

Government Orders

vided all the assistance it could to help solve the problems. First, we appointed a conciliator.

Then we appointed a conciliation commissioner, whose report was submitted to the parties. Unfortunately, we face a situation which requires government action. Believe me, it is with regret that, as the Minister of Labour, I must table this bill before the members of this House. It would be much better—and we all know it—for the parties to negotiate a collective agreement together, and that is our basic policy.

However, all port operations on the west coast have now come to a stop and the economic consequences are such that the government must act. This bill provides for the immediate resumption of operations and the appointment of a mediator—arbitrator, who, I hope, will bring the parties closer.

In closing, allow me to thank all the members of this House for their co-operation on this bill. This shows, I think, that we all care about this country's economic development.

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga—Maisonnette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, you will, however, understand that my speech will differ from that of the Reform Party, even though we are both speaking in opposition.

I would like to say that it is always difficult moment for Parliament when its elected members are obliged to adopt special legislation to force people back to work, since we agree, hope and say that, in the workplace, there is nothing better than a collective agreement that is wanted, negotiated and implemented by the parties.

Therefore, I believe that the Minister of Labour cannot be particularly proud of starting her career here in this House, by imposing special legislation. She will be quite free in the coming days to go down in history by allowing us to adopt anti-strikebreaker legislation, legislation sought by the official opposition from the time there were eight of us, and we continue to think that this must be done.

• (2145)

Therefore, we are saying to the minister that the best way for her to continue her work as Minister of Labour is not to introduce more back to work legislation, but to follow in the footsteps of one of the greatest Quebec democrats, a person she should seek to emulate, I am referring, of course, to René Lévesque who gave the province of Quebec an effective anti-scab legislation.

Since I mentioned anti-scab legislation, I should remind you that in a province or country—the Labour Minister in nodding in approval to the position of the Bloc—there is a direct link between such a legislation and the length of strikes and also, I should say, healthy labour relations.

This is what we are saying to the minister: it is unbelievable that, in 1995, no anti-strikebreaking legislation is in place at this federal level of intervention. I know that she realizes such legislation is necessary and wants to put it in place. She said herself that preliminary consultations were under way and she was committed to consulting the parties. So, she will have the chance in the days to come to go down in history as having given this country an anti-strikebreaking act.

With this in mind, as the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie said and the hon. member for Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup after him, we, the official opposition, fully grasp what a shame it is to have a lock-out bring the West Coast to a standstill. We know how important port activity is to the economy of the region. That is why we hope that a back to work agreement can be signed.

The difference between the labour minister and ourselves is the fact that we do not want a back-to-work order at any cost. Our concern with this bill is that it will shamelessly resort to arbitration. The minister should be consistent with herself. She was very pleased to tell us earlier that the discussions have resumed, that both parties have come back to the negotiation table, although their efforts might be a bit timid. She even linked the resumption of the negotiations to the statement she made in the House during question period.

We should be pleased about the efforts, albeit timid, made by both parties to resume negotiations. We take comfort from the fact that, with the resumption of the negotiations, we might be able to avoid arbitration and rely on the mediation process.

It is certainly not because we are naïve or overly tolerant that we in the official opposition continue to believe that mediation would have been possible. Why would mediation have been possible and why is it desirable? Because in the delicate balance of labour relations, arbitration means acting unilaterally. A third party outside the dispute is given the extraordinary power to make decisions on the application and the validity of each clause of a collective agreement. We think that this is not desirable, that the use of arbitration where a person will be able to impose a collective agreement that will be effective until December 1996 is not desirable. I will say it again, we would have preferred being able to continue the mediation process.

A link should also be made with another fact. We believe things would have been different if we had had anti-scab legislation in Ottawa. This debate provides us with an opportunity to do something. The hon. member for Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup reminded us that this is the second time the House passes special legislation concerning operations at the west coast ports.

At the time of the first legislation, the present labour minister had other things on her mind, and I am sure she had no idea that she would some day be the member for Saint-Henri—West-