

Supply

Mr. Beatty: She already did. You may have slept through it though.

Ms. Copps: Mr. Speaker, the minister of health and welfare says: "She already did. You may have slept through it though". He may sleep through the fact that his government has cut \$20 billion from the pockets of poor Canadians over the last six years. A lot of other Canadians are not sleeping, and a lot of Canadian children are not sleeping because they do not have adequate nutrition. He may think it is funny and he may sit there and smirk over the fact that 40 per cent of Canadians using food banks now are children. He may laugh over the fact that in the city of Montreal there are children who cannot write their school exams because they do not have enough food in their stomachs. We on this side of the House do not think that is a laughing matter and one of the reasons that we want to introduce at this stage, 15 days before Christmas, a sole debate on the wide range of economic and social policy issues, including the minimum wage, is because the absolute minimum level of federal support needed to maintain the loss of purchasing power that has occurred over the last six years of Tory power strictly related to the minimum wage would require an increase in the federal minimum wage up to \$5.88 an hour.

We are hoping on this side of the House that the debate today will begin to evolve not only around the areas of cuts. Believe me they are not hard to find in "slash and cut" Toryland. They can find the money to sell the GST, but heaven forbid that they should put food in the mouths of Canadian children.

At the same time, we want to see a real government solution to the very specific problem of the working poor in this country who are having to work at wages that the federal government should be ashamed of, the fact that \$4 an hour has not changed since 1986, the fact that the real purchasing power of the poorest of Canadians employed under the federal system has remained stagnant since that time and the fact that they have lost in real dollars, based on the annual minimum wage rate in 1979, \$1.88 an hour in their purchasing power as Canadians.

We on this side of the House want to see the government bring real programs forward to provide support to those Canadians who are trying to make it in a

very difficult economic period and we do not need smirks and rhetoric on the part of the government. What we need are very specific programs. We are asking the government for some specific commitment on the particular issue of minimum wage and on a revisiting of the children's benefits that have been butchered by this government over the last six years.

Mr. Steve Butland (Sault Ste. Marie): Mr. Speaker, I too congratulate my colleague from Hamilton East for touching on a whole series of points that affect average Canadians and people who are suffering through this government.

We have something in common with Hamilton and Sault Ste. Marie as to the steel mills, and I am making reference to the Unemployment Insurance Act. I ask the hon. member to comment on the 85 per cent ruling which people who have been involved in a labour dispute for, in our case 16 weeks, and even after the 16 weeks people are not automatically entitled to unemployment insurance after having lived on \$100 or less for all of those 16 weeks. These are families and it is particularly difficult at this time of year.

I would ask the hon. member about the 85 per cent ruling. It seems strange to me and I am sure it must seem just totally unjust to people who are involved in this kind of dispute that the government would take a ruling that has been struck down by everyone, including the Federal Court of Canada, to the Supreme Court of the land to ensure that this 85 per cent ruling remains intact, to the detriment of the workers of this country.

• (1610)

I am just wondering if she has any comment to that effect. Why would the government persist in such an unjust ruling?

Ms. Copps: Mr. Speaker, obviously the federal government should have allowed the law of the land to remain the law of the land when in fact the court struck down the 85 per cent ruling back in July 1989.

The fact that it did not seems to be further indication of the fact that it wants to squeeze workers off unemployment insurance. When you look at the net result of Bill C-21, which is cutting billions of dollars from unemployment insurance, the 85 per cent rule is a further nail in the coffin of a lot of steelworkers.