

Unemployment Insurance Act

its guns with regard to having an administrative system which allows farm workers to collect unemployment insurance just like any other worker in this country. I would call upon the Government in this day, when it is making some progress, not to backtrack, whether it is a few months from now, whatever the pressures which come to bear on it.

We welcome this legislation, Mr. Speaker, because of the fact that it removes certain discriminatory clauses which were long overdue for removal. We also want to indicate there is need for more, which is why we wanted to introduce amendments as they affect fishermen and maternity leave. That is why we have called for the extension of unemployment insurance benefits by some 26 weeks and why we welcome the fact that a major Tory leadership candidate has also called for the extension of benefits. We call upon the Government to recognize the fact that it is important to provide income support for people if it is not going to provide them with work, support which allows for the dignity of the individual.

• (1230)

At the same time we once again call upon the Government to make a serious commitment to full employment and, in the process, dedicate a greater share of the cost of unemployment insurance out of general revenue so that it can be borne more equitably and the Government can be reminded of its responsibility to provide work for all Canadians.

Hon. Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands): Mr. Speaker, I am indeed pleased to rise and take part in this very important debate today, and I want to thank the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mr. Bujold) for having yielded to me his place in the speaking order.

As my colleague the Hon. Member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) has said, the Government's proposed amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act as they affect maternity benefits are indeed long overdue. I am sure the Minister will recognize that I, among others in this House, have been pressing for these changes not just for weeks or months but for years. I am pleased to see that they are being brought forward. They will have the effect of making maternity benefits more accessible to women in the work force.

But while that is important, equally significant is that these amendments signal a change in attitude. They signal an acceptance of what is already a fact for so many Canadian women, the fact of the permanent presence of women in the paid labour force. More and more Canadian women are in the paid labour force and they will continue to be for most of their adult lives. The 1981 census statistics indicate that 65 per cent of women under the age of 45 now work outside the home. Even more important and noteworthy is the fact that 45 per cent of women, almost one in two, who have children under the age of three years, were in the paid labour force in 1981. Although the majority of part-time workers are women, three quarters of all women in the paid labour force are working at full-time jobs.

In other words, women are in the work force to stay, yet they will face considerable obstacles, not the least of which is access to the so-called non-traditional jobs. That is, Mr. Speaker, the better paying jobs, the ones that offer more career opportunities than the clerical, sales and service occupations in which women in the labour force continually find themselves heavily concentrated. As was mentioned by my colleague, it is those very categories which are most threatened with obsolescence by the massive high-tech revolution which is sweeping over us.

Women are indeed under-represented in the higher paid jobs, Mr. Speaker. As well, they will continue to be paid less for the so-called women's jobs even though such work may be of equivalent value. That is, in terms of skill, effort, responsibility and working conditions they will still be of lesser value, given the way in which the market operates, when compared with jobs usually performed by men.

Until this situation is changed, women will continue to earn on average about half the salaries earned by men. That has been documented over and over again. Of women working in this country today, 75 per cent receive salaries of less than \$12,000, yet women's earnings are essential to the well-being of the Canadian family. The Canadian Council on Welfare estimated in 1981 that if all the women in two-income earning families ceased working if they were to be out of the paid labour force, then the number of Canadian families living below the poverty line would rise by 60 per cent. That shows how critical the income of women is to the maintenance of family support.

That is why income support is so vital during the period when a pregnant woman or a new mother cannot work. Yet our Unemployment Insurance Act as it is presently constituted, before these amendments take effect, contains several barriers which stand between pregnant women in paid jobs and the income support they need for the time they must be off work due to pregnancy.

In addition to meeting the qualifications necessary to obtain regular or sick benefits, that is in addition to a labour force attachment of some 20 weeks, women claiming maternity benefits must also satisfy that "magic ten" rule in Section 30(1) of the Unemployment Insurance Act. This Section seeks to ensure that the woman who was in the paid labour force has to be in the labour force at the time she became pregnant. At least ten of her 20 weeks of employment must fall between the thirtieth and fiftieth weeks prior to confinement.

That requirement, Mr. Speaker, has caused untold hardship, confusion and frustration for women who attempt to obtain maternity benefits. Not only does it create inequities which have been mentioned by the Minister and by my colleague from St. John's East, because the date of birth is not always accurately predicted, but it also means, and this is critically important, that a woman who has been in the labour force for any number of years but who happens to be ill or laid off temporarily at the time she becomes pregnant would not qualify for maternity benefits.