

Government Orders

where mention was made of a gap of 25 cents. Today I believe the spread is 10 cents.

• (1535)

Yes, under these conditions, it is a failure. It is a failure because, as far as I could tell from a great distance, they had made efforts. I talked to the union side. Since the law was announced hastily, I did not have time to talk to management, but I understood that an effort had been made, perhaps on both sides, but at least on the union side, to change the relationship, as shown by the last two settlements which were achieved without a strike.

After this brief reminder, I would also like to say—and for me this is a major point that the minister should consider when I move an amendment—that the union several times, and even when the first strike in a port began, as far as I know, on January 27, the union always said that it was ready to help ship grain. This absolutely must be said because I think that what happens to the grain is the most important and most urgent. It is a busy period when the equipment cannot be used for storage; the system must operate in such a way that there is no loss either at the point of departure or at the port.

From the time the strike began, the union thus showed that it would ship the grain. I say that because in everything I have read, that is not said and my source is reliable; it is the same as the minister's. In keeping with the tradition of openness, he generously made it available to me. This source says that, faced with a rotating strike, the employer threatened a complete lock out, and the employer locked the workers out on January 29, thus stopping grain shipments. I think that must be taken into consideration.

Nevertheless, as we saw, the mediation which took place narrowed the gap separating the parties. For the benefit of hon. members, let me remind you that the employer added 5 cents an hour to his initial offer, taking it to 65 cents, and the union lowered its initial demand to 75 cents, which is a big effort on their part under the circumstances. That is where matters stand now.

One thing that this House must consider is that in labour relations, we must always seek to understand. It is easy when we are here, removed from what is happening in real life, not to consider the motives for which people act. If we want to move ahead as a Parliament, we must always try to consider the motives that drive people.

In British Columbia, as far as I know, there was no recession. All the figures available show that while Quebec, of which we often speak, perhaps too much for some hon. members, had a severe recession, Ontario, for which this was really the first shock, had a more severe recession in 1990 than in 1982–83, but that was not the case in British Columbia. We must therefore understand the union's demand in light of economic activity in

British Columbia and not of what is happening elsewhere. I think that, in the opinion of members, it is important.

• (1540)

However, I understand how serious the situation is. I know how important the transport of grain and other products is for all of Western Canada. We have read in the newspapers that 26 shiploads of grain are stopped and that another 38 are expected to follow. We also know that, so far, the Canadian Wheat Board will have to pay around \$6 million in docking fees due to delays. It is a serious situation from an economic standpoint and I understand the anger of those who would like to see a quick solution to the problem. It is also important for Canada, for the reliability of Canadian ports.

If I may have the floor for one minute, I would like to say that I understand very well since my constituency includes the port of Montreal and I became very angry last year when I realized that the Canadian Coast Guard did not do everything it should have to ensure that the harsh winter—but there have been worse winters—did not close the port for more than three weeks. We thought then that the Canadian Coast Guard icebreakers were taking a long time to find their way to Montreal.

Whenever a port closes, it causes a lot of anxiety because it is like the heart of economic activity in the region, so I understand very well the anger of Western producers. But I remind you that British Columbia's prosperity can help us to understand how such a conflict happened, and I would like to add that I know, without having heard it, that the workers themselves are undoubtedly extremely disappointed given the effort they put into this and that their employers are anxiously waiting for a solution to this whole situation.

Let us go back to the bill itself. I intend to propose an amendment to the final offer process. I will return to it during the debate. But I would like to tell the House right now that the final offer process may appear fair in some cases but that, in other cases, it may put one of the parties at a disadvantage, especially if the parties had not planned on this process putting an end to their conflict.

I should say that labour law is the fastest-growing kind of law because once a bill becomes law, the parties go to great lengths to ensure that it is in their best interests and one must admit that they are acting very intelligently although some are more powerful than others.

Given the circumstances, I will propose an amendment so that the arbitrator chosen by the parties or appointed by the minister responsible pursuant to the law would not have to choose between the two offers but, since the minister is entrusting him with choosing one or the other, he can also entrust him to choose in the two offers the elements that seem the most equitable to him, on the understanding that he would be limited to the two offers.