

Pacific Coast Longshoremen Dispute

As was mentioned by the hon. member for Okanagan-Revelstoke, (Mr. Johnston) the wisdom of a review of pending legislation has, I think, been demonstrated more than once during the period of nearly 12 months that I have been Minister of Labour. As you know, the Prime Minister (Mr. Pearson) has set up a task force to study the problems and to make recommendations on what, if any, changes should be made in the existing procedures. We know from discussions which the Prime Minister, I, and others have had with the head of the task force Dean Wood, that he may be able to make an interim report in six months; but it will take considerably longer than that—in fact it might take a year or more—to give us the objective conclusions on which we could base recommendations to lay before parliament. In the meantime we have had to invite parliamentary action on two occasions, one was in connection with the decision to establish the commission to inquire into the working conditions on the docks in the three St. Lawrence ports, and the second was the return to work railway legislation. We nearly had to ask parliament to intervene in a third major dispute.

In the frank and full discussions which I had in Vancouver last week I assured both the longshoremen and management that I would not disclose the names of any individuals or the statements made by any individuals, that each talk would be a conference held within four walls. However, I stated that I felt I should be free to announce the conclusions or the recommendations which I might have to make to my colleagues in government, or eventually in the house based on our talks. We proceeded on this basis and there were worth-while discussions.

The lines are still drawn. All the stevedoring companies to whom I was introduced feel strongly that foremen, or people with the right to discharge and dismiss and to perform other managerial functions, should not be part of a truly bargaining unit, while a union may have this right of association. They are pleased with the decision of the Canada Labour Relations Board on this important point; but naturally the workers feel equally strongly that they have a question of principle—not all of them, but at least 75 or 80 per cent of them, and in a democracy these proportions are very important. They feel that they should have the right to bargain collectively and,

[Mr. Nicholson.]

though not in Canada but in some other jurisdictions, the right of a modified type of bargaining has been granted to supervisory personnel. I would not be frank with the house if I did not say that.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Where is this right granted?

Mr. Nicholson: In the United States foremen have been given that right, by agreement.

Mr. Douglas: They have been given this right by legislation.

Mr. Nicholson: I am not sure of that, but I do know that in some areas at least it is done by agreement. I have been assured that with regard to longshoremen on the west coast of the U.S.A. it is done by agreement or otherwise. However, the lines are drawn.

I listened to the arguments, and I tried to act not as an advocate but as an interpreter, who explained to one group and to the other the views of their opponents. The atmosphere was such that they were not meeting very regularly to exchange ideas among themselves. I asked both sides whether they felt any useful purpose would be served by my continued presence there at that time. I think there was a consensus, if not a unanimous feeling, that there would be no point in my remaining there. I did say—and I advised the house of it on my return—that if circumstances changed and, more particularly, if I received a specific request, I would go west as quickly as I could. Last night I reached the decision that I should do so. I telephoned the Prime Minister early this morning—some time before I received notice of this motion and he immediately agreed that, if this were my decision, he was in full agreement that it was the right course to follow. I am therefore proceeding west this afternoon.

During the past week some suggestions have been made to me that we may be able to explore and which may solve the situation. I am not saying that we will achieve an immediate return to work, and I am not saying I may not have to recommend a certain course of action to the government or perhaps even to parliament; it is too early to say exactly what should be done. I am anxious to get west in view of the developments which took place late yesterday. I am taking with me my assistant deputy minister, the former director of industrial relations, Mr. Bernard Wilson, whom I think is generally regarded as one of the most experienced men in Canada in this field. I expect to be on the coast for the next