

Labour

why? What will happen to the older workers of Ontario and British Columbia if these provinces refuse to participate? Will the older workers be left out in the cold? Will this mean there will be no assistance for older workers in Ontario and British Columbia?

Workers of all ages suffered job losses in the recession of the early 1980s, but older workers have not benefited from the recovery. A study in November 1987 by Statistics Canada shows that even though young workers had returned to the workplace in 1986, the unemployment rate among Canadians over 55 years of age continued to rise. Older workers have a harder time in getting back into the labour force, and they collect unemployment insurance benefits longer than any other group.

In 1988 the average duration of unemployment for those aged 45 and over was 26 weeks compared to 12 weeks for young people. I am relieved that the Government saw fit to include a retroactive clause in this legislation which will assist older workers who fell between the cracks after the Government cancelled the LAB Program. While the legislation is long overdue this retroactive clause is most welcome.

Let us briefly look at the budget of this new program. A former Liberal Government introduced the Labour Adjustment Benefit Program in the early 1980s with a budget of \$125.6 million over three years. This new program will be given a budget of \$125 million over five years, cost shared with the provinces. This Government is not taking into account the annual rate of inflation or the rise in the cost of living. It has not considered the large number of older workers who will qualify under this program.

The principle behind this legislation is good. However, the program itself needs some fine tuning. I hope once it gets to committee stage Members will recommend certain changes to the program which will make it fair and equitable for all older workers.

As it stands now major permanent lay-offs will be assessed on a case by case basis. While there are some loosely worded criteria in the program outline provided by the Department such as disruption in a region, the size of a lay-off and the number of older workers affected, there are no specifics on what constitutes a major lay-off. No specifics on what kind of disruption in a region must occur and no specifics on how many older

workers must be affected before qualifying for benefits under this program.

These questions must be addressed at the committee stage. There have been significant lay-offs in the softwood lumber industry in northern Ontario as a result of the imposition of the 15 per cent export tax on softwood lumber products. At the moment the softwood lumber industry in northern Ontario cannot benefit from regional development programs offered by FEDNOR. I sincerely hope that older workers who have been laid off in the softwood lumber industry will benefit from assistance under the program for older worker adjustment. I hope these workers will not be given the same treatment their employers have been given.

This legislation clearly states that the federal contribution will be contingent on a provincial financial contribution. This worries me and members of my Party a great deal, given that agreements with Ontario and British Columbia have yet to be signed. The program for older worker adjustment refers to lay-offs and the employer participating in the program. Again, what is not clear in this program is whether or not an employer laying off workers due to a plant closure will qualify under the terms of this program.

The Department's briefing on the program's financing states, and I quote: "Maximum feasible financial participation will be sought from the employer". I fail to see how employers can be asked for a maximum feasible financial contribution when this Government has already forced employers and employees to carry the burden of unemployment insurance premiums. The Government continues to shift the burden of financial responsibility to the provinces and to the employers. We do not know if older workers affected by mergers and takeovers will qualify under the terms of this program. We do not know if older workers laid off due to severe cut-backs in the VIA Rail subsidy will qualify for benefits under this program, nor do we know if older workers who have lost their jobs due to the Free Trade Agreement will receive benefits.

These are questions which must be addressed when the legislation moves to the committee stage. There are many ambiguities in this piece of legislation. Will older workers who are receiving benefits under this program and who find work after they are in the program have to requalify to at least 750 hours of work annually, should they be laid off after two or three years? Or, will they be