

FROM COAL PITS TO TAR SANDS: LABOUR MIGRATION BETWEEN AN ATLANTIC CANADIAN REGION AND THE ATHABASCA OIL SANDS

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing developments of the Northern Albertan Athabasca Oil Sands include exceptionally labour intensive processes, while securing labour for this industry has been a perpetual challenge. The industry has relied on temporary and transitory labour since its inception, with a great deal of mobile workers originating from Atlantic Canada. Based on ethnographic research, this paper examines the dynamics of an emerging route of migration between the former coal-mining region of Industrial Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and the sites of the Oil Sands industry. Processes of migration have had profound social and economic impacts on the communities of Industrial Cape Breton, while such mobile workers find themselves in a form of work organization which is increasingly precarious and contingent.

THE OIL SANDS AND TEMPORARY LABOUR

The production of crude oil in the extractive industry of Northern Alberta's Athabasca Oil Sands is a complex operation, requiring large amounts of skilled labour for the industry's development, expansion, and continued operation. The oil sands constitute a mixture of sand, clay, earth, and bitumen—the latter a tar-like form of petroleum which, once extracted from the sands, must be further processed to produce synthetic crude oil. As such, the sands are neither properly “tar sands” nor “oil sands”, but rather “bituminous sands”. While for most of the 20th century, the terms “oil sands” and “tar sands” were used relatively interchangeably (Pratt 1976; le Riche 2006), the terms have become politically loaded over the course of the past decade, with environmental groups favouring the more critical latter term, and government and industry the former as more “business-friendly”.¹

A barrier to the commercialization of the oil sands has been to find efficient methods to separate the bitumen from the sand and to transform it into synthetic crude. Oil Sands development has, for much of the 20th century, been largely experimental, and it is only with the increases of global oil prices since the late 1990s and certain technological innovations that the industry has been able to extract bitumen from the sands in a consistently profitable manner (Le Riche 2006). This segment of the oil and gas sector has grown rapidly over the past decade, with nearly half of Canada's oil production now originating from the Oil Sands (National Energy Board of Canada 2007), while continued rising prices of oil throughout most of the 2000s have further motivated the rapid expansion of this industry and underlined the need for supplies of skilled labour.

Securing labour for the Oil Sands industry has represented a major challenge. The Oil Sands are located in a remote and sparsely populated area of Canada. In the early years of development, initial ideas for industry to build a series of company towns were quickly abandoned, and the various costs of municipal planning, construction of related infrastructure, and the organizing of housing for incoming workers were downloaded onto the province of Alberta (Alberta Municipal Affairs 1980). At the beginnings of industrial developments in the 1960s, the nearby hamlet of Fort McMurray was selected by industry and government to be built up as a community to house incoming industrial workers. The rapid development of Fort McMurray has been fraught with difficulties from the beginning, in terms of the financial costs of rapid growth and the social impacts of intense and prolonged flux, and has come to embody and exemplify the challenges and pressures of an archetypal boomtown (Alberta Municipal Affairs 1980; LeRiche 2006).

Yet Fort McMurray has only come to house a section of incoming workers. As has been the case with many modern resource extraction industries (cf. Storey 2009; Russell 1999), the industry has come to rely heavily on temporary and transitory labour, in this case principally housed in work camps situated around the construction projects located to the north of the town site. As industry underwent a dramatic and significant period of expansion from 1996 to 2008, the town of Fort McMurray struggled to keep up with the demands of providing housing, while the system of work camps became more sophisticated and developed, as accommodations capable of housing several thousand temporary workers were constructed. These "camps" evolved from handfuls of temporary trailers housing a few dozen workers to sprawling complexes containing multiple wings of dormitories, cafeterias, and leisure space for multitudes of workers, while the populations housed within the camp system have increased dramatically, from 5903 workers in 2000, to 9178 in 2005, and to 26,284 in 2008 (Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality 2010). The permanency of these constructions is worth underlining: in contrast to the temporariness of the portable trailers of the past, these modern project accommodations point out the

extent to which temporary work has become an enduring feature of the landscape in the Oil Sands. At the same time, the organization of work in the Oil Sands serves to promote the proliferation of such forms of temporary labour, with a great deal of work in the industry being divided into short-term “projects” handled through a web of sub-contractors.

Throughout the 2000s, the Oil Sands industry became increasingly reliant on greater numbers of temporary labourers originating from other regions of Canada and the world². Yet, while mobile workers have played a central role in shaping and impacting the region, establishing the size of such migration patterns and the number of temporary workers in the Oil Sands has proven a methodologically difficult task, with researchers noting the lack of reliable data and particular difficulties in enumerating a shifting and dynamic population of mobile workers (Aylward 2006; Storey 2010). In Fort McMurray, a thriving grey market of private homeowners offering unlicensed room rentals to temporary workers has thwarted traditional population enumeration techniques (Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality 2010). One report offers what the authors admit is, due to methodological challenges which excluded a potentially substantial portion of temporary workers, a rather conservative estimate of 24,311 long-distance commute workers in the region in 2007, with approximately 5,883 individuals originating from Atlantic Canada and 1,925 workers commuting from Nova Scotia in that particular year (Athabasca Regional Issues Working Group 2007). Meanwhile, the population of temporary workers housed in work camps has grown by a dramatic 636.7 percent over the past decade, from 3,568 individuals in 1999 to 26,284 individuals in 2008 (Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality 2008). Within my research field-site of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the president of the Cape Breton Building Trades Council estimated that there were 1,700 Cape Breton unionized tradespeople commuting to Alberta in 2005 (CBC News 2006), growing to 2,200 Cape Breton tradespeople by 2008 (Pottie 2009).

Despite the methodological difficulties of ascertaining the exact size of the patterns of migration between the Oil Sands region and Atlantic Provinces, we can nevertheless underline that a substantial amount of work in the oil sands is done by temporary workers, that these numbers of temporary workers have grown significantly over the years, and that Atlantic Canada, historically an economically difficult region of Canada characterized by faltering industries and high rates of unemployment, is in the process of sending large numbers of temporary workers to the Oil Sands.

FIELDWORK IN INDUSTRIAL CAPE BRETON AND OUT WEST

As such, the focus of my research is to examine the dynamics of labour migration between the Atlantic Provinces and the Oil Sands industries, primarily

through the use of ethnographic fieldwork. Fieldwork was carried out in 2009 and 2010, and consisted of residing for a year in an Atlantic Canadian region colloquially known as Industrial Cape Breton, located on the eastern side of Cape Breton Island in the province of Nova Scotia. The region consists of several towns and villages which originated as coal-mining company communities, with the small city of Sydney at its centre once containing a steel mill. A variety of processes led to the decline and eventual closure of these industries, with the last of the mines and the mill closing in 2000 and 2001 (Gibbs and Leech 2009; Morgan 2009). While out-migration and circular migration has been historically common in the area, this more recent economic decline prompted increased and dramatic out-migrations from the area. Leading up to and following the closure of the region's major industries, a large number of individuals had begun to temporarily leave the area to work in Northern Alberta, and this route of migration has been supported and further institutionalized by elements of the Oil Sands industry. In the early to mid-2000s, work fairs were held in the region to recruit workers for Oil Sands work, while a direct charter flight from the Sydney airport began to transport workers to and from Cape Breton and Northern Alberta (Pottie 2009). "Going out West", "doing the back-and-forth", and the "21-and-7" –referring to a common arrangement in which individuals worked three weeks away and returned home for a week before beginning the process anew—became familiar concepts within the region as more and more people secured temporary employment in Alberta's oil extraction sector.

During this year-long research period, I conversed with and interviewed individuals throughout the region who were involved with or impacted by such labour migrations, speaking with them about their experiences of labour mobility and their impressions of how such work organizations are impacting their local community. Semi-structured interviews were additionally conducted with community leaders, politicians, trades union representatives, local academics, and regional economic development officers. A great deal of my time was spent noting and observing how labour migration and the overarching themes of economic decline came to impact upon everyday life in the region, and how these themes emerged in local news, events, and public space. Part-way through the year, I travelled to the Oil Sands, staying five weeks with workers I had met through contacts I developed in Industrial Cape Breton, and I continued to interview and speak with these temporary workers in the town of Fort McMurray and in the work camps, while attending training sessions and worker orientations in several of the Oil Sands facilities. I investigated themes of how labour migration was understood in the receiving region, and spoke with community leaders, urban planning agents of Fort McMurray, and managers of Oil Sands facilities, while taking advantage of several public forums in the area to speak with residents about their views of temporary labour and the ongoing developments of the Oil Sands.

It is important to point that such workers are rarely referred to as labour migrants, either in academic terms or colloquially. As I mention above, in Industrial Cape Breton, these movements were simply referred to as “going out West”, while a common designation in research and media for such workers is “long-distance commuters” (cf. Storey 2009). There is some value in terming these migration patterns a “commute” in that it underlines the circular and temporary nature of this organization of work. Yet, the term also has the problematic consequence of downplaying and obscuring many of the impacts of these movements and avoids recognition of the perpetual social dislocations which such labour mobility entails. As such, I prefer to employ the term “labour migrant” to refer to mobile workers, subscribing to Narotzky’s definition of labour migration as “the circulation of people in their capacity to be the carriers of labour power”(1997:79).

DYNAMICS OF LABOUR MIGRATION

There is considerable variation in the experiences of migration to and work in the Oil Sands. Migration between Industrial Cape Breton and Northern Alberta is highly mediated by social networks, with many relying on friends and family already established out West to find employment and lodging. Others may secure employment in the Oil Sands through advertisements in local media or through online job sites. For many unionized tradespeople, work placement and housing within work camps is organized at least in part by their Cape Breton union, and through collaboration between Cape Breton unions, Albertan unions and sub-contractors, while union membership additionally guarantees a certain base-line of standards in terms of working conditions, pay, and benefits. There is also a gendered component to these routes of migration. Work in the Oil Sands is, as has typically been the case of heavy industry and construction in Canada, a male-dominated industry. Yet, the system of work camps which houses these industrial workers also requires vast numbers of workers for its everyday operations of maintenance, cleaning, and kitchen duties. In my field site, many women had found employment in work camps as cleaners, cooks’ helpers and administrative staff, while a small minority had also found employment in the traditionally male-dominated trades. Individual levels of satisfaction with work experiences vary considerably, with the numerous sub-contracting companies and work camps noted as providing a wide spectrum of pay scales and living and working conditions.

Meanwhile, migration, and themes of migration, has been thoroughly incorporated into everyday life within Industrial Cape Breton. In many respects, the local economy is increasingly becoming a remittance-based economy³, dependent on money sent home to the families of such workers and the money spent by such workers during their time home between contracts (cf. Gibbs and

Leech 2009). Yet migration also has effects beyond the economic, impacting upon the social fabric of community life. Massey *et al.* (1987) detail an emerging phenomenon in various villages in Mexico in which temporary migrations to the United States has become a normal and accepted aspect of working life, and have developed the concept of “cultures of migration” (cf. Kandel and Massey 2002) to refer to these situations in which labour migrations achieve such normative status within a community or region. I would argue that a similar set of circumstances is emerging in Industrial Cape Breton, in which going out West is becoming a familiar and expected set of working conditions. The Oil Sands commute has emerged as a central option within individuals’ array of choices, with the idea of such migrations becoming increasingly incorporated as a taken-for-granted aspect of life in the community.

This set of circumstances became especially evident through interviews with back-and-forth workers when we spoke about the decision-making processes which led them to embark on such migrations. Common responses framed the answers in such a way that the perceived field of options for individuals was extremely limited, to the extent that, in many cases, embarking on migration out West was the only available choice and presented as a logical and pragmatic reaction to local economic circumstances. For instance, when I asked for an explanation of his rationales for working out West, one worker provided a generic list of options which he saw as widely applicable to people across Industrial Cape Breton:

Well, Nelson, you’re talking about three choices. Either the whole family moves out West. Which a lot of ‘em don’t want. Or stay home while Daddy goes to work and comes back home. Or you all stay here and go on welfare. That’s your choices. Jobs are very, very rare here.

Consequences of such labour migrations include the pressures placed on the family unit due to the absence of a family member. This perpetual separation was routinely noted as the most difficult and challenging aspect of this work arrangement. Tom, who had found employment as a general labourer in the Oil Sands, noted how the projects to which he was hired frequently went far past their anticipated completion dates, and as such, he was never certain how long he would be away from his family. This uncertainty placed a great deal of duress on himself and his family, while causing him to miss many of his family’s milestones:

Oh, it’s tough. The last time I was away, I missed my youngest daughter’s confirmation. She had a play, a concert, and you’re trying to tell her when you’re getting home. And you don’t know when you’re getting home. You promise them the world, but you don’t know when you’re going to see them.

Others additionally noted the strain which these cycles of absence and return place on family and intimate relationships. Cindy had recently returned from a sojourn in Fort McMurray, while both of her brothers-in-law and her mother were actively working out West. As she explained, the stresses of migrant labour had deleterious impacts on her family, with one sister in the midst of a divorce and the other dealing with the consequences of a compromised relationship. She had a particularly negative view of the commute, and held firm to the belief that no relationship could avoid being encroached upon as a result of such work-life patterns:

If a person isn't single and they have a family, even if they don't have children, those relationships tend to sever. Like, I've seen so many relationships break up because of the whole going out West thing [...] Like, the whole back-and-forth thing just doesn't seem to work, I find. There's a lot of infidelity and stuff. That's what I've seen, like, time and time again [...] I don't see a whole lot that do last. And if they do, like my sister and her husband, they've been doing it for years. But they've had issues with infidelity and things, but they, like, they accept it. She accepts it. It seems to be like either they accept it, and they're the couples that make it, or they relocate, and then they're together there and whatever. But for the most part, like, I don't see many relationships that are healthy and do the back-and-forth thing.

Another point which arose was the impacts these migrations have upon the local community and local community institutions. Glen, a community leader of one small Cape Breton town, underlined how the impacts of migration ripple outwards into the community at large. He pointed out that in his town, the section of the population who go out West are mostly middle-aged men who typically have been among the most likely to be involved in community volunteerism. Such absences are having tangible effects on community life, with the volunteer fire department no longer having enough members to continue operation, while the local little league baseball team and children's hockey club found themselves without volunteer coaches.

Of course, not all the impacts of this labour migration route are negative. For most people, the rationales to commence and continue such migrations are to secure a livelihood and to provide for one's family. Work in the Oil Sands is variable in terms of pay and conditions, yet this industry does contain some of the highest paid industrial jobs in Canada⁴, with tradespeople routinely noting that the consistent work and abundance of overtime hours to be found in Northern Alberta allow for higher wages than could be made elsewhere. Such workers have been sending money home and spending their "out West dollars" at home, having a number of positive impacts on the local economy and mitigating some of the impacts of the loss of the region's principal industries. Many mentioned how working in the Oil Sands was much more profitable than other jobs they had held locally, opening up opportunities for an improved and

previously unattainable quality of life. Before working in the Oil Sands, Tom was employed at a local car parts manufacturing plant, and had considered this as his life-long career until the plant closed and he found himself unemployed. Working out West provided him with lucrative new opportunities and a point of contrast to his former work experiences.

The money's good. You can clean up a lot of debt, and you come back and go on unemployment [...] My house, it needs a lot of work. I was making \$14.50 an hour [working locally]. I was taking home four hundred and twenty bucks a week. There's no way I could do what I did with that kind of money like what I did with what I made out West. I just did the front step and the back porch, and I have to gut the kitchen. That's how rotted it is. I thought, man, I'll build the step here in the back, but it'll be three years before I can save enough to fix the one in the front. But it's just, once you're out there, you can take care of all those problems at once. It's nice. Knowing that it's there, it's very comforting.

As well, paradoxically, labour migration appears to be slowing out-migration in Industrial Cape Breton⁵. A number of workers noted there was a certain irony in their labour migration, in that they had to leave Cape Breton in order to stay – if it was not for their ability to work temporary contracts out West, they would have to permanently leave the region to search for employment. A large motivational force for taking part in such patterns of migration is to preserve close-knit family and community ties, with many noting that they preferred to maintain ties to the area and keep their families in the region, even if such stability requires their perpetual absence from the community and from family life, rather than to expose their families to the social dislocation of moving away permanently. Storey has noted similar circumstances in the parallel situation of Newfoundland migration to the Oil Sands, pointing out that the opportunity for commute work “has helped maintain smaller rural communities that have lost their previous economic *raison d’etre*” (2010:1177).

THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF MOBILE LABOUR

A basic idea in the political economy of migration literature is that processes of migration allow capital to be linked to distant pools of labour, allowing capital to draw upon such sources of labour (Narotzky 1997; Ferguson 2010). This system of work organization is advantageous to the oil extraction industry by providing flexible and temporary workforces which allow for the rapid periods of expansion which we have seen throughout the past decade. Yet this system of work organization is beneficial for capital in other respects in that it allows for the easy dismissal of such workers once their labour is no longer required. Such transitory labour systems equally allow for rapid periods of contraction in the

industry, emphasising such workers' particularly unstable and precarious work situations.

During the first half of my fieldwork in 2009, it quickly became evident that the so-called "economic downturn" was having a dramatic impact on the migration routes between Industrial Cape Breton and the Oil Sands. In the face of the recession and declining crude oil prices, Oil Sands companies had drastically reduced the scope of their operations and cancelled various construction projects (Cattaneo 2008). Many people found themselves unemployed as the various projects they were assigned to were either cancelled or scaled back. Individuals who had envisioned long-term careers of back-and-forth employment out West—employment which meant they had to leave their home community on a regular basis, but still relatively well-paying industrial work nonetheless—were suddenly faced with the realization of how precarious and contingent these jobs actually were. One newly unemployed worker I spoke with underlined this situation:

I was out there for four and a half months, it was good, I made a lot of money. The people at the contracting firm shook my hand and said, 'Buddy, right after Christmas, we have a huge project, a two or three year project. We want you to come back.' Great! And, that's when the economy went belly up. So they pulled the plug on that project, it just sat there idle. And so did a lot of other projects. The rug was taken out from under them, and everybody's out of work. And everybody's scrambling 'cause, you're basically living on unemployment until you get back out there again. And so, a lot of people's unemployment ran out, and they were stuck.

Workers were finding their stretches of unemployment between work contracts becoming lengthier, while Cape Breton unions involved in organizing jobs out West for their members offered local tradespeople fewer and fewer opportunities for out West employment. An interviewee addressed fears that work in the Oil Sands was in danger of becoming a thing of the past and voiced his concerns of what would happen to the region if such work opportunities ceased to exist entirely:

Everybody's workin' out there. Or at least everybody knows someone workin' out there. There's nothing here. If you send everybody home, what are people going to do? The steel mill's gone, fishing's going down [...] What are you going to do?

During this period of the downturn, workers became confronted with the conflicting relationships they held towards Oil Sands work: people in the region had come to rely on such work opportunities, but also came to recognize their precarious status in this particular organization of labour.

ADAPTING TO CONTINGENT STATUS

Towards the end of 2009, many individuals in Industrial Cape Breton who had undergone long periods of unemployment finally began to find employment out West once more. However, now this work pattern had taken on an air of uncertainty. One interviewee mentioned how the “glory days” when anyone could find work in the Oil Sands had come to an end, but that working out West would always be a central form of employment for people in the area. Workers, he continued, would simply have to adapt to the cyclical whims of the global economy and learn to compete with one another for scant employment opportunities:

We’re seeing more people coming home, and they’re coming home for longer periods of time [...] Right now, there’s no work out there for people. But after the New Year, it should be getting better. You have to know people now [in order to find work].

Various changes, some obvious, others more subtle, had taken place which shifted many of the costs of this migration route from Oil Sands industries and sub-contracting companies onto workers themselves. The direct charter flight from Sydney to Fort McMurray had been cancelled, and more workers were funding their own travel expenses to the Oil Sands. Many workers who had previously been lodged in work camps were now venturing out West and finding their own temporary accommodations in Fort McMurray. Individuals were increasingly enrolling in safety training programs at private institutions, training that was previously company-paid as part of incoming workers’ orientations, in hopes that it would improve their chances of being employable. The economic downturn underlined this type of work arrangement as precarious and unstable, and had allowed the industry to take measures which further reduced the cost of labour. Yet the ensuing prolonged periods of unemployment did not cause workers to reconsider their relations with this particular work organization, but rather to accept and adapt to their particularly uncertain and contingent situations. In short, these circumstances conditioned labour to accept less in a situation in which they were already particularly vulnerable. Such workers have had to discard the dream of secure, full-time employment in Industrial Cape Breton and accept the idea of embarking on career-long cycles of temporary labour migrations, and yet now additionally find themselves implicated in paths of unsure and unpredictable work trajectories.

CONCLUSION: THE CONTINUATION OF MOBILE WORK AND CONTINGENCY IN THE OIL SANDS

Over the past two decades, Northern Alberta's Oil Sands industry has developed from relative obscurity to a central component of the Canadian economy. These industries have been constructed and expanded through a reliance on temporary labour, a reliance which shows no signs of slowing. While enumerating mobile and shifting populations of temporary workers has proven difficult, signs clearly point out that perpetually temporary labour will continue to be an enduring and escalating feature of the Oil Sands industry, with larger and more sophisticated work camps becoming permanent aspects of the region and temporary workers constituting growing proportions of the Northern Alberta population. Atlantic Canadian communities will continue to supply temporary labour to the Oil Sands while such back-and-forth movements of mobile workers will continue to have a variety of social, cultural, and economic impacts, both negative and positive, within such communities.

Yet temporary labour is an inherently flexible form of labour provision, useful not only in its ability to travel to where labour is required, but to leave once that labour is no longer required, and thus has proven particularly convenient for resource industries prone to cyclical periods of expansion and contraction. In the expansion period of the past decade, the Oil Sands industries provided the conditions for the emergence of circuits of migration from various regions where labour was in abundance. By the late 2000s following the economic downturn, this dynamic had reversed, and workers in Industrial Cape Breton quickly learned of their precariousness in this organization of labour. Eventually, unemployed workers became willing to assume various costs of mobile work that had once been covered by the employer, and in realizing and adjusting to their newfound contingent status, such workers came to accept less from their relationship to this pattern of work. Tom, looking at his future plans for employment working out West in the Oil Sands, sums up these feelings of uncertainty in relation to his precarious position in this pattern of labour migration: "I don't really know when I'm going to stop. I'd like to think in five years, but who knows. If it goes bottom up out there, then you're done, eh?"

NOTES

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- ¹ In my own work, I continue to use the terms Tar Sands and Oil Sands interchangeably, yet among my informants (principally mobile workers in the oil and gas industry), "Oil Sands" is the colloquially used term, and I wish to reflect that usage. In addition, "oil sands" refers to the actual physical material of bituminous deposits, while the capitalized "Oil Sands" is used to designate the region of Northern Alberta in which these deposits are located.

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- ² The issue of foreign workers in the Oil Sands has been a contentious subject. Yet, at the height of the boom, foreign workers made up a relatively small 3% of the mobile worker population, or about 700 individuals out of the estimated 25,000 mobile Oil Sands workers in 2007 (Athabasca Regional Issues Working Group 2007). Regardless, this is an important issue and while it is outside of the purviews of the research that I based this present article on, the subject of temporary foreign workers in the Oil Sands industry requires further in-depth exploration.
- ³ This was a point echoed in numerous interviews I conducted with workers and family members. While no reliable quantitative studies exist in regards to remittances and the dynamics of temporary internal migration between the Oil Sands and Cape Breton, the president of Cape Breton's Building and Trades Council estimated that at the height of the boom, Cape Breton trades workers were remitting upwards of \$3 million per week into the local Cape Breton economy (CBC News 2007), while estimates report that a commuter household in Cape Breton stands to earn on average \$25 000 more annually than a non-commuter household (Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation 2009: 71).
- ⁴ As a point of comparison, the average 2005 household income in the Oil Sands region of Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality was \$122 442, compared with the Cape Breton Regional Municipality's average 2005 household income of \$40 451 and of Canada's as a whole household income average of \$53 634 (Statistics Canada 2007).
- ⁵ Many factors influence population decline, and given the lack of data on interprovincial mobility, it is difficult to quantitatively discern the impacts these current migration patterns are having on out-migration in the area. Yet, a consistent trend in interviews with commute workers and their families was that the presence of temporary work out West allowed them the economic viability needed to continue residing in Cape Breton. One worker summarised this situation succinctly: "And you can say what you want about it, but it's keeping Cape Breton alive. The biggest employer in Cape Breton is Fort McMurray. Without it, put it this way, we couldn't live here."

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