

Government Orders

support to the minister and I would be prepared to help in any way I can to make that happen.

• (2110)

The two questions I would like to ask the minister on the legislation are, first, why are the Montreal docks not included in this legislation? Second, if the Reform Party had been drafting this legislation it would have removed section 8 and replaced it with final offer selection, which has been discussed here before.

I want to be very clear about this. I talked to the minister's officials before the debate began tonight. I understand that the reason behind not using final offer selection is that it was used about a year ago in a labour dispute that was then ongoing. I understand and I accept what they have told me.

However, I would like to ask the minister if she believes that final offer selection could be useful at some point in this process. Would she commit the mediator-arbitrator to move to final offer selection at some point in this process if it is necessary?

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Minister of Labour, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, with respect to the port of Montreal, why is the situation there not included in this bill? Well, I would say that the situation in the port of Montreal is completely different.

I said earlier that we evaluated each situation on its merits. That is what we have done in the case of the port of Montreal. As you know, there is a labour relations problem there too, but all the other ports in the province of Quebec are now also in operation. Trois-Rivières, Sorel and Quebec City come to mind. Therefore the impact or consequences are not as great compared to the situation in Western Canada. That is my first comment.

My second is that, in the port of Montreal, we have seen over the years that the parties are very often able to reach an agreement. I believe that we have not had a general strike in the port of Montreal for over 20 years. At this point I have complete confidence that the parties can still come to an agreement in the port of Montreal. It is also very clear that I am making them a formal offer of mediation, precisely for the purpose of reaching such an agreement. Under these circumstances, I would consider legislative intervention completely premature.

As for the second question, regarding the possibility of a final offer, I would like to say that the complexity of this year's debate, compared to last year's, is completely different. Last year, there was only one element involved. If I remember correctly, the issue then was whether or not to allow an increase from 65 to 70 cents. The question was very simple: yes or no? The issue was a very straightforward one.

The situation before us today is much more complex. That is why we have opted for mediation-arbitration. If there is a final offer, the decision will be up to the arbitrator.

[English]

The Chairman: The member for Winnipeg Transcona made it clear that he had not finished his earlier remarks.

Mr. Blaikie: Mr. Chairman, I asked the minister a question earlier.

Concerning back to work legislation, is it the general policy of the government to bring in back to work legislation which does not involve a settlement, but rather a mediator-arbitrator as is the case before us now?

The reason I ask that question is because of the debate which has already ensued here and the comments which have been made about the possibility of further back to work legislation having to do with the rail situation. There is a concern, given some of the things the Minister of Transport has said in the past, that if the government brings in back to work legislation it may legislate a settlement to get rid of or reduce severely the employment security benefits that are in the current collective bargaining agreements.

I want to ask the Minister of Labour whether or not she can give assurances to the House and to the people who are concerned about the nature of that back to work legislation. Has the government ruled out legislating a settlement, particularly in respect of the employment security benefits?

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Minister of Labour, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I repeat that each situation is assessed on its merit.

As for the railway situation, it is now 9.15 p.m., so it is premature to talk about back to work legislation. I would not want to base my opinion on assumptions, but we will assess each of these situations. I am happy to see that negotiations were going on, today, in the railway sector. Once again, the main purpose of the minister of Labour is to help parties reach an agreement and to legislate. When we do that, it is because we do not have a choice any more.

[English]

The Chairman: There are four people who want to speak and there are about 15 minutes left. One more comment from the member for Winnipeg—Transcona.

Mr. Blaikie: Mr. Chairman, I want to ask the Minister of Labour with respect, I understand there is no need for back to work legislation now and I hope there will be no need. I cannot foresee a situation in which there would be. But her colleague, the Minister of Transport, also has a responsibility in the area of rail. He has indicated on a number of occasions that the government would act to eliminate the employment security provisions of the collective bargaining agreements if they could not be negotiated away.