

Unemployment Insurance Act

I do not think hon. members should discuss employment, whether salaries should be increased on account of the fact that people live far away from the place at which they work and so on.

Mr. KNOWLES: It so happens, Mr. Speaker, that I had concluded, before you interrupted on the point, the matter I was discussing. But I must insist on my right to do so under the provisions of the resolution before us. It proposes to amend the act "to clarify certain provisions thereof", and I was complaining about a provision in the act that is not clear—"more specially in relation to contributions, procedure, offences and penalties". As the minister knows, this whole question I am talking about is one of the most ticklish and difficult procedures that the unemployment insurance commission has to deal with under the act. It is under this section that the penalty of being denied benefits causes a loss of confidence on the part of workers. I am sure, Mr. Speaker, that a careful reading of the act itself, and perhaps a closer acquaintance with the administration of the act, would convince anyone that what I have said bears directly upon the resolution.

I just want to conclude by saying that I am sure the minister has received these representations from bodies like the Winnipeg and district trades and labour council; and I hope that even yet, before the bill is introduced, he will see to it that one of the things it clarifies is that particular provision.

The other important point which the Winnipeg and district trades and labour council—along with other labour bodies—felt it wanted to make representations on had to do with the fact that the act, as it now stands, provides for only one umpire in the whole of Canada. At another stage I shall go into some detail as to the difficulties that arise because of this fact; but I ask the minister to give consideration to the request of bodies such as the council to which I have referred, for an amendment to provide for at least three umpires in a country of this size. I am sure he will agree with me that those two amendments to the act which have been asked for would add a great deal to the usefulness and the value of a piece of legislation which, we all admit, is already of great use and value in the life of this country.

Mr. F. D. SHAW (Red Deer): In keeping, Mr. Speaker, with the examples set by previous speakers I propose to be brief. In fact, what I have to say may occupy less time than I expect, because I found it virtually impossible to hear what Your Honour said when directing words of advice to the previous

[Mr. Speaker.]

speaker. However I shall proceed, believing firmly that you will stop me if you deem it advisable to do so.

It is to be observed that the resolution before the house indicates that it is expedient to introduce a measure to do, among other things, a bit of clarification. It is about that feature, Mr. Speaker, that I wish to make a few observations. Under the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1940, we find a section, namely section 31, dealing specifically with persons eligible for benefits under the act. I have found that there is a rigidity of interpretation which is hardly justified and which, in my estimation, hardly carries out the spirit of the act. Whether or not clarification is possible remains, of course, a matter of conjecture. Possibly if we were provided with copies of the various directives which are sent out to the regional officers, we might be in a better position to know exactly why they make certain decisions. Let me hasten to observe that I am not speaking critically of those who administer the Unemployment Insurance Act. My limited relationship with them has been pleasant indeed. However I know they are human beings and as such must err upon occasion.

Interpretations under those sections establishing eligibility have aroused the indignation of at least one organization within the province of Alberta, or at least the branch of it within Alberta, namely, the brotherhood of maintenance of way employees who have had several bitter experiences with cases with which they were associated and which affected persons who belonged to their organization. While I do not dare to endeavour to cite too many details of a specific case, I shall give just one or two facts to try to bear out what I had in mind with respect to the spirit of the act.

For the moment I shall use a fictitious name, that of John Brown. I do that for this reason. I shall hand this particular case to the minister, because I feel that he believes we should not allow every case to stand with the decision of the lone umpire functioning under the act. Here is a man, John Brown, for example, who is employed for thirty-six years as a section foreman and who retired at the age of sixty-five. He is a man drawing a salary of \$6.75 a day. He owned his home in a small hamlet and had living with him his wife—an aged lady who was badly crippled by rheumatism—and her aged sister eighty-four years old.

This man became unemployed and made application for benefits under the act. For a time he received benefits. He was advised that a certain position was open to him and that he