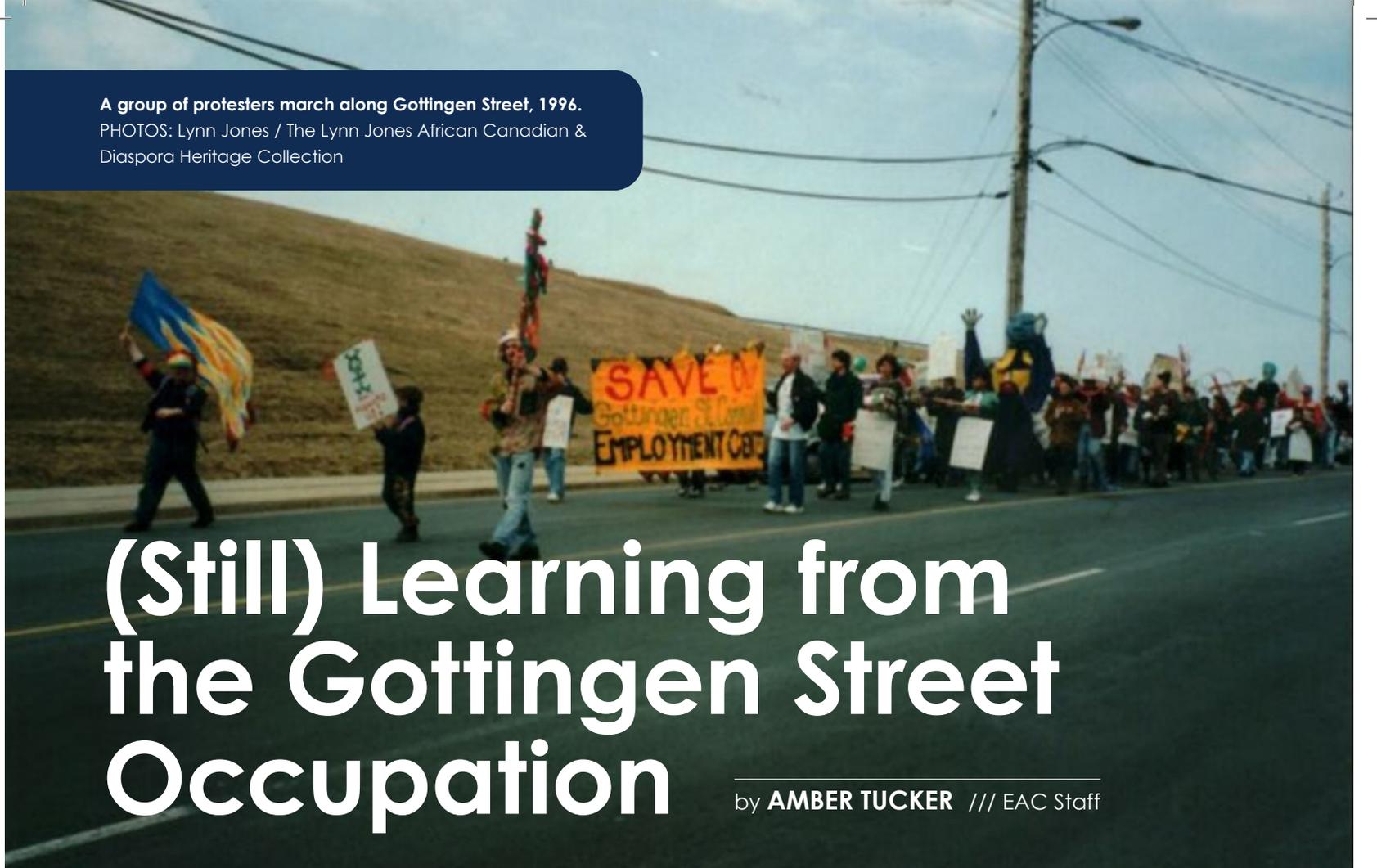


A group of protesters march along Gottingen Street, 1996.
PHOTOS: Lynn Jones / The Lynn Jones African Canadian & Diaspora Heritage Collection



(Still) Learning from the Gottingen Street Occupation

by AMBER TUCKER /// EAC Staff

In March 1996, a small group of employees and community activists walked into a Canada Employment Centre (CEC) in the North End of Halifax, Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia, and began occupying it. It was a daring direct action, protesting – and preventing – the federal government's plan to close the CEC.

Among the lead occupiers was Dr. Lynn Jones, prominent African Nova Scotian leader, labour leader and lifelong activist. She generously spoke with me for this article.¹ Jones was an employee at that CEC, as well as vice president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), at the time when she found herself asking how the community could fight to keep the Centre open.

In the wake of federal budget cuts, thousands of CECs were being shuttered or relocated. Kijpuktuk/Halifax's North End had high rates of poverty and unemployment, and the CEC at 2089 Gottingen Street was the only place residents could access these employment services. Jones and other leaders were all too aware of the harm closing the Centre would have. So, when the Department of Human Resources Development Canada refused to negotiate or even delay its closure, the group decided to occupy.

Amber (she/her) is a communications officer at the EAC. She is also an editor, community organizer, and cat mama. She lives in Kijpuktuk/Halifax.

The “Gottingen Street Occupation” would continue for an incredible 122 days.² Thirty years later, it remains the longest occupation of a federal government building in Canadian history.³ The principles behind its success can continue to inform our movement work today.

1 Value and strengthen relationships. Long before the occupation, leaders from the Black community, labour unions, artists and others were used to working together on community issues. Jones calls this “a prescription for organizing.” She says, “You just don't decide today that you're going to organize and expect that it's going to be successful. You have to build up a relationship long before you get into it. That's the key.” (That doesn't mean exclusively formal meetings. The group that went on to occupy had a regular Friday gathering at the bar after work).

2 Learn as you go along. Whether you're planning a march, writing to politicians or crafting a protest puppet, you don't have to be an expert already. When a fellow organizer suggested they occupy the Centre, “I could literally feel the air where we stopped,” Jones says. “Most of us had never occupied a place in our life. We'd demonstrated, we'd done different things – we had never occupied.” Along with employing known strategies, sometimes we must navigate the discomfort of trying a new one. “But I have less fear of that,” Jones reflects, “because I've done it now.”

3 Harness challenging times to build momentum. “There was such a liberal slash-and-cut agenda, and the communities weren’t getting the funding they needed to do their work,” says Jones. This was in part why, when the group consulted their respective communities about the plan to occupy, they received unanimous support, “because things had just been piling up for so long.” Other like-minded individuals and organizations added momentum: Jones’ union, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, provided funds and held a rally in Grand Parade with Bob White (then head of the CLC) as a featured speaker. Newspapers ran sympathetic stories, informing the public about the fight to keep the CEC. Near and far, people backed the occupation.

4 Make art, fuel change! Creativity played a meaningful role in the occupation. Jones describes how local artists created a “Save Our Community CEC” sign, a beautiful emblem of resistance that hung over the door. One day, they led a DIY parade down Gottingen Street with neighbours cheering from the sidewalks. “It was a community parade,” says Jones, “the best parade I ever attended, to this day.” There were flowers, costumes and even homemade puppets (tauntingly named after unsupportive MLAs). Creative expression helps us reclaim our power, gives shape to new visions and invites people to share them.

TAKE ACTION

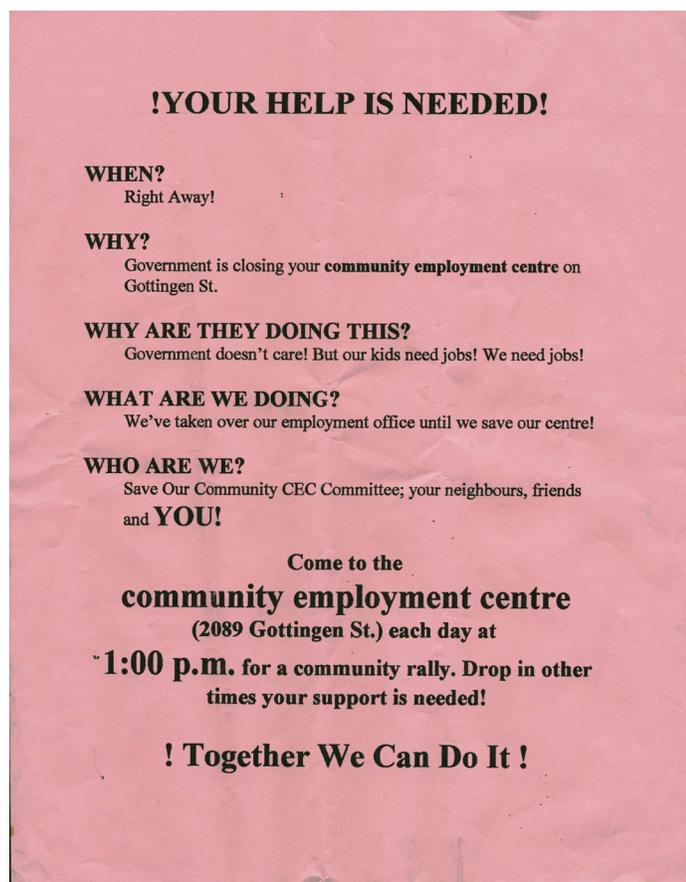
Brainstorm the threads that connect you with folks in your area. Start talking with people about what would make their lives better. Better housing conditions? Access to fresh food? Affordable childcare? As you get to know one another more, stay open to how you can organize toward that common goal.

5 Engage the wider community. The occupiers were far from the only participants over the months-long action. Various groups borrowed the space for learning sessions and meetings, and even sleepovers for the neighbourhood children. Union members across the country wrote letters of encouragement that eventually covered a wall of the CEC. The activists held daily demonstrations, with all ages showing up day after day. Jones describes a spirited atmosphere: “Someone would stand on the soapbox and lead us into songs, and the horns would honk to support, up and down Gottingen Street.” She adds, “We had more food than we knew what to do with. The food just kept coming.” It grounds us to know that victories are won in community.

After 122 days of occupation, Jones received an early-morning phone call: the government had finally agreed to negotiate. They went on to agree to the organizers’ key demands.

By then, however, the community was understandably tired. A year or so later, the Gottingen CEC was moved, then closed entirely, with no pushback. As Scott Neigh writes in *Resisting the State*, this is evidence that “the work of making change absolutely must be sustained over the long term.”⁴ However urgent a moment may feel, it’s only strategic to pace ourselves so we can prevent burnout and organize for the long haul.

Movement history endures as part of the unseen fabric of our lives. The Gottingen Street Occupation deserves to be heard, read and remembered – for what leaders and community accomplished then, and for what their struggle can teach us now.



REFERENCES

1. Jones, Lynn. Personal interview. 13 January, 2026.
2. Chisholm, Cassidy. “How an Occupation in North-End Halifax Saved the Community from Gentrification.” CBC, 17 Sept. 2021, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/activists-celebrate-occupation-employment-centre-gottingen-street-1.6180114. Accessed 6 Jan. 2026.
3. Logan, Sam. *Forgotten Histories: Remembering the 1996 Occupation of the Canada Employment Centre in Halifax*. 14 Dec. 2017.
4. Neigh, Scott. *Resisting the State: Canadian History through the Stories of Activists*. Fernwood Publishing, 2012.