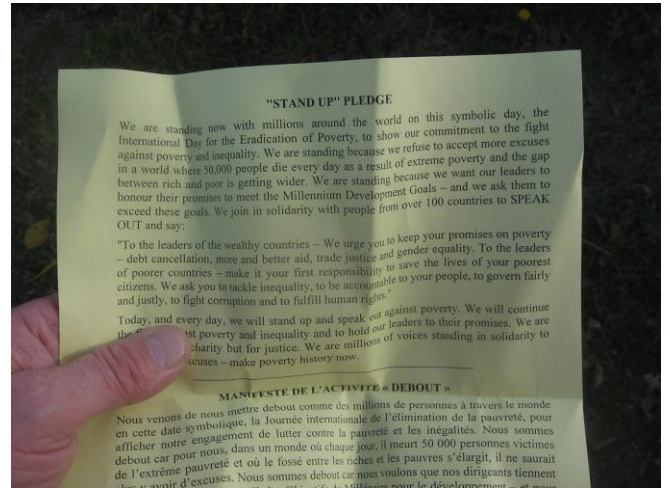
View of October 17th marchers

A march was held to highlight the UN's International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Participants walked with banners and placards from 150 Queen Street, Moncton to the Riverfront Park, along the Peticodiac River. At this point, around a sculpture erected by the CFSJ in 2007, participants jointly repeated the following famous statement first said by Joseph

Wresinski, founder of the ATD Fourth World Movement : “Wherever men and women are condemned to live in poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights are respected is our solemn duty.” The participants in the March also took the “Stand Up” Pledge proposed by the *Make Poverty History Movement*.



Statement by J. Wresinsky at the base of the CFSJ monument



Text of the Stand Up Pledge

Sketches

On Friday evening, two short sketches were presented where members of the CFSJ were the actors. The first one represented a person on social assistance picking up empty pop cans and plastic bottles with the hope of doing his part in the NB government’s self sufficiency agenda. The second sketch which showed welfare recipients comparing their 3% raise with the 10% bonuses promised to Deputy Ministers. Participants were invited to offer their reactions to these sketches

Panel on current crises.



Panelists Auréa Cormier, Claude Snow and Kurt Peacock

Following the sketches, the main theme of the Summit was tackled through a round table discussion which focussed on three current crises : food, housing and energy. The speakers had prepared PowerPoint presentations to cover their issues. The topic of “Food Crisis, Root Causes and Solutions” was presented by Auréa Cormier, Emeritus Professor from Université de Moncton. “Social Housing in New Brunswick” was covered by Claude Snow from Caraquet, a community worker. Kurt Peacock, visiting scholar at UNB

Saint John talked about “New Brunswick’s Energy Challenge”. A series of questions from the audience completed this session.

NB Government’s plan to reduce poverty



Minister Mary Schryer

The Saturday morning session began with a speech by the Minister of Social Development, Mary Schryer. In her conference, she explained at length the notion of poverty which goes beyond the lack of food, shelter and water, she says. “Poverty also includes the lack of opportunities to learn, the lack of health care, of employment and of respect.” She is committed to do everything she can to eliminate exclusion and poverty by putting a greater emphasis on Transition to Work programs. She says it is not normal for people to be deprived from working just because they go hungry, they do not have affordable housing, they cannot access health care or they lack education. We must provide them with the necessary tools so that they can help themselves and integrate the work force, she says.

Minister Schryer makes a distinction between extreme poverty and working poverty. She points out that poverty affects negatively the business community. Government has undertaken a review of the welfare system in view of eliminating the obstacles to returning to work. This means providing more child care services, better housing, access to health and education, training and creating work opportunities.

The government’s plan is to organize eight discussion meetings with the goal to obtain a consensus with the partners on the appropriate actions to reduce poverty in N.-B. Questions were raised by participants concerning what will happen if no consensus is reached, if the Minister is changed or if a gender analysis was not built into the process. The Minister said that there would be a plan B in place if there is no consensus, that the Premier is the only one deciding about nominations to Cabinet and that there will be a gender analysis added to the process.

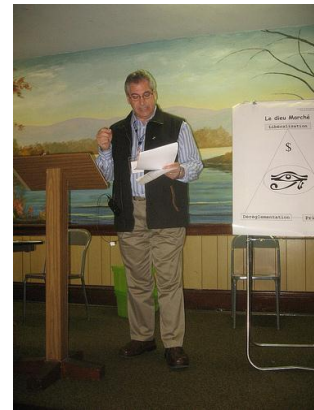
Others have made the remark that poverty is linked to the policies of the business community, that a similar review of the welfare system already took place some years ago and the results should be examined. A participant also mentioned that many people already in the work force are living in poverty. Another one stated that the funds set aside for the welfare review should be given to the recipients. A participant said that she felt there was too much pressure exerted on the welfare recipients to return to work and

sometimes, they are sent to ridiculous training sessions which lead nowhere. In response to a participant who complained that people were often forced to communicate with the Department through an automated system, the Minister said that this would be corrected.

Common Good versus Private Interests

Guy Fortier, a professional group leader from the Montreal *Carrefour de participation, ressourcement et formation*, explained how, over time, neoliberalism took over and how disastrous it is. The market has become an absolute, he says, and everything else is relative. While promoting the free market, deregulation and the privatization of public services, other realities were sacrificed. This has led to more exploitation and exclusion and a greater gap between the rich and the poor.

Some of the more fortunate take for granted that it is normal that public services fall in private interests, that we can do with less public services and less regulation, or not at all, like employment standards (minimum wage, work duration, etc.), food regulations, air traffic control, etc. There is an attempt to deregulate to allow goods and services to move freely. We accept too easily that schools be built and run by the private sector and we claim that unemployment and poverty are unavoidable in a modern economy. We even give licenses to market water and seeds, thus transferring into private hands essential and collective goods, allowing these people to exercise control and make a profit. The State gives up its responsibilities.



Guy Fortier talking on the Common Good

In adopting an individualistic vision, the State is not protecting the common good. For some, society is non-existent as such, only individuals who exchange among themselves on a commercial level. These people believe that there is an invisible hand that dictates the market laws and that the State is powerless. They also believe that by creating wealth, poverty will be reduced, although experience has proven otherwise. Some also believe that there are forces that act upon the individuals. They think that through the market laws, we can reach a balance, a social control and a distribution of the wealth, which is false. The boards of administration of large corporations make decisions which affect the fate of individuals, whether they be in relation with policies, restructuring, lay-offs, etc.

Less regulation means more people without security roaming on the streets, more food banks, more shelters, etc. The State expects that non-profit organizations will help out these people, without giving them the resources needed to do it. We must come back to a more equitable distribution of resources which will ensure the well-being of all citizens through a better environment, the diversification of the forests, the protection of the land,

the preservation of institutions and international solidarity. Ordinary citizens can promote the common good, by getting information, criticizing, joining advocacy groups et finding counter- arguments to demolish the myths. In short, we should all be working towards the establishment of new world order based on respect, dignity and equity.

Conclusion

The following comment made by a participant in a written evaluation expresses the opinion of many others: “The whole summit on Poverty is for me a big success. Resources persons chosen are well-informed of the situation, with very realistic and objective analysis of the situation.” The participants felt that the choice of speakers was excellent. They they appreciated the opportunities learn, talk about important issues and encourage each other. The theme of the Summit was also well grasped, as exemplified by the following comment: “Charity is a short-term solution. In making a donation, one feels better inside, but the effect does not last. Justice is a long-term solution. It is a more difficult process. The results are more durable when the deeper roots are attacked.” Given these reflections, the Summit organizers feel that their three objectives for the event had been met.

The CFSJ believes that the commitments to work for more social justice must continue since much remains to be done. As Judy Rebick pointed out, we can transform society by raising public awareness but the approach must be one where we work with the poor instead of for them.

At the Summit, the Minister of Social Development, Mary Schryer, made a formal announcement that the NB government has undertaken an engagement process to come up with a Poverty Reduction Plan through wide public participation. This news was well received as it had been requested by the CFSJ and many other advocacy groups. Minister Schryer said that consensus would be sought on the best strategy to achieve poverty reduction. Questions were raised regarding the difficulty of achieving a consensus in such a difficult area. Based on the past experience undertaken in the 1990s, some participants expressed their concern that again, no significant action might result from this process.

The 2nd Summit on poverty was supported by many sponsors. Without their very generous support, the event would not have been possible. A list of donors was distributed to all participants¹ and their names were also posted in a prominent place.

¹ List of donors in alphabetical order: ABPPUM, Amsterdam Inn, Canadian Union of Public employees, Canadian Labour Congress, Chignecto Presbytery of United Church, City of Caraquet, City of Dieppe, Congregation des Filles de Jésus, Co-op Atlantic, Diocèse de Moncton, Elmwood Hotel, Fédération des Caisses populaires, Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du NB, Filles de Marie de l’Assomption, Government of New Brunswick, Holiday Inn Express Immaculate Heart of Mary Knights of Columbus, Institut Féminin francophone de Grand-Digue, John Howard Society Saint John Branch, Kairos, Maison Nazareth, Mount Allison Faculty Association, Rodd’s Parkhouse Inn, Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, Sobeys, Soeurs de Notre-

Dame-du-Sacré-Coeur, St. Thomas University Teachers Union, United Way of Greater Moncton and Southeastern NB Region Inc., Village of Memramcook.