

Government Orders

this point. He has delivered a very fine tribute to the people who work for National Defence, in the veterans homes and in the hospitals. In fact he has delivered a very fine explanation of why this contract should have been settled months and months ago and of why the issue of pay equity should have been settled years ago.

I ask the minister: Does he think \$16,000 a year is enough pay for the valuable work he just described, for the love, care and attention these people give to our veterans? Does he believe that they should have to wait an additional two years, after already waiting seven years for pay equity? Does he believe that this is a fair and just situation? Above all, where has he been for the last six months? What kind of message has he been sending to the President of the Treasury Board about the importance of this work and the need to settle this strike?

Mr. Merrithew: Madam Speaker, in response to the member for Ottawa West, I appreciate her concerns and her kind remarks about the concern I share for the veterans of Canada.

I might mention, though, that the President of the Treasury Board, in his remarks this morning and in answer to questions throughout this past week or so, has indicated time and time again that there have been months and months to negotiate. The two parties were a considerable distance apart. He has indicated publicly in Question Period here in the House and said again this morning: "I am available and I will be willing to negotiate any time that we can reach a mutually agreeable settlement". He has made that offer over and over again.

I am perfectly aware that there have been discussions going on with PSAC, the employees, members of the bargaining table, and the minister himself. While it is his responsibility to do the actual negotiations, I think he has been more than willing to sit down with them. I would put out the offer once again on behalf of the President of the Treasury Board that the place to resolve differences of opinion in bargaining is at the table. The only way to do this is to go back to the table.

Mrs. Catterall: But not in the House, not here.

Mr. Merrithew: We are willing and the minister mentioned that this morning: "I am available, and I will be willing to negotiate any time".

The minister did mention the issue of pay equity this morning and again in Question Period this afternoon. The Government of Canada is not running from that particular issue.

• (1540)

He mentioned this morning that an amount of \$28 million had already been paid to deal with that particular issue. He said that there were other adjustments, and I quote exactly: "retroactive pay adjustments totalling \$28 million have already been paid out". He continues: "We are in the process of paying another \$10 million".

Second, today in Question Period he mentioned that they were now awaiting a ruling from the Human Rights Commission with regard to the third stage. It is not that the government has not dealt with that issue. The government has dealt with it and in fact has spent \$28 million in redressing that grievance.

Mr. Brewin: Madam Speaker, the government has said that it favours pay equity. It is perfectly simple for the government to include that principle in the bill, to direct the conciliation boards, and, in the final analysis, to reach a decision which incorporates the principle of pay equity in the bill.

If the government intends its words to be accepted at face value by the people it is forcing back to work, why does it not do the just and proper thing and include this in the bill? It leaves the workers who are being forced back to work under this legislation bitter. They have been through a three-week strike. The minister makes nice sounds about how much he welcomes them back to work.

Could the minister say that he and the government will agree at the outset of the conciliation process that pay equity will be conceded? If so, why will the government not put it into the bill?

The minister portrays in eloquent terms the problems at Ste. Anne's and the aged and sick veterans about whose care we are all concerned. If the care of those veterans is in fact required now by those on strike, then it is a simple matter for the government to narrow this legislation to those workers. If there are other individual situations where it is absolutely essential for employees to go back to work, it is possible for the government to narrow the legislation.