

COOPER INSTITUTE ACTIVITIES REPORT 2023



With the support of many generous donors Cooper Institute has been active in the community for 40 years.

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Migrant Justice

The past year has been a busy one for the Migrant Worker Program at Cooper Institute. We have continued the work of building relationships with migrant workers in PEI and have worked alongside them to advocate for better policies on both the federal and provincial levels. Additionally, thanks to funding geared toward direct support work, we have been able to support workers with healthcare appointments and applications for EI, pensions and new work permits.



At Farm Day in the City

An important aspect of the Migrant Worker Program has always been public education, and 2023 was no exception. In collaboration with the volunteers from the PEI Action Team for Migrant Worker Rights, we were active at various community events across the province, passing out information and talking to people about the status of migrant workers in PEI. We were present at four *DiverseCity* events hosted by IRSA in the summer and at Charlottetown's *Farm Day in the City* in the fall. We invited workers to join us at these events. People at each event signed two petitions – one calling on the federal government

to implement a regularization program to give status to all undocumented people, and a second petition calling on the provincial government to enact its Temporary Foreign Worker Protection Act.

Our largest event of the year took place in October when we hosted a public forum with guest speaker Gabriel Allahdua, activist, former migrant worker, and author of the book *Harvesting Freedom*. The event featured performances by several Island musicians and poets, food from local caterers, a panel of migrant workers and much discussion. Thanks to members of the PEI Action Team for Migrant Worker Rights, we provided transportation to ensure migrant workers were able to attend the event. Overall, it was a large team effort and a great success!

Cooper Institute has continued to push for policy change at all levels of government, to ensure better living and working conditions for migrant workers. In April, Cooper Institute was asked to present to the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology alongside the Madhu Verma Migrant Justice Centre and lobbyists from the seafood processing industry. In September, members of the Senate Committee visited PEI to hear directly from workers about their experiences in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. During their visit we organized meetings with workers and another with the PEI Action Team for Migrant Worker Rights. We also met with the UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Tomoya Obokata. After hearing from workers and organizations from across the country Obokata called upon the federal government to grant open work permits to migrant workers, as well as a clear pathway to permanent residency.

We also organized a meeting with the Federal Minister of Agriculture's office staff to voice our support for a regularization program, promised by the Prime Minister. We have continued to be vocal in the media about numerous issues limiting workers' access to protections.

A goal of the Migrant Worker Program in 2023 was to strengthen community capacity to support Temporary Foreign Workers. In March, we hosted a

session for support workers to enhance their understanding of the issues experienced by Temporary Foreign Workers and to share some of the tools available to support workers. In May, Cooper Institute participated on a panel at ARAISA's National Small Centres Conference about the importance of advocacy work for settlement and cultural organizations. We engaged with employment support programs to build their capacity to support migrant workers. And we spoke with two UPEI classes about how to get involved in local issues surrounding workers in PEI.

The most valued part of our work continues to be building relationships with migrant workers in PEI. This year we engaged with many groups of workers and supported them in addressing workplace and housing issues. We also helped to facilitate important conversations with workers about how to best address issues around deceptive and recruitment practices.

We want to thank the volunteers who work with us for their continued support, and we look forward to seeing many familiar faces return to PEI when the fisheries and farms start operations again in April!

PEI Working Group for a Livable Income

The PEI Working Group for a Livable Income (WGLI), of which Cooper Institute is a founding member, celebrated its 20th Anniversary in September. It was a lively event shared with friends of WGLI and supporters of Basic Income Guarantee.



Members of Cooper Institute celebrate WGLI's 20th anniversary

In 2023, WGLI continued to promote livable

income for all PEI residents, by engaging policy makers, the general community, and the media.

Presentations to Government: WGLI made submissions to the Employment Standards Comprehensive Review Panel as part of the process of revising the Employment Standards Act, and to the Employment Standard Board *Annual minimum wage review*. Content of the latter included: the effects of inflation, the impacts of the ongoing housing crisis on low-income tenants, and on food security, and on health. Two members of WGLI presented to the House of Commons Finance Committee Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2024 Federal Budget.

Meetings with politicians: Early in the year, WGLI had a productive meeting with the Minister of Social Development and Housing. Then later, under the new government, the group met on two occasions with the new Minister, Deputy Minister, and staff of Social Development and Seniors. There is strong support on this level for basic income, specifically for a province-wide 5 to 7-year demonstration program funded jointly by the PEI and federal governments. The current minister has taken several explicit actions in favour of moving forward on this.

Community presentations: The Working Group spoke to several community-based groups about the predicted positive changes a livable income would have for all PEI residents and for the economy. One of these was the Haviland Club of Charlottetown and another was an NDP PEI rally in support of Basic Income Guarantee.

A group of 50 interested people received four updates during the year on the progress of plans for a basic income program. Two organizations - the Voluntary Resource Centre and the PEI Association of Retired Teachers - requested articles on basic income for their members' newsletter.

Media: CBC Charlottetown aired an interview about the targeted "basic income" program organized and administered by the Department of Social Development and Seniors. WGLI clarified that calling this program basic income adds unhelpful confusion about the process of establishing basic income in PEI and elsewhere. Targeted programs generally involve a top-up of a social assistance payment. They lack the fundamentals of basic income, which must be universally available, without conditions, to all who need it to come up to the accepted poverty line. Basic income is designed to eliminate the demeaning process of proving eligibility and compliance.

In June, the Charlottetown Guardian published the Working Group's Op Ed on the power of Guaranteed Basic Income to address food and housing insecurity.



Celebrating Cooper Institute's 20th anniversary

In November, WGLI organized a successful media conference/community event in Charlottetown for the release of the report of *A Proposal for a Guaranteed Basic Income Benefit in Prince Edward Island*. Reporters from CBC Halifax and CBC Charlottetown interviewed participants and reported on the launch.

During the year members of WGLI worked on guaranteed basic income in collaboration with: Basic Income NOW Atlantic and the pan-Canadian group, Coalition Canada basic income – revenu de base.

Basic Income NOW Atlantic: Two members of the WGLI represent PEI in Basic Income NOW Atlantic, whose goal it is to advance an Atlantic voice in favour of Guaranteed Basic Income in the Atlantic Region. Besides organizing forums to engage policy makers across various jurisdictions, the group has engaged a wide range of grassroots organizations and individuals by inviting them to sign on to a consensus statement. To date, 49 organizations and 360 individuals have indicated their support for programs of guaranteed basic income. As part of a pan-Canadian effort, the Atlantic group has engaged municipalities in support of basic income. Twenty municipalities in the region have passed resolutions urging provincial and federal governments to move forward on the proposals for basic income. In PEI so far, 4 municipalities have voted unanimously in favour: Charlottetown; Summerside; Kensington and Three Rivers.

Coalition Canada basic income – revenue de base: Two members of the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income represent PEI in Coalition Canada which since its formation in 2019, engaged representatives from all provinces and territories. Its top priority is paving the way for a Canada-wide Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI). It has done comprehensive research, which it has used to update

and lobby MPs, senators, and other influential groups. From the beginning the Coalition recognized PEI as an ideal launching place for a province-wide 5 to 7-year demonstration program, funded through federal and provincial cooperation.

In September of 2021, six members of Coalition Canada established the “Proposal Committee”. Two Coalition members took on the demanding work of organizing the work of the committee and sub-committees over the next eighteen months.

The committee was made up of eight economists, all pro-basic income, but with different perspectives, five politicians including three retired MPs (Liberal, Conservative, and NDP) and two sitting PEI MLAs (PC and Green), and six members basic income advocates. Over the course of almost 100 online meetings the Committee developed and finalized *A Proposal for a Guaranteed Basic Income Benefit for Prince Edward Island* in March 2023. It was finally released to the public in Charlottetown in November.

The proposal is meant to show the Prince Edward Island and Federal Governments that a basic income demonstration is possible for PEI and urges the two jurisdictions to begin their conversations about how to move it forward. Read the full report here: www.GBIreport.ca.

Seed Sovereignty

Once again in 2023 our collaboration with the public library system in planning community seed exchanges was a big success. Events were held in Charlottetown, Summerside and Breadalbane and were well attended. Thanks to funding from the Community Foundation, we were able to offer seed saving workshops at two of the events.

Cooper Institute was also able to support the PEI Seed Alliance, which had another successful year as well, offering many varieties of locally grown and adapted seeds, filling orders from across the Island, and beyond.



Irene Novaczek, organizer of the Breadalbane seed exchange

PEI Fight for Affordable Housing



Housing remains a hot topic in PEI, and Island tenants continue to face many challenges. Cooper Institute and the PEI Fight for Affordable Housing (PEIFAH) remain committed to advocating for policies which see affordable housing as essential to our communities, rather than a commodity to be profiteered. It was a year of new challenges, but also several successes, largely due to the hard work of members of the PEI Fight for Affordable Housing.

After years of organizing to push Charlottetown to regulate short term rentals (STR), 2023 finally saw the city implement bylaws to regulate STR, beginning in March. Although enforcement mechanisms still have not been fully established, this should be celebrated as a success and an example of what tenants can do when they get together.

In April, the PEI government enacted the new Residential Tenancy Act, replacing the 40-year-old Rental of Residential Properties Act. Although there remains much to be desired in the new legislation, some suggestions submitted by the PEIFAH were included in the new Act. The new legislation limits within-guideline rental increases to 3% per year with landlords potentially able to increase rents another 3% above that guideline. Unfortunately, shortly before the new legislation came into effect, many landlords submitted applications for rent increases above the guideline, to lock in high rents while they could. Some of those applications were for rent increases of more than 90%!

Due to the influx of requests for support, volunteers with Cooper Institute and the PEIFAH organized sessions with tenants in Charlottetown and in Summerside to discuss strategies to fight such rent increases. Drawing from volunteers' experiences and tenants' knowledge, the sessions were a valuable learning opportunity for everyone involved.

The PEIFAH was also invited to attend a Social Housing and Human Rights Conference in Winnipeg.

Together with housing advocacy groups from across the country, we called on the federal government to build 50,000 new social housing units each year for the next ten years to increase the supply of non-market housing in our country. The PEIFAH has continued to attend meetings with this group and looks forward to remaining engaged with this national group.

Cooper Institute was lucky to have Cory Pater work with us over the summer. Thanks to Cory's leadership, a dedicated editorial board and the support of contributors, the PEIFAH was able to launch a newsletter – *The Tin Trumpet* – featuring articles written about tenants' issues from tenants' points of view. Two editions of the Tin Trumpet have been distributed by email and in print through networks of tenants who live in various apartment complexes.

The PEIFAH also focused on engaging with post-secondary students, a group which is greatly affected by the grim state of rental housing in our province. In collaboration with Renting PEI, the PEIFAH held sessions at Holland College and UPEI to inform tenants about their rights. The group also tabled with the UPEISU to get students to sign letters to their MLAs calling for the moratorium on renovations to be extended after it expired in November.

One of Cooper Institute and PEIFAH's largest projects in 2023 was the Tools for Change Project, funded by the Community Housing Transformation Centre. The project brought two groups of tenants together to develop recommendations for maintenance standards regulations and to create a tenants' guide to preparing for rental hearings. Leading Impact Consulting was hired to implement the project, and their hard work and dedication was greatly appreciated. With the support of a lead group of tenants, they consulted with many other tenants through group meetings, one on one interviews and online surveys, and facilitated the process of developing content for two strong tools that will be used for lobbying efforts and tenant support.

One of the biggest challenges tenants in large multi-unit complexes faced in 2023 was having their units converted into condominiums with the potential to be sold off individually. Members of the PEIFAH met with several groups of tenants, working with them to bring the issue forward to government. This highlights the fact that tenants constantly live under the threat of eviction and losing their homes if they are not generating enough profit for their landlord.

The PEIFAH looks forward to continuing to learn from tenants and to support them in building a unified voice advocating for a housing market that works for everyone, not just the landlord class.

Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands



The Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands has been in existence for 5 years, years which have been filled with action aimed at bringing about changes needed to protect all lands in PEI. Current Members of the Coalition include the Citizens’

Alliance of P.E.I., Cooper Institute, National Farmers Union, and committed individuals whose shared interest is the stewardship of PEI lands and the protection of the Island’s ecology and environment. The Coalition emphasizes that while “land” is their focus, they speak of land and water as one, and use the plural, “lands”, to include coastal areas, forests, watersheds, residential and recreational land, wetlands, and farmland.

The actions of the Coalition are aimed at engaging the wider population of PEI as well as decision-makers in all matters relating to lands protection.

Engagement of PEI Community – In 2023, the Coalition continued its series of community forums begun in 2022, called *Whose Land Is It Anyway?* In January, *Land Grabbing as a reality in PEI*, was held in Charlottetown, highlighting the ease and speed with which rich people and corporations are taking over PEI lands.

A second forum, *Is Kings County for Sale?* was held in March, in Montague. It dealt with Asian capital land-grabbing under the guise of the Buddhist monks and nuns.

In May, *Land Abuse & Power of the People* was presented in Kensington. It highlighted government inaction, the result of people being silenced by a powerful farming sector and a government afraid to act.

All forums had excellent presenters and attracted a good cross-section of people who had opportunities to share their views and ideas for action. One such action was a request for a public inquiry into all PEI lands transactions and transferrals over the past 10 years. The Coalition spent many productive hours developing reasonable Terms of Reference for the proposed public inquiry.

Media – Local media paid little attention to the work of the Coalition besides publishing notices for Coalition forums and showing up for events with some promise of conflict, such as the Montague forum on Asian capital land dealings in March during the provincial election campaign.

On a national scale, the *Globe & Mail* published an in-depth article, *Monks, money and the fierce debate over PEI's scarce land* in August, and *Maclean's* published *The Battle for a Prince Edward Island Beach* about Point Deroche, also in August. There was skillful follow-up by local journalists Bill McGuire and Ian Petrie, both in the *Island Farmer*. The *Globe and Mail* article failed to adequately “follow the money” to verify the claim that Buddhist corporations (as a single interest) control 17,000 acres of land in PEI. The Coalition received much attention on its facebook page, resulting in 3,000 people signing a petition asking the PEI government to halt operations at Point Deroche.

Engagement with Politicians – The only meaningful purposeful meeting with politicians which the Coalition had during 2023 was in a public rally, entitled “Talk with us”. The Premier, who graciously attended, and Government were asked to honour an earlier petition to halt operations at Point Deroche, and to place a moratorium on all other coastline development. The request to the Premier to establish a public inquiry on all land transactions over the past 10 years was reiterated. The coalition renewed its call for the Government to establish processes aimed at transparency in land decisions. Despite a request for open communication with the Coalition and the community on land protection issues, “Talk with us” did not take root.

Islanders for Proportional Representation

This year was an all-around disappointment for organizations promoting democratic renewal in the form of proportional representation (PR). Election fever was in the air at the beginning of 2023. With the threat of an early election, it was not the best time for getting the community to think about PR.

In the almost four years since the last election, it seemed as though parties and the community had taken a backward step, from almost 50% voting in favour of PR in 2019. Even earlier support for electoral reform seemed to stagnate. It is not clear if promoters of PR just gave up or if they changed positions, now believing that majority governments are good for everybody, even distorted and false majorities. Not many seemed concerned that this position leaves the way open for “absolute power” in the hands of one party, i.e. in the hands of one person, a premier.

PEI’s electoral history is dotted with extremely lopsided majorities, often with an opposition of one or two MLAs. From that perspective, the 2023 election

was not a total disaster. But from the perspective of Islanders for PR, it was a setback for democracy. A number of elements factor into this conclusion: a) Voter turnout was 68.5%, a scandal for PEI where it is traditionally in the 80%+ range; b) We are left with a barely workable government with the almost absolute power and only 3 MLAs in the official opposition; c) The former Official Opposition was decimated, among the seats lost, three influential women. In summary, First Past the Post did its trick and provided an unrepresentative Legislature.

Official Results				Possible Results*
Party	Popular Vote	% seats won	# seats won	# seats won
PC	55.9%	81.4%	22	15
Lib	17.2%	11%	3	5
Green	21.6%	7%	2	6
NDP	5.5%	0	0	1

*(Assuming the same popular vote, but under a PR system.)

The Challenge for 2024 is directed at the progressive third sector, non-governmental groups, and individuals committed to democratic renewal, to claim their rightful place. Political parties and governments will not make the necessary changes. It is not in their political interest to do so. A strong community voice must be created. We can all learn from the courageous history of Democratic Evolution over the past 184 years. (For more on this, see the PEI White Paper on Democratic Renewal, July 2015).

To paraphrase the late Leo Cheverie, who was a champion of democracy and avid promoter of Proportional Representation, “We want to continue that process of ‘democratic evolution’ and to honour our forbearers who had the courage of their time to make the difficult changes needed”.

Supported Decision-Making

The PEI Coalition for Supported Decision-Making (Cooper Institute is a member) believes that all individuals, regardless of cognitive impairment should have access to the support they need to exercise their right to make decisions, and that legislation is required to ensure those decisions are respected. Supported decision-making is at its core about self-determination, dignity, and equality. It creates and strengthens relationships, and it builds community.

The membership of the PEI Coalition for Supported Decision-Making includes representatives of organizations that have direct experience working with seniors and persons with disabilities who routinely experience challenges to their right to make decisions for themselves.

In 2022, the PEI government introduced a new Supported Decision-Making Agreements Act in the PEI Legislature but shortly afterwards, in response to concerns raised by the Coalition, referred the Act to the Standing Committee on Health and Social Development for further study and consultation.

In their presentations to the Committee, Coalition members raised several concerns, most importantly that the definition of capacity contained in the legislation, specifically the requirement that an adult would need to be able to understand the nature and effects of an agreement, would exclude people with profound disabilities, those who are most at risk of losing their autonomy.

In November, members of the Coalition were happy to learn their recommendations had been included in the Standing Committee’s report to the Minister. We were hopeful.

Our optimism was short-lived. Following the 2023 election, when we finally met with the new Minister of Social Development and Seniors we learned that the report of the standing committee had not been followed up on.

Furthermore, several pieces of *substitute* decision-making legislation developed by the Department of Justice & Public Safety - the Adult Guardianship and Trusteeship Act, the Powers of Attorney and Personal Directives Act, and the Public Guardian and Trustee Act - had been presented and had received third reading in the legislature. Common to all three was a definition of capacity based on a person’s ability to understand the information relevant to making a decision and to appreciate the consequences of a decision (or lack of decision).

The Coalition has consistently advocated for and will continue to advocate for supported decision-making legislation that includes an inclusive definition of capacity, rooted in the belief that someone’s intention and expression of will should be the foundation for capacity to make decisions. This will no doubt be challenging. While there still seems to be an appetite on the part of government to move forward with Supported Decision-Making Legislation, there is resistance to incorporating a different definition of capacity than has been written into the new substitute decision-making legislation.

Organizational Support

Members of the Cooper Institute collective support many organizations in various ways:

La Société acadienne et francophone de l'Île

PEI Parkinson Association

**Breaking the Silence Maritimes-Guatemala
Solidarity Network**

P.E.I. Supported Decision-Making Coalition

Voluntary Resource Council

BIPOC USHR

National Farmers Union

Coalition for the Protection of PEI Water

Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands

Coalition Canada Basic Income - revenu de base

Latin American Mission Program (LAMP)

PEI Action Team for Migrant Workers' Rights

PEI Fight for Affordable Housing

PEI Seed Alliance

Fundraising Committee

Donations to Cooper Institute during 2023 are at an exceptional all-time high. Des Duffy and Yvonne Gallant are long-time supporters of Cooper Institute. Thank you, Des and Yvonne, for your personal contributions! Des is completing his fifth year asking family and friends for donations to fund our ongoing work in PEI. In 2023, Des raised \$74,700. This amount has helped to pay the wages of two part-time staff. Thank you, Des' for your labour and commitment. Des and Yvonne's belief in the value of Cooper Institute's work continues to overwhelm us as does the generosity of all of our donors.

Irene Burge, a founder and current member of Cooper Institute, is a constant fundraiser. In her annual February mailout, she encourages people to sign up as sustaining monthly donors. This work over the years results in an assured revenue of over \$18,500 per year, which covers our overhead costs. The annual mailout also results in many one-time donations. As well, Irene directs donations to Cooper Foundation, which helps to provide long term support for Cooper Institute's work. Thank you, Irene, and all of our donors.

The Cooper Institute Fundraising Committee encourages donors to continue with their generosity. With your help we can continue our current work and expand it when needed. Donations can be made by using the "donate" button on our website www.cooperinstitute.ca. Contributions can also be made in the following ways: pre-authorized monthly donations; an annual contribution; a memorial for a deceased family member or friend; a bequest in your Last Will and Testament. Cooper Institute is a registered charity (Registration #10114 4541 RR0001).

For information on donating to Cooper Foundation, which is also a registered charity, contact ireneburge7@gmail.com

Connect with Cooper Institute

Call us at 902-894-4573, find us on Facebook, or visit our website – www.cooperinstitute.ca.



Better still, come and visit us at 81 Prince Street in Charlottetown!

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2024 is an important year for Cooper Institute. In May, we will celebrate our 40th year as a collective! Forty years of social justice, engaging PEI communities in issues related to equality, inclusion, protection of lands and water, and democracy. We hope you'll join us in May to mark this milestone. Keep tuned!

Cooper Institute at 40 1984-2024

THEN

The 1980s were years of hope for a better future. In Canada and globally there was an upsurge in the formation and development of social movements. Rights-based thinking was clearly the impetus for new collective voices to emerge and claim space for various sectors and concerns. Organizations were forming and strengthening around the rights of women, LBGTQ rights, and Indigenous rights. People and groups were calling for an end to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Others were drawing attention to the warming of the planet.

While this growth of progressive social movements buoyed Cooper Institute's formation in 1984, the greatest motivation for creating the collective was the lived and shared experience of Cooper Institute's founding members in grassroots organizing in Latin America. They had heard from impoverished people how the economic system works for the majority of the world's people. They learned from everyday people, that the root causes of most social inequities can be found in the economic system. They learned of the deadly influence of a world order which deliberately concentrates wealth in the hands of the few, and of the resulting ever-growing inequity between the Global North and the Global South. Perhaps more importantly Cooper Institute's founders understood that there are more than two options for a new economic order.

It is notable that in 1970s, the growing demand for new directions to solve the increasing North-South inequities caused the United Nations to propose a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Incorporating language such as *ending economic colonialism and dependency*, *new interdependent economy* and *sovereign equality and the right of self-determination*, this inspired hope in some quarters. Unfortunately, NIEO did not ever question the very basis of the economic system: the purpose and the right of capital to expand and amass untold profits mainly through the agency of multi-national corporations. NIEO in fact set the stage for many of the trade deals which for years to come would benefit the global North and further impoverish the Global South.

Across Canada, including in Prince Edward Island, social justice and international solidarity groups were active in 1984. They were strengthened by refugees from affected countries, including Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The formation of Cooper Institute in 1984 took place in the midst of a decade when sister organizations also putting down their roots. These included the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the Native Council of PEI, the Voluntary Resource Council, Women's Network PEI, Community Legal Information Association, PEI Family Violence Prevention Services, PEI Rape and Sexual Assault Centre, Peers Alliance (formerly Aids PEI), PEI People First, PEI Citizen Advocacy and the Island Peace Committee, and the Charlottetown Farmers Market. The National Farmers' Union, which predates Cooper institute by 25 years, has been in this circle almost since its beginning.

NOW

Over the years, Cooper Institute has had the privilege of carrying on its work while feeling the strength of these community groups, at times working with some of them more closely in coalitions and on various committees and projects.

The challenges of the global economic system in 2024 are more intense and more complicated than they were in 1984. The concentration of wealth on one hand and levels of poverty, housing insecurity and food insecurity on the other are beyond our imagination. We are living now in a time when governments seem powerless to act in the face of uncontrolled accumulation of wealth or the constant threat of the climate crisis.

More than ever, equity seeking organizations are called upon to work together to support our community to take back their voice and their power to change policies and systems for the good of all. We need to nurture hope within our own and in the wider community. Social justice, equity, and even happiness, are possible for the whole Prince Edward Island community.