

Government Orders

It is the most ridiculous statement I ever heard.

Mrs. Barbara Sparrow (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, I have listened very carefully and I have to say that all of us have heard a lot of nonsense spoken in this House and, indeed, outside this House recently concerning these proposed amendments to the UI act.

We have been told that workers are going to be at the mercy of their employers, that employers can use certain clauses to punish the employees, even to curtail legitimate union activities, that under the changes fired workers will have to prove they were not fired for misconduct.

Members of the opposition have conjured up the spectre of people who say they have left a job to escape sexual harassment being subjected to some sort of humiliating public inquiry. We have heard that the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission staff is going to try to deny benefits to claimants who left their jobs with just cause.

We have been told the government is attacking the unemployed and proposing to cut people off UI.

The members of the opposition are frightening Canadians with inflammatory rhetoric in an effort to score cheap political points. That is not what this bill is doing and that is not what we are doing.

Let us look behind the facts, behind all smoke-screen and see how Bill C-113 works. It works to provide a fairer, more equitable unemployment insurance system for all Canadians. The government proposes to eliminate UI benefits to voluntary quitters. That means people who choose not to work will not be eligible for UI benefits. It is as simple as that. I ask the members of the opposition to explain in plain English, in plain French, in plain language just why people who quit work for no good reason or who are unemployed because of their own misconduct should be supported by the working Canadians and the employers. I ask them.

Let us not pretend that some people do not take advantage of the UI system working only as long as it takes to accumulate the minimum number of weeks to file and then quitting. It is happening and everybody knows it is happening. All we have to do is look at the numbers.

Last year the UI system spent almost \$1 billion to support 225,000 people who decided either not to work

or were fired for misconduct. Even though they do make up a small percentage of the total claims, they are making a big dent in that UI account. That \$1 billion could be used to reduce the deficit in the UI account.

Perhaps members in the opposition will explain to Canadians why the entire UI system should be jeopardized so voluntary quitters can have a comfortable holiday.

Before members start telling me that in these times no one quits their job because they want to, let me clarify. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand people quit their jobs without just cause. There was no sexual harassment, no discrimination and no responsibility to look after a sick child, no reference to any of the 40 reasons to quit a job with cause. That is 225,000 people who just plain quit, despite the economy.

• (1735)

No one who has an interruption of earnings through no fault of his or her own has anything to worry about with regard to these changes. The term just cause was defined in the UI act to protect the workers who have legitimate reasons to leave their employment. The act already lists five reasons that constitute just cause.

Bill C-113 proposes eight additional reasons to be incorporated into the legislation. If you quit your job because you have been sexually harassed, are facing discrimination or hazardous working conditions, followed your spouse to another city or these needed to take care of a child or any other invalid, these are just causes and you will have access to UI. It is that simple. You have quit with just cause.

Members opposite should have known this before December 2. If they did not, they are going to know it now.

What about the people who thought they had just cause even before the system said they did not? Before Bill C-113, if a Canada Employment Centre agent determined that you quit without just cause or you were dismissed for misconduct and you disagreed, you could appeal to an independent board of referees. That still remains.

After Bill C-113 you will still have the right to appeal the decision. In fact, the bill before us will strengthen the protection provided to Canadians who appeal an insurance agent's decision. The bill gives the chairperson of the board of referees the authority to take the steps necessary to protect the privacy of harassment victims.