

It is apparent also, and the hon. member can verify this himself, that the minister has addressed the problems of labour relations in Canada to his colleagues in a very frank manner. I hope that as time goes on the parties themselves in collective bargaining, and the members of this house, would address themselves to the issues that he has outlined in such a way as to seek lasting solutions to the difficult questions posed.

LABOUR CONDITIONS—PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH BODY TO SET STANDARDS FOR WORKERS IN VARIOUS CATEGORIES—GOVERNMENT POSITION

Mr. John A. Fraser (Vancouver South): Madam Speaker, during the debate on the settlement of the rail strike in August of 1973 the Minister of Transport (Mr. Marchand) said the following in reference to the way we determine the level of wages in any dispute between management and labour in Canada—he said this with the hearty applause of members on government benches, and I think that all hon. members should keep in mind what he said, not because I agree with it but because it has to be measured against the actual needs and actual situation that we have been facing for some years now in the field of labour management relations:

How is the level of wages established? Is it according to a certain rule of justice, as I heard yesterday? No. It is according to the strength of each party. I have been in that trade all my life. I was involved in certain strikes where the justice of cause was very clear, and we lost. I was involved in others where it was less evident, and we won. Why? Because we were weak in the first case and strong in the second. This is the way disputes are settled. They are not settled according to certain criteria or principles known or accepted by everybody. It is free bargaining.

That particular statement—and I direct through you, Madam Speaker, this point to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour (Mr. MacGuigan)—had the endorsement of the entire government benches on the night it was given. If indeed that statement received such approbation, then I think that we can take it that at the time, and that is only a short while ago, that was the policy of this government.

In the light of a document that has recently come to public attention, we now find a definite shift away from that position. I do not see how any other interpretation can be given to it. For instance, in October of 1974 I put questions to the Minister of Labour (Mr. Munro) at the time we were settling the grain strike. I was asking him about this complete question, and the Minister of Labour referred to the need for some type of formal structure for ongoing discussions between labour and management which could possibly lead to setting up some central body which would have the confidence of both sides and could come up with comparison criterion standards for workers in various categories, some standards against which judgment can be made on what is fair and reasonable.

● (2210)

It does not take very much imagination to see that that statement is not consistent with the statement made by the Minister of Transport earlier. I think it is proper that not just all hon. members in this House but the entire community, which has a stake in the peaceful and effective settlement of labour-management disputes, consider

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very carefully just exactly what the philosophy is which ought to govern the settlement of these disputes. It is a fair question to ask, and I direct this to the hon. parliamentary secretary: what really is the policy of the government?

It is clear from the cabinet memorandum to which the parliamentary secretary referred in his answer just a moment ago to my colleague, the hon. member for Central Nova (Mr. MacKay), that the minister of Labour now realizes full well that the position put forward by the Minister of Transport a year before is not a satisfactory approach to the problem of establishing a fair wage in any given dispute, and that there must be an attempt to find some sort of economic justice.

I think it is very important that the government explain to all hon. members, and to the public, whether there is now in the wisdom of the government a determination to shift away from a strictly adversary approach, an arrangement which can only result in a settlement depending on the strength of the parties. Let us all exercise some common sense. When we have disputes affecting the national interest or essential services, in the traditional approach of free collective bargaining, which depends on the alternate right of management to lock out and the right of labour to strike and withdraw its services, those two traditional weapons do not exist because as soon as labour makes the strike effective by using that economic weapon, all hon. members are called back into this House, and we end the strike because it is then affecting the national interest.

I ask the parliamentary secretary to meet my point and to tell this House whether what is happening right now in the government is a moving away, a shift of emphasis from the old fashioned adversary system where power was the final determinant, to an attempt to try to find some way to give some just wage to workers—especially where the dispute affects the national interest—who are locked into a hopeless position because they cannot exercise the only ultimate economic weapon they have, and that is the right to strike, because when it affects the national interest we are called back into parliament, and we take that right to strike away from them.

This is a fundamental issue. How will we, in coming years, find a more civil way to determine these disputes? They should not be settled on the basis that one group, whether in management or labour, has power which is out of all proportion to the justice of the cause. Surely, if we are to have a civil society, a society which exercises fairness, we must find a way to determine what is a fair and proper wage. It must not be a wage which can be beaten out of the other guy. People should not see how low you can keep a wage if you beat the worker down.

I ask the parliamentary secretary to deal specifically with two questions. First, does the document, which was released to the public within the last few days, reflect a shift in government policy, in view of the statement the Minister of Transport made one year or so ago? If so, will this new policy be the subject of a statement in the House of Commons? Second, have we the right to believe that the government, in moving as it has, has the support of organized elements of labour? I ask this as I perceive the government has shifted its position.