

Unemployment Insurance Act

just listened to a member from British Columbia, and if that is the way to learn then I do not think I am any further advanced having listened to his speech than I was at the beginning.

Let me say this in respect of the nearly one million people across this nation who are unemployed; we want to help those in that group who cannot find employment after an honest effort, but we do not want a program which encourages those in that group who simply refuse to work and who are unwilling to take the kind of work available. We do not want to encourage them by providing benefits which are unnecessary and not in the interest of the nation as a whole, including the unemployed.

Let me say one or two additional things on the specifics of this bill and the act it proposes to amend. Over the last few years we have had several amendments to the unemployment insurance program, leading to great confusion on the part of those affected by it. I have particularly in mind the limitation of the 20-hour week proposal being the basis for eligibility, along with the secondary test of a flexible ten to 14-week requirement for benefits. This has caused a great deal of difficulty and confusion to the unemployed, and I know in my own constituency office the question of eligibility for unemployment insurance benefits is a day to day concern. Literally hundreds of constituents inquire as to eligibility, and there is confusion not only on the part of recipients but in the minds of some who administer the unemployment insurance law.

We have to be very careful when we make these changes because of the widespread effect they have on those in communities who find themselves from time to time unemployed. I for one felt that the 20-hour per week work requirement was onerous and difficult in my area of Atlantic Canada, where people find themselves unemployed seasonally and periodically.

One of the groups which has been adversely affected by this requirement is that group of marine workers including long-shoremen and stevedores working in the port of Halifax and elsewhere along the eastern seaboard and, indeed, in other parts of Canada. As part of the normal work routine of these people they are required to stand by waiting for employment. Indeed, if they did not stand by waiting for the opportunity to be employed the whole marine transportation system would break down. Indeed, if they sought employment which would allow for steady work over a time period and did not make themselves available for periodic employment on the waterfront, on the piers and wharves in the coastal parts of Canada, the marine transportation system would grind to a halt. These people are performing an essential and necessary service in the interests of all Canadians, yet this is a kind of employment where 20 hours work during a week is a substantial amount. Many of them are unable to supplement their earnings from employment as marine workers with unemployment insurance payments because of this eligibility requirement.

I should point out that in years prior to this requirement it was the practice of many marine workers to engage in their own kind of work during periods of unemployment, particularly during the winter shipping season on the east coast, periods

when work was not available at all or available for very limited periods of time, and they could supplement their earnings with unemployment insurance benefits. When the 20-hour week requirement was introduced it had a very adverse effect on this particular group. Even though their earnings on a yearly basis were relatively high, they found themselves without income for periods of time when employment was not available.

The minister in addressing his remarks to this bill indicated he is now proposing that an individual who earns either one fifth of the maximum weekly insurable earnings or works 15 hours a week, will be eligible for coverage, and that kind of coverage will commence January 1, 1981. This measure, which I welcome, goes a long way toward remedying this problem in respect of marine workers.

I might mention that such a change is not without very considerable cost. It affects apparently 300,000 workers across Canada and will represent an additional cost approaching \$100 million. As you can see, we pay very dearly for an extension of benefits of that kind. It is nonetheless one which I think is needed, and I hope the minister will carry through with his promise, ensuring that this benefit is available by reducing the requirement to 15 hours a week or one-fifth of insurable earnings. This will benefit not only marine workers but other groups who require assistance. I have in mind particularly substitute school teachers who are again required to stand by waiting for employment and who, for many weeks during the period they are employed, do not attain the required 20 hours, yet their earnings are substantial enough, even with a much lesser period of work, to qualify them for benefits. These are changes we welcome, along with the actual changes contained in Bill C-3 in respect of the Unemployment Insurance Act.

Let me add very generally that we are concerned with the plight of the unemployed across this country. We welcome any changes which will benefit those people who need them, but at the same time we do not want the unemployment insurance plan subjected to the abuses of the past. The only solution is that indicated by the previous Progressive Conservative government which embarked upon a study of the Unemployment Insurance Act with a view to correcting those abuses occurring in the past, while at the same time providing reasonable benefits which the country can afford. We welcome any continuation of that period and technique of reform which will bring about an unemployment insurance program beneficial to those who require assistance, without encouraging those who do not need assistance but who remain unemployed simply to collect benefits. I close on that note by saying we welcome changes which assist the unemployed, but we recognize there is a need for changes in the legislation to correct abuses. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. Members: Question!