

Airline Firefighters Strike

work and serve rather differently. I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that these communities are entitled to their views and that it should not be up to the federal government by fiat to tell them that their ideas and values are wrong and that it knows better.

It is for this reason the government has proposed, in the interest of harmonious relationships between employer and employee—and Treasury Board is the nominal employer—that where a man or woman engages in the federal public service and is likely to remain throughout his or her working career in that particular community, that is, a condition known as lack of mobility, there are marked differences in the kind of rewards that communities in Canada accord to these particular professions. Where there are marked differences and lack of mobility, we suggest—and I emphasize this—and indeed offer a regional approach rather than a national approach.

This means that those who avail themselves of this offer look for comparability with people in a corresponding trade in the community in which they live and work, and comparability where their wives shop, with the wives of other people engaged in the same profession. A number of unions have accepted this with satisfaction. A number of other unions have not accepted it. The fact that they have not accepted it does not mean we do not reach agreement. The government offers this to them, and if they accept it we reach a collective agreement.

In the present case we have offered to the firefighters regional rates, that is, the firefighters would be able to achieve comparability with corresponding people in the area in which they live and work, rather than the national average. The leader of the NDP (Mr. Lewis), suggested, I think rather irresponsibly for a member of this House, that we should in effect pay public servants the highest rate going anywhere in Canada. He suggested that in this way you can obtain harmony.

An hon. Member: He did not go that far: he said close to that.

Mr. Drury: Close to the highest probably sounds good to the people looking for a large increase and not so bad to the taxpayer who has to pay the bill. We have a system which has worked very satisfactorily and which has led to a very large number of collective agreements, whereby the federal government's position is that those who wish to be on national rates will bargain for a settlement at close to the national average.

● (2250)

Mr. Lewis: That takes in the lowest.

Mr. Drury: Of course it does. We all understand arithmetic. The average is the mean between the top and the bottom, and it includes both. We are prepared to offer the national average and we have concluded a great many agreements on this basis with those who prefer that kind of arrangement. The result is that where there are not wide differences of rewards across the country, there is not much disparity between the various communities. However, where there are wide disparities, as in the case of the firefighters and a number of other trades across the

[Mr. Drury.]

country where disparities exist, it is conducive to intense dissatisfaction.

The union, in so far as the firefighters are concerned, feels it is bound by a statement of principle that national rates are the rule. They are bound by the rules of the convention. Consequently, they responded to the government's over-all regional rate, which means substantial increases for places like Vancouver, Toronto, and some of the other western provinces mentioned, and to lesser increases for some other communities where there is not such a large disparity, by saying that their policy was national rates. Clearly, this is highly unsatisfactory to the firefighters in Vancouver, indeed in the whole B.C. area. It has been indicated to us that firefighters in another unit in B.C. and also in the employment of the federal government will go out with other services in sympathy with the claims of the airport firefighters. The local in Vancouver has made it quite clear in public statements that they would be prepared to defy the injunction ordering them back to work in what, as everyone admits, is an illegal strike.

Mr. Nielsen: Who is the applicant?

Mr. Drury: The applicant was Treasury Board. The hon. member for Hamilton West has been complaining that the government does not have the public interest in mind.

Mr. Alexander: Right.

Mr. Drury: When members of the public service engage in illegal practices, in this case an illegal work stoppage, we invoke the law. We have no whips and we would not use them if we had; but we do invoke the law, and the ruling of the law is the order to return to work. This order of the court has not been observed by the workers in Vancouver, which indicates quite clearly how strongly they feel about this, and I sympathize with their plight and recognize that there is a wide disparity. In the name of national rates they are being asked to make a considerable financial sacrifice in terms of comparability—in the name of national rates, in the name of the dogma. As I say, I sympathize with them in this. In fact, I might say that the workers in Vancouver have gone on an illegal strike in support of Treasury Board policy. That is something.

An hon. Member: Beautiful.

Mr. Drury: That happens to be a fact.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Boulanger): Order, please. I regret to interrupt the minister, but his time has expired. The hon. member for Hamilton West, Mr. Alexander.

Mr. Alexander: Mr. Speaker, I think I had better bow to seniority.

Mr. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Mr. Speaker, in the three minutes left I would like to add something to the debate. The hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Hamilton) referred to a conflict of interest that exists in every case where Treasury Board sits down at the bargaining table with the bargaining agents of the employees. It seems to me that there is always a conflict. On the one hand, Treasury Board acts on its own behalf as the nominal