

Bitterness just below surface as Pelee Island ferry strike ends

Residents say service should be declared essential

BY KATE HARRIES
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PELEE ISLAND — Never again.

That was the vow as islanders woke up yesterday to the welcome sound of the M. V. Jiimaan's foghorn, signalling the end of a 36-day ferry strike that cost businesses an estimated \$1 million.

There's relief here but also bitterness — directed not at the 40 members of the Seafarers International Union, but at ferry operators Ontario Northland, which took a hard line at the bargaining table, and the provincial government, which ignored local pleas that it intervene.

"I'm so excited I can't wait," said Ev Mattee as the boat pulled in after its first morning round trip to the mainland.

"It's good to be back to normal again," said Co-op employee Paul Feltz, waiting to pick up sorely needed supplies, including the 5-gallon drinking water jugs that ran out 10 days ago.

Because of the sulphurous taste of water in most wells, most of the island's 275 permanent residents drink bottled water.

One two-kilometre stretch of West Shore Dr., where the major businesses that cater to the area's estimated 50,000 summer visitors are located, has municipally treated water. Even that was about to run out,



said Pelee Township Reeve Al McAninch.

"It's not anything like the Walkerton situation," he said, but the strike ended just before the municipality had used up its supply of chlorine. Federal regulations prohibit transporting the product by air.

First on everyone's agenda now is ensuring that the island can't be cut off again.

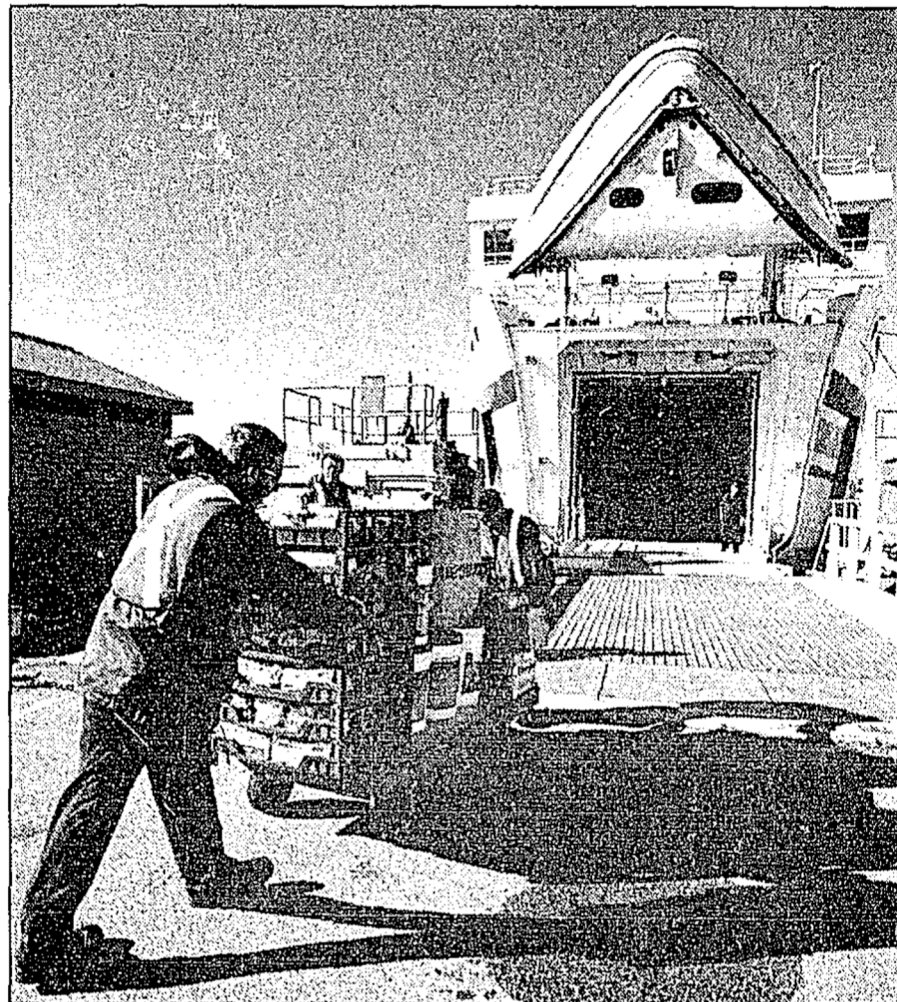
"It has to be an essential service," said McAninch, interviewed at the liquor store where he is the manager.

"It's our highway. There's no way around it."

And, he added, "it has to have local input in managing it."

Islanders resent that Ontario Northland's marine services are based in Owen Sound with a "hands-off" management team 100 miles away who know nothing about the system.

McAninch noted the ferry has not had a local manager for three years, which he said shows Ontario Northland has scant regard for the interests of the community, at the tip of Canada's southernmost landmass.



TED ANDKILDE FOR THE TORONTO STAR

BACK IN BUSINESS: Deckhands Ryan Pencarinha, foreground, and Jeff Fraser roll groceries on to Pelee Island ferry, which resumed service after a strike.

But McAninch also had criticism for various Ontario ministries — transportation, tourism, and northern affairs and mines — which he said passed the buck when locals were begging the province to intervene and end the strike.

Bill Parish — a spokesperson for Tim Hudak, minister of mines and northern development, the department that oversees Ontario Northland — said there may be "some legitimacy" to the islanders' demand for more say.

But the province can't do anything about declaring the ferry an essential service because Ottawa has jurisdiction over all waterway labour matters, Parish said.

The offer the workers accepted in a vote last week was for wage increases of 2 per cent in each year of a two-year contract, and pension plan payment increases of one per cent a year, said deckhand Joe McInnon.

Two weeks into the strike, lo-

cal businesses and residents raised enough to meet the strikers' demands for a year. This, they reasoned, would give both sides time to negotiate a deal but also get the ferry back in operation to kick off the tourist season.

The offer was rejected, angering Pelee islanders.

"It hurt, as it would hurt any group whose legitimate request is ignored," said Ron Thiessen, director of the Heritage Centre Museum and the originator of the fundraising idea.

McAninch described the ferry service as "a big lemon that can't make money because of speed, because of inefficiencies, because of the number of people needed to run it."

The Jiimaan, (a 400-passenger, 40-vehicle capacity vessel) was added to the service in 1992. But its leisurely 12-knot pace — a far cry from the 30 knots of more modern ferries — means it takes 90 minutes to travel the 12 nautical miles to the mainland.