

Unemployment Insurance Act

tion of not only the minister but the people of Canada. What this government should be doing is looking at the rules of the game. It is in this respect the government has gone wrong. This government came out with a cosmetic approach to a very serious problem which resulted in shafting our senior citizens and the poor. We have gone through that exercise, but we have not directed the government's attention to the eight-week eligibility period and the number of weeks an individual can obtain unemployment insurance benefits after being involved in the work force for that eight-week period.

The minister says the government is looking at the benefit structure. He says he is going to bring in something—I do not want to misquote him, but I think he said he intended to bring in some “serious amendment or a “very significant” amendment. Either one will do. The fact of the matter is that this bill does not do a doggone thing in facing the problems which exists in the unemployment insurance scheme today. We are aware of this, and for that and other reasons we will vote against the bill on third reading.

There is one other thing the minister should be directing his attention to that is of extreme importance. There has been no recognition of the total family as an income unit. Has the minister thought about this, or is this part of the benefit structure to which he has referred? Is this another matter he is thinking about, or should think about? I hope he will give this matter consideration in his benefit structure review. What is the situation in respect of seasonal workers, many of whom earn up to \$30,000 a year during a very limited time in the work force, perhaps seven or eight months? I am not suggesting it is wrong for them to be involved, but I want the minister and his officials to advise me and the people of Canada about what is going on.

In summing up, I have really just two or three points. It has been agreed upon, understood and generally accepted, that the benchmark for unemployment accepted by the government is 4 per cent of the labour force. Over and above this figure the government has to step in and make contributions. We reject any new formula which the minister envisages over and above this amount, and in this regard I say the government has been less than honest with the Canadian people. We resent this proposal for another reason. We resent any regressive tax being placed on employers and employees. I wonder how long employers can put up with intervention by this government. Such intervention creates a great deal of paperwork for these people. Think of the situation, now, with the government wage and price controls. I do not know how employers will survive with this added burden.

Perhaps I should not say this is all right for the Steel Company of Canada, but at least that and similar companies can afford to hire accountants and lawyers to fill out the forms required by this legislation and other legislation under the restraint program. This filling-out of forms costs money in terms of real dollars and time. What about the small businessman? He has to fill out these forms and already has an added tax in respect of unemployment insurance, all because this minister and this government have not been able to attack the high rate of unemployment. This is a shameful scenario.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

[Mr. Alexander.]

Mr. Alexander: We hear from another hon. member over on the other side, that very beautiful friend of mine. I do not want to start any problems with her.

An hon. Member: You should.

Mr. Alexander: No way! I know when I can win and I know when I am likely to lose. I will just let it stop there before we get another interjection. I hope hon. members realize what is going on. When this bill is passed—and it will be, with this government and its strength over there—and the Canadian people are catching up now, slowly but surely, I hope those members will go back and tell their constituents just what is happening. I hope they will tell their constituents just how honest this government has been in setting that benchmark of 4 per cent and now making their usual 180-degree turn.

I hope they will also tell their constituents how this government has shafted the people by asking for more money to put into the unemployment insurance scheme. This government believes that more money will provide a panacea, but the proposed amendments will do nothing to solve the problems that exist. These are problems of magnitude—and if the hon. member does not understand that now, he has no business being here.

Mr. David Orlikow (Winnipeg North): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Orlikow: Before I have said even a word I hear some rude interjection by the same voice that was interrupting the hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander). I warned hon. members days ago that such interjections will only lengthen the time I take to discuss this matter.

Mr. Alexander: They don't understand that.

Mr. Orlikow: I invite the hon. member to continue his abuse, because sometimes it helps in making a better speech. The hon. member for Hamilton West and I have suggested the amendment should be left out of the present act. This is perhaps the most important amendment suggested to the 1971 Unemployment Insurance Act because it so drastically affects the method of financing the whole insurance plan. In 1971, the Liberals told us that keeping unemployment low was of major importance. The then minister of manpower said that our system was really on trial, if we could not operate on the basis of lower rates of unemployment than were traditional. When he said that, we had been having a rate of unemployment of between 4 per cent and 5 per cent.

● (1620)

What has happened since we passed that bill in June of 1971? Since that time, the rate of unemployment has fallen below 5 per cent in only one month. In 1971, the average rate of unemployment was 6.4 per cent; in 1972, it was 6.3 per cent; in 1973, it was 5.6 per cent; in 1974 it was 5.4 per cent; and in the first 11 months of this year it averaged over 7 per cent. The monthly rate has been above 7 per cent for the last nine months. It was only slightly below 7 per cent in the two preceding months. For the past six months we have experienced the highest rate of unemployment since the spring of 1961.