

Grain Shipments

It might appear to some people that I am against labour and the right to strike in any circumstance. If people believe this, then they have not been listening. I am, and will continue to be, against allowing a group of people in essential services to tie up the country every few weeks or months in order to force their employers to award them unreasonable and excessive increases in pay and other benefits. The Canadian people have a right to be protected from such irresponsible actions. Who is to protect them if we do not?

I have heard that the Canadian Wheat Board has advised farmers in the western provinces not to grow too much wheat in the coming season because it does not appear that we will be able to deliver the wheat we sell. It would seem that even a government agency today is assuming that wheat shipments throughout the country and to our foreign buyers might not be met because of a probable strike of essential workers. If this is a fact, and I have reason to believe it is, this certainly represents a sorry state of affairs.

On the radio news last night—since it is now three o'clock in the morning—it was announced that a settlement had been reached between Treasury Board and the General Labour and Trades Group. Of course, I congratulate the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Chrétien) for having been able to make such an announcement. Certainly this situation has continued for far too long. I happen to believe there could have been a settlement a good deal earlier.

It has already been mentioned that we have been unable to deliver grain to China under a contract signed last year. It now appears that we will not be able to deliver in respect of a more recent contract with China. It has been suggested that the United States and other wheat producing countries will benefit from our inability to keep our commitments. This lends some credence to the reports that our farmers have been advised to cut back on planned wheat and grain crops. When I consider that this state of affairs has been brought about by a small percentage of the workers in the grain handling category, and when I consider it has been allowed to happen by the federal government with apparent disregard for the rights and welfare for the majority of Canadian citizens, I have to ask what is happening to our country. I have to wonder whether anybody is in charge of the country and, if so, whether or not they know what they are doing.

Our country cannot continue to fumble around with these vital issues year after year. There must come a time when the right to strike should take second place to the interests of the country and our citizens. If the unions continue to abuse the right to strike, and blackmail and bludgeon the country at will, then we must consider the wisdom of taking away the right to strike. At least we will have to consider taking away the right to strike from those workers in essential services, people who in the past have used this weapon for their own purposes without regard to the interests of the majority of Canadians.

● (0250)

Mr. Jake Epp (Provencher): Madam Speaker, there are a few comments I would like to place on the record with respect to the motion which is before us this early in the

[Mr. Darling.]

morning, specifically dealing with the grain handlers' strike. Since the time in 1967 when the present law was introduced and passed by this House certain conditions have changed which make it incumbent on all members of the House to examine seriously what is best for the country in respect of labour management. We have to consider whether or not the so called right to strike in essential services—which I will define more precisely later on—is beneficial to the country and more specifically whether it is of benefit to the individual worker who uses that weapon. I have serious doubts that it is to his advantage.

I think we are all familiar with the effect which this strike is having on the grain trade and on Canada's reputation. We heard today about the demurrage problem and that this money will have to be paid by the western Canadian farmer, a person who is facing tremendous increases in input costs as he is looking to the 1975 planting season, a person who has had to tolerate quietly, as the third party affected by the strike, the fact that whatever settlement will be made, whether a settlement legislated in the House or one agreed to by the two parties involved, its cost will be borne by him, and yet the input he had in that settlement was minimal.

We are also cognizant of the fact that as a result of the previous grain handlers' strike we will not recover until some time this summer from the effects of that strike so far as our commitments and our grain deliveries are concerned. That is not to include the present disruption that we hope has now been concluded with the tentative settlement that was to have been made today.

The Canadian people cannot simply state on the floor of the House of Commons, or in the editorial pages of our newspapers, that the right to strike is a basic right, irrespective of its cost. We must seriously consider whether or not there is a better way to resolve differences between labour and management. As Canadian farmers on the prairies are contemplating what to plant in the next few months, they are faced with the problem not only of grain deliveries but, as the frost will leave the ground, with road restrictions and with a reduced period of time for their grain deliveries so that those grain deliveries, which they thought they could make in the winter, will now have to be undertaken in the spring seeding time.

These are the practical problems that farmers have to face because of the strikes that have occurred. The public interest must be considered, and we say it must take precedence over union or management action. Our reputation as an international grain supplying country is at stake.

With regard to food aid, at the food conference in Rome the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. MacEachen) made a clear commitment to the third world that Canada stood behind its former commitments on food aid, and that we were willing to increase that food aid. We have not had the capacity, the capability or, for that matter, the moral courage to say that even though the strike continued, human need, human hunger and the spectre of death by starvation convince us that we must allow grain to move so that the hungry of the world can live. Surely that is a pretty high price to pay for the so called right to strike.