

Supply—Labour

In connection with the possibility for providing a winter works program the minister said: "I have had some experience in this connection. Preparation for any plan of this nature at this time would be a little premature." That is a rather fantastic statement by the Minister of Labour in view of the history of seasonal unemployment in this country. Everyone who knows anything at all about unemployment statistics knows that even in a period of relatively full employment we do have substantial unemployment in Canada in the winter time.

I have on my desk the unemployment figures for recent years. Taking the month of February, for example, I find that unplaced applicants in February of 1956 numbered 515,000, in February of 1957 574,000 and in February of 1958 854,000. Tremendous unemployment in the winter has become almost the pattern. Yet the Minister of Labour, when asked whether the government is making any plans to provide for even a relatively small winter works program, said that it was too soon and that it would be premature to advance such a program at this time.

This shows, that the government not only has no plan but does not really think that seasonal unemployment is a very urgent or important matter. Not only has the government winter works program employed only 40,000 people on site, but the fact is that the government is not prepared to undertake the necessary planning to provide an adequate program next year. Surely this is a callous attitude. It means that the government has little or no regard for the approximately half million people who have been unemployed during the winter for some years. I suggest to the minister that he endeavour to get his colleagues to agree now to announce that for the coming winter there will be a continuation of the winter works program with certain improvements as to amounts paid thereunder. As has already been said, the minister would assist in the passage of his estimates if he were to state now the policy of the government on this important question.

There is another matter to which I should like to refer, Mr. Chairman. I should like to ask the Minister of Labour what the attitude of the government has been to the very important presentation made to the government by the united steelworkers of America requesting a full inquiry into the steel industry of this country. I feel that the Minister of Labour is the appropriate member of the cabinet to whom to direct this question, since the whole point in the brief presented to the government was this: That the workers in this industry have been blamed for the

very high steel prices. They believe that the high steel prices have resulted from an arbitrary fixing of steel prices by the companies at levels that are unduly high, at levels that are not justified by the wage rates paid in the industry. Although there has been a substantial increase in productivity over the years, the wage increases have never equalled the increase in productivity and yet the steel industry of this country, according to this submission to the government, has set steel prices unduly high to the consumers of steel and the industries in Canada dependent upon steel. I should like to have from the Minister of Labour a statement on the attitude of the government toward this brief.

Mr. Starr: May I answer the hon. member's question at this time? It is evident that the hon. member does not realize this matter is under consideration by the Minister of Trade and Commerce, and that the representations in that regard will not be made by me but will be made by the Minister of Trade and Commerce to the government.

Mr. Argue: I wish the Minister of Labour would talk to his colleague the Minister of Trade and Commerce. I see that the memorandum was not presented to the Minister of Trade and Commerce, but was presented to the Prime Minister and the government of Canada. This is becoming a government of delay, indecision and procrastination. There has been delay with regard to this submission, with regard to the appointment of a minister of external affairs, as well as appointments to 40 or 50 prominent positions in the civil service. There has been delay upon delay. I think the trade union people of this country will be disappointed that the Minister of Labour, on item one, is not able to give an affirmative answer to the important request of the steelworkers that the steel industry in Canada be investigated. In their submission, the steel industry is taking exorbitant profits and is blaming the high prices on the workers in the industry.

I have another question that I should like to direct to the Minister of Labour, and that has to do with the wage rates being paid by contractors doing work on the South Saskatchewan river project. I want to say that I raised this matter under the P.F.R.A. item of the estimates of the Department of Agriculture. At that time I was told by the Minister of Agriculture that all the correspondence coming to him on this matter had been referred to the Minister of Labour. I take it, then, that the Minister of Labour has knowledge of this situation and will be able to tell the committee what action has been taken in this regard.

[Mr. Argue.]