

wages to lay a complaint in regard to the conditions under which they work. I observed from the evidence given before the price spreads commission that some of the most scandalously low wages were being paid by persons who were working on government contracts. I am not blaming the government entirely for that state of affairs, because in the case I have in mind at the moment the original contractor sublet the contract, and it was sublet a second time. It may be extremely difficult for the government to keep track of contracts that are thus sublet, and it is for this reason that I want to see the government strictly enforce the fair wage provisions of all contracts that it lets; because I believe that when a government lets a contract the goods should be manufactured or produced under such conditions that a government would approve. I am not sure, Mr. Chairman, that this vote is not too low; I do not know whether the government have enough inspectors, because if we have to wait always for the person who is employed at low wages to disclose that condition, it will be an extremely difficult task for us to hunt down the shops and factories which are paying extremely low wages. For that reason I asked the minister what steps the government takes to see that the fair wage clause is enforced. He informs the committee that all they do is to wait for a complaint to come in, and then I presume the government takes such action as they see fit. I know of cases where there have been refunds to the employees who have been underpaid, but what I would like to see is such a strict enforcement of the clause enacted by the government that it will be impossible for an employer of labour to evade it on any government contract; and that ought to be applicable specifically to employers who obtain a contract and then sublet it, and where the goods are subsequently manufactured under what are called sweated labour conditions.

Mr. FRASER (Northumberland): Following the remarks of the hon. member for North Winnipeg (Mr. Heaps) with reference to the fair wage clause on government contracts, may I say that although a fair wage clause may be embodied in the contract that clause does not apply the same in Ontario as it does in the province of Quebec. I am referring to contracts made by the Department of National Defence for clothing supplies for the unemployment camps. Those contracts are let at such a low figure that no legitimate manufacturer can manufacture the goods under the minimum wage laws of

Ontario and compete. I am under the impression from investigation that the minimum wage clause inserted in government contracts is being overridden in the province of Quebec, forcing Ontario manufacturers who tender on these contracts to go to extreme measures to lower their costs. It seems to me that the Minister of Labour should make it his business to see that these contracts are not let at sweated labour prices, because that simply forces the manufacturer into a very awkward position, and as I said a moment ago into a position where he is bound to try to get around the fair wage clause in some way.

I should like in this discussion of the fair wage clause to make reference to another branch of government service. I refer to the wages received by rural mail carriers who tender on competitive contracts for certain routes. The per hour rate that is being received by government employees under competitive contracts on rural mail routes is absolutely scandalous. In many cases it is not sufficient to maintain the equipment. In addition often under the contract price, the rural mail carrier receives about ten cents an hour for the time that he actually puts in on his route.

Mr. GORDON: The rate has always been scandalous.

Mr. FRASER (Northumberland): I am not questioning that. I am looking for some method of correcting it.

Mr. GORDON: It was scandalous even in good times.

Mr. FRASER (Northumberland): I quite agree, but simply because it has been scandalous is no reason why it should continue to be scandalous, especially in view of all that has been stated in the last year before the royal commission on price spreads.

Mr. GORDON: We are all getting better.

Mr. FRASER (Northumberland): Permit me, Mr. Chairman, to cite one case I have in mind, which is authentic and quite definite. One rural mail contractor has to cross twice a day a sheet of open water about three miles wide, maintain his equipment, and make the trip 312 times a year in all kinds of weather, and sometimes at the risk of his life, for less than twenty cents an hour. May I be permitted to urge upon the Minister of Labour as earnestly as I can that, whether the present method is right or wrong he take some steps to see that the minimum wage remuneration shall be applicable to those who are carrying the rural mail in Canada.