

compensation while they were off work. For example, a worker may be off for 52 weeks during which time he collects partial workmen's compensation benefits. At the end of the 52 weeks he is deemed ready to go back to work, but his former employer tells him that he could not keep the job open and had to hire someone in his place.

This worker may have contributed to the unemployment insurance fund for many years. He meets all the conditions of the Unemployment Insurance Act. He is willing and able to take a job, so he goes to the unemployment insurance office and files for benefits. His records show that he has not worked in the last 52 weeks, however, so he has not the required eight weeks of contributions to the fund. My amendment would extend the qualifying period to include the time that the worker was off due to sickness or was in receipt of compensation benefits. For example, if he was off for 52 weeks, then the unemployment insurance office would go back over the past year and 52 weeks to get eight weeks of contribution so he would be eligible for unemployment insurance benefits until he could get back into the work force.

It is a very simple amendment and it is just. It deals with a condition that was recognized in the original Unemployment Insurance Act before it was amended in 1971. The reasons for having it in the act prior to 1971 are still relevant.

I know that private members' bills have as much chance of passing in this House as a snowball has in the nether world. I know there is the practice of talking out these amendments, but I appeal to all members of the House to let this one pass. It may not be used in urban ridings where most occupations are less hazardous than those in my own area, where mining predominates. Insurance companies recognize that miners have the most hazardous jobs in the country and demand a higher premium from them than from other citizens. The chance of workers in my area being affected by the act as it stands is much higher than, say, workers in the riding of my hon. friend from St. Catharines (Mr. Parent). I know that even though he is on the government side of the House, he will recognize the great need for this kind of amendment which would benefit workers in highly industrialized areas whose jobs entail a large degree of danger.

This is the kind of amendment that is supported by the trade union movement, Madam Speaker, which has consistently suggested it to the Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Andras) who is responsible for the Unemployment Insurance Act. Other amendments could be brought in, but this one is very important to the worker. I checked with the trade unions in my area to find the extent to which this particular amendment would be used, and found that compared to other sections of the act such as the maternity section, it would be used very often. It is very important in industrialized areas where workers have hazardous occupations.

Someone who has worked for 20 or 25 years and finds that he does not qualify for unemployment insurance benefits is in a very difficult position. He can go to the welfare office and ask to be put on the welfare rolls, in effect going through a very dehumanizing process in order to keep himself and his family going until he can find a job. Surely this is no way to treat people who made their

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contributions to the fund when they were healthy and working. This amendment would maintain the dignity of the worker who finds himself in such a situation.

I therefore hope that other hon. members who speak on this amendment do not resort to the usual device of talking the bill out, but that they let it go to a vote. It is very important to the workers of this country that this bill is passed and that the act be amended in this fashion.

Mr. George Baker (Gander-Twillingate): Madam Speaker, it is not my intention to talk out this bill, but it seems to me so important that it will require 15 or 20 minutes of my time. I have done some research into the proposed amendment and have some ideas regarding its effect on the Unemployment Insurance Act. I should like, also, to deal with what is wrong with other sections of the act which pertain generally to the situation to which the hon. member referred.

● (1710)

In 1971 there were fundamental changes to the Unemployment Insurance Act which among other things reduced the minimum insurable weeks required for eligibility to eight in the previous 52. This feature, in conjunction with the payment of sickness benefits, significantly reduced the need to provide for extensions to the qualifying period. The significance of the reduction to the requirement for eight weeks of insurable employment was that claimants would be paid benefits on a combination of recent labour force attachment and the difficulty in finding employment at the particular time he or she was unemployed. This is in contrast to the previous act which was based almost solely on the number of insurable weeks worked in the qualifying period.

I understand that experience with the new act since 1971 indicates that extensions to the qualifying period could be useful to the following categories of claimants: extended sickness, workmen's compensation, imprisonment, labour disputes, courses of occupational-vocational instruction. Studies on the potential advantage to extend benefit periods in these circumstances are under way in the Unemployment Insurance Commission but are not yet complete. Completion is dependent upon other in-depth studies being carried out that might bear either directly or indirectly on the suitability of reintroducing the extension of the qualifying period concept. Therefore, to proceed independently with proposals for amended legislation in this regard would be premature.

Let us consider benefit period extension. A significant consideration that must be taken into account in dealing with this general subject is the parallel requirement to also study the need for extensions to existing benefit periods for similar categories of claimants. For example, an individual who initiates a claim for benefit and is then incarcerated for an extended period of time should be treated with the same advantages as the individual who was incarcerated before he had established a claim for benefit. This effect compounds the degree of study that must be entered into before extensions to the qualifying period can be agreed upon.

Let me now say a word concerning workmen's compensation. At this time, working level discussions are being