• (1900)

For this reason, I intend to strike a board of inquiry on labour relations, whose mandate will be to report on the ways that parties involved in handling cargo in ports can avoid closing down ports in the future when they are in the process of resolving their labour conflicts, because closure compromises our competitiveness on the world market and our reputation as a trustworthy exporter, and forces Parliament to take rapid action.

Mr. Speaker, clearly, we must avoid a repeat of this situation in the years to come. And I have told my colleagues that I am personally committed to finding a long–term solution to these labour–relation problems which have become endemic to west coast ports. That is why I would like to ask the members of this House to support the bill before us—to ensure that we will be able to move goods destined for export markets through west coast ports in the near future as we did before.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte–Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the official opposition agreed to today's emergency debate on this labour relations problem on the West Coast.

However, we still have questions and—in light of the government's proposals—we will oppose the bill as drafted. We will propose a number of amendments in committee of the whole and if these amendments are approved by the government, we would then vote in favour of the bill.

We have questions because this bill comes after a general strike was called at midnight last night. So a special bill was introduced less than 15 hours after the strike started. Logically, this amounts to calling into question the right to strike. Let us say so clearly. How can we talk about the right to strike when special back–to–work legislation is introduced after 15 hours? In fact, the potential right to strike cannot be exercised if a special bill is tabled less than 24 hours after a strike is called.

Last year, it was the same problem at the same port but with a different group, the dockers. We then agreed that the thing to do was to launch a debate on the issue right away and put in place settlement mechanisms. In this regard, I commend the industrial inquiry commission initiative. However, last year, the Minister of Human Resources Development told us that, in actual fact, arbitration was futile, that we had to move on to the last offer mechanism—the last union proposal and the last offer from management.

This year, we are rediscovering the advantages of arbitration. I think that this shows a kind of inconsistency. Let me say clearly that I favour neither approach. Nonetheless, I fail to see how you could be against arbitration last year and, this year, consider arbitration to resolve the dispute at the very same place, the same port, with more or less the same players.

It seems to me that inasmuch as the right to strike is recognized, it is important to give both sides time to bargain not only before action is taken, but also while pressure is being exercised. Provided of course that negotiations can take place in acceptable and modern conditions.

This brings me to the whole issue of the anti–strikebreaking legislation. Such an act exists in Quebec. In fact, it was enacted as early as 1977 if I am not mistaken. Ontario and British Columbia have since followed suit. This means that 70 per cent of the people of Canada are governed by such legislation.

We are finding out that strikes tend to last much longer in areas under federal authority than in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia, where anti–strikebreaking legislation is in force. I remember mail strikes. These were extremely violent strikes, but strikes are becoming much less violent in provinces with anti–strikebreaking legislation, and I think that the hon. minister is aware of this.

In Quebec, the CPQ has made no demands denouncing the anti–strikebreaking legislation in recent years.

• (1905)

It used to at first, but I think that based on the results, the benefits of such legislation, the council realized that it made for better labour relations, as negotiations were more meaningful in a way, disputes were fewer and more easily resolved, all because modern legislation was in place.

When I hear that action is urgently required, I agree. But, as I said earlier, we plan to move amendments in committee of the whole. I wonder why it is not considered equally urgent to act to put an end to the strike at Ogilvie Flour in Montreal. That stike has not been going on for 15 hours, but nearly a year. One year, and no anti–scab legislation. Yet, if there is a company which does not care about its workers, it is Ogilvie.

Let me give you some examples. The negotiations were conducted in English. The employer refused to negotiate in French in Quebec. This is illegal under the Quebec Labour Code. Indeed, since law 101 and the various related provisions were passed, negotiations must be conducted in French.

The employer, AND, a company whose board of directors includes former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, refused to negotiate in French. How nice. So, no anti–scab legislation in the case of Ogilvie. Yet, it seems to me that there is some urgency to that conflict which, as I said, did not start 15 hours