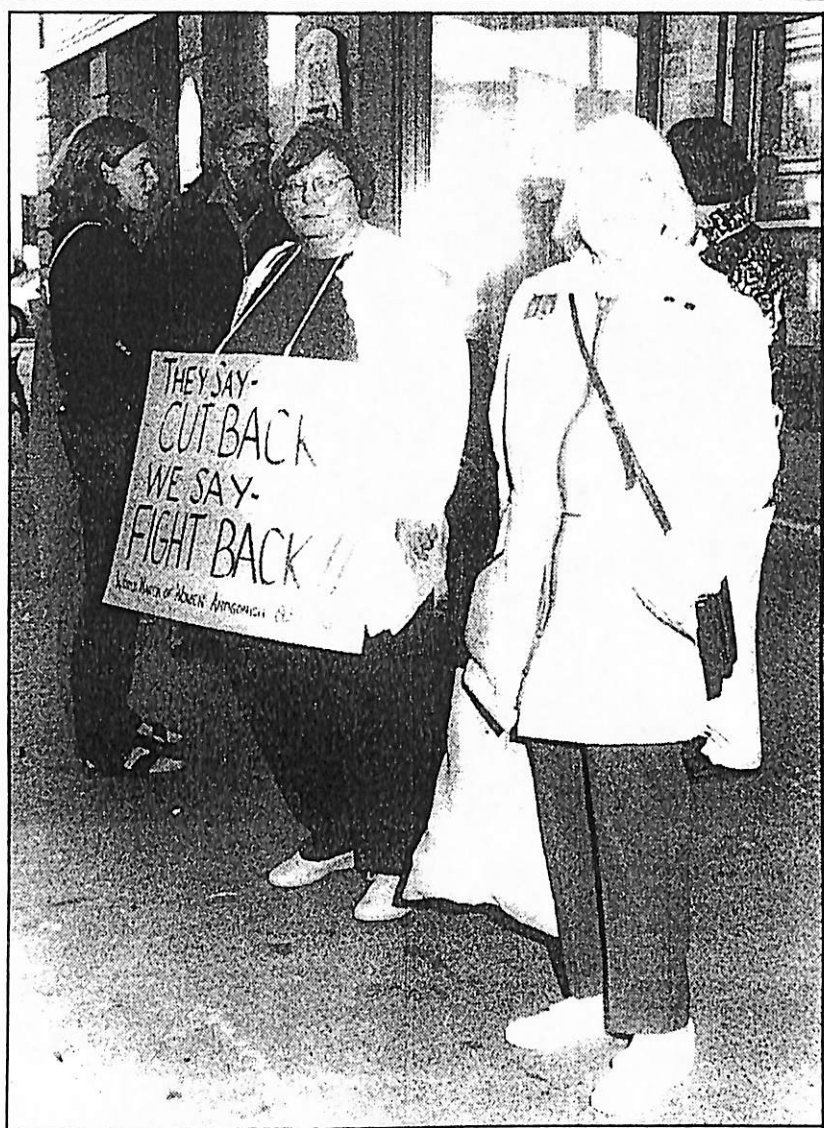




FRAN NUNN (left) and Rosalina Van der Lans were among the local protesters who gathered outside Kirk Building in Antigonish last week to protest proposed changes to the province's income assistance system.

Public protests proposed changes

by Monica MacKinnon

Over a dozen people gathered outside the Kirk Building in Antigonish last Wednesday, joining their voices in a chorus of provincial protests about proposed changes to the province's social assistance programs. The building was targeted because it houses the office of MLA Angus MacIsaac.

MacIsaac is a representative of changes the public fears will reduce already inadequate financial support for Nova Scotians receiving family benefits or income assistance. Ed Miller of the Antigonish Coalition for Economic Justice said.

People across the province are on red alert about the upcoming announcement of changes to community services programs.

Past news releases indicate the changes, which will be announced in full detail this week, will include a focus on employment for people on assistance.

Both MacIsaac and the department of community services have chosen to refrain from comment on the protests until details of the changes are unveiled.

"I prefer to make comments based on the details," MacIsaac said. "At this stage people are reacting to speculation without full information."

However, community services minister Peter Christie is quoted in a government press release issued in mid-June saying the department is focused on helping people overcome barriers to employment.

"The most immediate and effective way to address poverty is to provide employment opportunities."

Katherine Reed of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre works with and advocates for women on social assistance.

Her concerns with the upcoming changes are three-fold.

Emphasizing work may mean pushing people into minimum wage jobs with inadequate living wage, she said.

Single mothers receiving family benefits should be allowed to stay home with their young children and not be forced into the workforce.

Social assistance recipients and advocates also fear reduction in the amount of benefits. "Benefits are already inadequate," Reed said. "A reduction will be devastating."

ACEJ and the AWRC organized last week's protest and distributed pamphlets to people on the street outlining proposed changes to social assistance.

A similar protest is scheduled at the same location for this evening (Wednesday) from 5 to 6 p.m.