

PUBLIC SERVICE—SUGGESTED DENIAL OF RIGHT TO STRIKE

Mr. Jake Epp (Provencher): Mr. Speaker, in the seven minutes given to me tonight I want to lay before the government again my view on the right to strike in essential services. I think it is very appropriate that this question be placed before the government at this time when we are again in the midst of a national strike by a union which provides an essential service to the people of Canada.

In 1967 when the right to strike was given unions in the public service the principle argument used was that this was a civil right which was given to other groups in labour, and that the public service should have the same civil rights as labour anywhere else. However, I think bitter experience has shown that we must ask tonight whose civil rights need protection. I seriously question whether it is not the people of Canada whose civil rights need protecting.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Epp: Mr. Speaker, since I was elected to this House in 1972, not too long ago, my experience is that we have had to legislate the grainhandlers back to work, we have legislated the railroad workers back to work, and I am confident that before too long we will legislate the postal workers back to work.

What is the scenario? We see workers in essential services calling for a strike. It is carried over the media that a strike is imminent. Everybody gears up to it and battens down for the occasion. The first thing the government does when asked how it will solve the strike is to express pious support of the right to strike. Once having expressed that support, the government lets the strike go on. After it has been going on for a while the government realizes that it is an emergency, that it must do something, and then brings in back-to-work legislation. We have had that experience. As members of parliament we become the conciliation and arbitration board as well as the body which sets the wages. At least this has happened in the past.

Whether or not the government says it is committed to the right to strike, in actual fact it breaks that very principle which it espouses and to which, it says, it wants to hold. It is a charade. Tonight while the people of Canada are in the midst of a strike in another essential service, they are sick and tired of the charade. They do not want it any longer. They are saying to the government that they do not want to be held ransom to unions, and will not negotiate with an economic pistol to their heads any longer. There are many people saying today to the government, and to the representatives opposite, that if the postal workers want to go on strike and hold us for ransom then so be it; they can go on strike and stay there.

We might take a look at some of the union leadership we have seen in the last few days by people such as Messrs. Davidson and Parrot. If this is union leadership then no wonder we are in trouble because it is hardly responsible leadership. These people have done immeasurable harm to

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the working people of Canada who are deserving of pay, but who do not want to have that type of leadership so far as they are concerned.

Mr. Francis: From their own unions.

Mr. Epp: Precisely.

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The question then comes back that we want to pay for people who are giving us essential services. I believe that when a person enters the public service he enters it slightly differently than if it were the free market place, and his prime consideration should be to give service. As taxpayers we want to pay for that service, but the prime motivation must be service.

I am saying today that many of the union leaders have lost that motivation. Today all they are looking at is how much they can get out of the grab bag. Today we should ask the question: should those who are in the public service and do not want to go on strike, and do not want to exercise that right, have the right to work? I would like the government to express its views on this. I say the time has come when Canadians demand that the government get off its backside and say what is its position on strikes in essential services, whether it is committed to a process to bring those services back, to bring back productivity in the public service where small groups, who are supposedly in the process of exercising their rights, will not be allowed to take away the rights of other Canadians to make a livelihood and to carry on their own businesses.

Mr. Lloyd Francis (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Provencher (Mr. Epp) has raised a question concerning the present postal strike.

The Public Service Relations Act provides public service employees, through their bargaining agent, with the right to select a dispute settlement method. There are two: binding arbitration, or the conciliation strike route. The employer has no involvement in the selection process.

Parliament having granted to federal employees the option of the conciliation strike method for dispute settlement, it would be wrong to assume that some employees on occasion would not choose this recourse.

On balance it can be said that the federal government has a most favourable record in terms of the number of strikes which have in fact taken place. Over 300 collective agreements have been signed since collective bargaining was granted to the public service, and there have been 11 legal strikes.

It is not the government's intention at this time to bring forward general legislation which will deny public servants the right to strike. Parliament will, of course, always reserve the right to review specific situations in order to protect the public interest.

Motion agreed to and the House adjourned at 10.26 p.m.