

Government Orders

• (1205)

This is the end of the redistributive effect of Unemployment Insurance. What people should realize is that workers should not be penalized for the lethargic state of our economy, especially when the government was elected on the promise that it would create hundreds of thousands of jobs and now looks idly—yes, idly, Mr. Speaker—at the waste of government money and at the sclerosis of its finances.

Up to now, the government has refused to debate its fiscal policy with the opposition. Moreover, it rejected the proposal of the Bloc Québécois to create a committee to study all budgetary expenditures. However, without any consultation, the government decided to cut into UI, without putting into place the means to help workers. Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Liberal members: Where are the jobs they promised during last fall election campaign?

Now that Liberals are in power, do they not fear the mounting discontent among taxpayers? It seems to me that my colleagues opposite, high in their ivory tower, do not realize the seriousness of the situation. They have lost touch with the reality of the employment market. What we need is an economic policy based on employment. We do not need unjustifiable and discriminatory measures aimed at the less well-off, which leave thousands of families with no alternatives and no hope.

As my colleague, the member for Mercier, said so eloquently in the speech she made in the House on March 25, the amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act do not reduce the inequities between the rich and the poor of our country, on the contrary. The announced changes do not provide for any specific measure reducing youth unemployment. Finally, these changes do not cancel out the raise in UI premiums of workers and businesses as of January 1st, 1994.

Several things bother me. What is the real purpose behind these changes in the Unemployment Insurance Act? Does the government really want to tackle the problems of unemployment and the labour market or does it simply want to hide its true intentions and have the middle class and the less well-off pay the bill?

The Minister of Finance announced recently in his budget that public expenditure control was one of the main goals of his government. I agree that such a goal of fiscal consolidation is necessary and even noble, but I am surprised and worried that close to 60 per cent of the projected drop in the federal deficit, some \$2.4 billion out of a total of \$4.1 billion, will be assumed by the unemployed, who are 1.607 million in Canada and 452,000 in Quebec.

According to the Minister of Finance, at least 85 per cent of the unemployed will see their benefits reduced. It is easy to figure out. Is it not strange when one is advocating social values and equity, as the Liberal government did so well?

In terms of equity, the government is making the unemployed pay the bill for its fiscal consolidation. That is an absolutely disproportionate share of the burden. We ask much more from the unemployed than from wealthier groups.

• (1210)

The Minister of Human Resources Development announced drastic measures regarding workers who lose their jobs. He said: "The proposed changes prejudice in no way of the social security system reform. These interim measures were necessary and constitute positive steps. At the same time, we are making additional savings by reducing duplication".

What the minister means is that tighter eligibility requirements, combined to a shorter benefit period, will force UI recipients off UI and onto welfare. These interim, positive steps will cost taxpayers in the various provinces at least \$1 billion; Quebec taxpayers alone will have to pay \$289 million. What do they take us for! Not all of us are wearing blinkers.

Basically, the federal government is making budget savings at the expense of Quebec's 452,000 unemployed and Canada's 1,607,000 unemployed. I am afraid that reducing the benefit period will be totally ineffective and that this measure will actually be counterproductive and fall short of the official objective.

Increasing the unemployment insurance qualifying period from 10 weeks to 12 could affect many of the thousands of seasonal workers in the eastern part of Quebec, to say nothing of Atlantic Canada.

Sixty per cent of UI cuts will be borne by Quebec and the Maritimes, two regions where we find the people who will be most affected by the increase in the number of weeks required to qualify for benefits. In other words, the fishing, tourist, forest and construction industries will be the hardest hit by this reform. That is unacceptable!

To wrap up, unemployment insurance reform reflects the Liberals contempt for the unemployed. The Minister of Human Resources Development admitted to pursuing the following objective: to force recipients to work longer to be eligible for the same number of weeks of benefits. As if the unemployed chose not to work!

But that is not where the problem lies. So, it is not by tightening eligibility requirements and reducing the number of weeks of benefits that the unemployment problem will be resolved. Unemployment in Quebec and Canada is due to a lack of jobs for everyone and people have to go from one temporary job to another. The proposed reform will do nothing to solve the problem of insecure jobs, on the contrary.

The government claims that the decision to lower the unemployment insurance premium rate from \$3.07 to \$3 per \$100 of insurable income in 1995 and 1996 will create 40,000 jobs by 1996. There is something wrong with that! Last December, this