

Statements by Ministers

this—so as to overcome the roadblock which prevented them from progressing.

I want to commend the PSAC officials because, as spokesmen for the employees, they did their homework and they did their utmost to obtain the best possible agreement from the employer, the Treasury Board.

[English]

I must say that I am not too impressed with the chest thumping in the third paragraph of the Minister's statement. He said that the employer, that is the Treasury Board, settled with the bargaining units of the 208,000 employees in a way which was fair and responsible. He went on to say that increases in rates of pay averaged 3.55 per cent per year over three years, which was lower than the rate of inflation.

There is nothing fair and there is nothing responsible in asking a public servant at the bottom scales of pay to take home less pay because inflation was more than what he or she received. The Minister used that envelope and said that it had been increased by 3.5 per cent. However, I do not think that a type of approach where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer is reasonable, responsible, or fair. Therefore I should like to get from the Minister the take-home pay figures. I believe, as do many other people, that indeed take-home pay has gone down. It is below what they had when the Government came into power. I think that is neither fair nor responsible.

I want to make another point which I think is an important one. It deals with the question of the conciliation board itself. It is a binding decision by a committee of people who are specialists in the field. I take it that the Minister will be able to explain to the House certain matters relating to this agreement. For example, the Minister said in his statement that female employees will receive a 17-week maternity benefit to close the gap between unemployment insurance and salary level. I would like to know what is meant by "closing the gap". Does the Minister plan on compensating employees totally by enriching unemployment insurance benefits to the level of an employee's salary, or will a percentage be given, as is done in certain places?

● (1520)

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. It is the practice that in answering statements made by Ministers Members confine themselves to the amount of time taken by the Minister to deliver his statement. I am sure the Hon. Member is close to completing his remarks.

Mr. Gauthier: Mr. Speaker, I am sorry. I did not realize that I had taken so much time. I apologize to the House.

I wish to offer my congratulations to those who negotiated the agreement. I do not think that the Minister should do any suspender snapping or chest thumping about this. As President of the Treasury Board I do not think he would want us to believe that he is the one who solved the issue. He had to resort

to binding conciliation. When that is done it is because an impasse has been reached and because a problem cannot be settled.

Mr. Mike Cassidy (Ottawa Centre): Mr. Speaker, this is a precedent-setting and historic agreement. I wish to congratulate the people from the Public Service Alliance of Canada and those from the Government, including the Minister, on the fact that a master agreement is now in place after some 60 or 70 years of collective bargaining in one form or another.

As the Minister knows, this evolution has taken a long time. In a quiet way, there have been some improvements in terms of labour relations since the Minister came to office. The Minister will acknowledge that I am not noted for paying compliments to the Government. However, I think it is worthwhile to note that this is a positive development which I hope will be of benefit to the some 150,000 or 160,000 public employees in the Public Service Alliance who will be covered by the master agreement announced by the Minister this afternoon.

I regret that binding conciliation had to be resorted to to achieve this agreement. There are a number of elements in the agreement which had proven to be out of reach. They are highly desirable elements which illustrate what should be achieved with master contract bargaining. In the past one particular unit of the Public Service Alliance might have achieved some progress in a particular area but other units would have to fight like heck in terms of bargaining in order to achieve the same progress. In this respect I note that four years have passed since, after a strike, the clerks won the maternity provisions which will now be extended to all female employees in the federal Government as a result of this agreement. That is a measure which is long overdue. It might not have occurred on a universal basis without that previous action.

I know that public servants will welcome the implementation of a dental plan which will now be almost universally available to all in the Public Service. It might even be extended to Members of Parliament soon. These are positive steps forward.

I think it should be acknowledged that this process took a long time. In fact, it took too long. The initial discussions on a master agreement began prior to the 1984 election. We are now at about the midway point in terms of the three-year agreement which is being entered into as a result of binding conciliation. There are some important issues with which we have to deal. A number of them affect women employees in particular. I refer to issues such as equal pay, affirmative action and child care provisions. Regrettably, no steps were taken in terms of adoption leave. I hope that the Government will accept that this puts it at a half-way point. There will have to be some evolution in terms of learning how to use this new structure without reviving new tensions to replace the ones which were overcome as a result of the master contract bargaining.