Mr. Speaker, today is the 27th day of a strike by the bargaining unit for federal ships' crews, mainly crews of the ships of the Canadian Coast Guard. It is clear that this strike has a serious impact on many aspects of marine transport and threatens Canada's economy.

I would like to say a few words about the importance of this back-to-work legislation for maintaining marine transportation in Canada at a time when I believe we cannot afford to let it come to a stop.

• (1620)

Madam Speaker, the sectors most severely affected by the strike by federal ships' crews are the St. Lawrence Seaway, navigation on the St. Lawrence River downstream from Montreal, navigation to and from ports in Atlantic Canada including, of course, northeastern New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, and especially and above all, ship movements in all Canadian waters.

Madam Speaker, hon. members were advised of the fact that on December 1, because of concerns for navigation safety, I decided to stop navigation on the St. Lawrence River between Quebec City and Les Escoumins. On December 4, we assessed the situation further, and decided to allow ship movements and daytime navigation, provided there were two pilots on board.

Normally, coast guard ships maintain navigational aids on all shipping routes, doing so before and as ice conditions develop. Summer buoys must be replaced by special winter buoys, which are submerged by drifting ice. This year, because of the strike, 400 buoys are now out of service. The losses and damages involved represent millions of dollars. The fact is that resulting tonnage restrictions on the St. Lawrence River will probably have to be maintained until late spring, until all the heavy buoy anchors can be located and removed from shipping channels.

[*English*]

The St. Lawrence Seaway system is the world's foremost inland waterway and the foundation of the Canadian Inland Marine Transportation system. The provision of essential services, such as aids to navigation in ice-breaking, are key to the safety and effectiveness of the ocean link to and from the heartland of North America.

Faced with problems of delays in transportation, foreign confidence in Canada diminishes over time and buyers of our exports, particularly in the case of grain, will seek alternate, more reliable transportation systems or, worse yet, other suppliers entirely.

During 1988 the St. Lawrence Seaway carried over 20 million tonnes of bulk cargo such as iron ore and coal to and from ports in the Great Lakes system. Over 15 million tonnes of grain also were moved through the Seaway, and a further 4.5 million tonnes of general cargo were moved by this great waterway. The economic significance of such figures are enormous.

The seaway's yearly cargo throughput is in the order of 40 million tonnes. Sixty per cent of the seaway's traffic is shipped to or from overseas ports, chiefly in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

I would like to say a few words about the effect that the recent record cold weather is having on the operation of the St. Lawrence Seaway. Operating conditions on the seaway are deteriorating as continued record cold weather is causing rapid build-up of ice through the system.

[*Translation*]

The canal on the South Shore, from Montreal to Lake Saint-Louis, which includes the Saint-Lambert and Côte-Sainte-Catherine locks, is completely covered with ice, which is getting steadily thicker as the cold weather continues. The canal is open to one-way traffic only, because of the thickness of the ice. Without icebreakers, navigation has become more difficult, and it may be necessary to close the section between Montreal and Lake Ontario earlier than usual.

[*English*]

As of midnight December 6, there were 51 ocean-going vessels in the Great Lakes system west of the St. Lambert Lock. Of these, 33 are still above the Welland Canal. There are an additional eight Canadian inland vessels per day requiring service. The average operating cost of these vessels varies from $5,000 to $25,000 per day and more, dependent upon the type of vessel.

Many of the vessels face long delays. These delays will be longer if ice-breaker support is not available. Some ocean vessels may even be trapped in the system for the winter if ice-breaker assistance is not provided.

Should a number of the 51 ocean-going vessels that are currently in the system be trapped, then the losses incurred will be huge. Early closure will also have a