

once and for all whether it wants to continue to give civil servants the right to strike?

● (1130)

This government, obsessed as it is with the fear of losing power, can only measure its actions in terms of votes. There are votes to be gained from being an open-minded administration that allows civil servants to strike, and there are votes also to be gained from forcing people back to work. But that is not fair to these workers. They are being used, and they are entitled now to know precisely where they stand. Because another strike in this essential service will deal a further blow to an economy that is already crippled as a result of chronic mismanagement on the part of this government, we on this side are forced to support this legislation. But we do so, as I will point out later, with some reservations.

I think another vehicle must be found either to avoid completely these disputes that lead to strikes, or to handle them more efficiently and effectively if they do arise. The fact, honourable senators, that there have been some 60 major public service disputes in the last eight years, and the fact that eight of those have required this type of emergency legislation, are obvious indications that it is time we seriously considered setting up a body which would make sure that negotiations were entered into long before a contract nears its termination date. Such a body could also oversee these negotiations to make sure that they were running smoothly. The idea is that we must take the necessary steps to avoid strikes. We simply cannot afford them now.

This government has shown itself to be a bad employer. Its employees are certainly not satisfied with the way they are treated. If I may repeat myself, 60 major public service disruptions in eight years is nothing to brag about. It is obvious that the administration just cannot handle properly the delicate negotiations that exist with its hired help. That is not surprising, honourable senators, since this government does not seem to be able to handle successfully anything that requires more than a minimum of skill.

So we need a body that will help this administration, in the few months it has left to it, to govern this country; and that is what this government should work towards establishing the minute we have passed this legislation.

We suggested that the postal workers be denied the right to walk out. We said this a long time ago. We made the suggestion because our economy at the present time cannot afford this type of strike.

However, we do not like to see workers forced back to work, and we deplore the state of affairs which allows disagreements to degenerate to the point where a strike seems to be the only option left for a group of workers. On the other hand, we have a responsibility to the rest of Canada, to what is left of the health of our economy.

The blame, honourable senators, is on the government for allowing such situation to develop. We do what we must for the good of the country, but sympathize with these workers, whose employer is known for its incompetence.

[Senator Asselin.]

[*Translation*]

Honourable senators, it is unbelievable that, as stated by the mover of the bill, this group of workers, the postal workers, have been without a collective agreement since 1977. And since 1977 this government has found no formula for a satisfactory agreement with the 23,000 postal workers.

In almost every center across the country, the union brought to the government's attention a large number of complaints about automation, a large number of work grievances, but they all remained unanswered and unsolved, no decision whatsoever being taken by the government representatives on the grievances filed with the employer.

It is no surprise therefore that these workers' attitude is one of hassle and defiance, because work conditions have been deteriorating for much too long. Further, there has been nothing forthcoming, and I repeat nothing except the Moisan Report, tabled under Mr. Mackasey. That report attempted to submit solutions to the government and both parties, but these did not go through.

I was shocked last week by what I would call the premature attitude of the head of government who suggested, even before the strike began, that he would have a special law enacted. Imagine, Parliament would enact a special law if employees exercised their legal right to strike. He even threatened to do away with the right to strike in the public service. That on the part of the head of the government was not an attempt to arrive at a negotiated solution but, in my opinion, purely and simply a provocation to those 23,000 employees.

So is it surprising, honourable senators, that the union should feel deeply annoyed and say publicly that it is possible in the circumstances that the emergency legislation might be disobeyed? Last night on the radio news I heard the president of the union, Mr. Parrot, say that he might advise his 23,000 employees not to obey the special legislation. Of course, nobody in this house would agree with such a decision by the president of the union but I think it reflects the state of mind that exists among the leadership and the postal employees at this time.

The question we are asking now is: Do they have the right to use a policy of confrontation that will undoubtedly incite the employees to disobey a legislation of Parliament, because they do not want to lose face, because they also want to keep a minimum of the privileges they won in the past year and a half from the government and its representatives?

What I find ridiculous in the process of negotiations and attempted settlements of this conflict is that even before those employees could use their right to strike legally, even before they could use an act voted by the Parliament of Canada allowing them to strike legally, after the required periods have expired, they introduced an emergency legislation and immediately said: You are not going to use the legal right to strike that Parliament gave you; you are going to go back to work.

We have enacted special legislation similar to this bill in the past but with the difference that we let the postal employees or the union membership first use their legal right to strike