

Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971

because of lack of employment, and we will not indulge in that kind of approach. We welcome the higher benefits that will be paid under the new unemployment insurance legislation. They will not be benefits at a level at which one can merely keep body and soul together; they will be benefits that will bear some relation to a person's wages, that will enable people who are out of work to keep in the swim, to keep up their hopes and to keep up their morale.

A second feature that we like is the wider coverage that is provided under the bill. This coverage is wider and more extensive in two main respects. On the one hand it brings within its scope a number of employed persons who for many years have been exempt from the provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Act. I think that perhaps it was a mistake that they were ever exempted. I think, since we were introducing unemployment insurance that was to cover people who made their living from employment, that all these people should have been included from the start. If they had been, many heartaches might not have been experienced and we would not have heard the kind of arguments that we have had to deal with lately.

Not only does this bill widen the coverage in that it seeks to take in all those who are employed, but it abolishes the ceiling that exists under the present act. As the minister said this afternoon, when the legislation was first introduced 30 years ago, that ceiling was \$2,000 a year. At present it is \$7,800 a year, but even that ceiling is being abolished. As I understand it, workers will pay unemployment insurance premiums on their income, but only up to the ceiling of \$7,800 a year. If employed persons earn more than \$7,800 a year, they will not go off the unemployment insurance rolls but will continue paying premiums at the \$7,800 a year level. As a result their benefits will be geared to that figure. We think this is good. We approve this wider coverage and this approach to universality. I shall say something more about that when I speak about the other side of the coin, about those parts of the minister's bill that contain shortcomings.

The third thing we welcome in this legislation is the inclusion of coverage for loss of income due to a person's being off work as a result of sickness or pregnancy. When the legislation was first brought in many years ago there was no provision for unemployment insurance to be continued in the case of a person who lost his job, qualified for benefits, began drawing them and then took sick. That injustice some of us in this House railed against for many years. It was finally corrected and I am glad that we are now going a step further and saying that when workers cannot receive their normal income because they are sick or pregnant, they shall be covered by this legislation.

Some people have said that with this kind of provision perhaps the name of the legislation ought to be changed. What is in a name? Some suggest that a change in name might make the bill a little better. At any rate, let us agree that we are concerned not only about whether people are at work or not, but whether workers have an income. If workers who depend for life itself on employ-

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

ment and on the income from that employment suffer a cessation in that income, there ought to be legislation to cover them. We are glad that the sickness and pregnancy provisions are included in this legislation.

• (9:00 p.m.)

I make the comment, in light of something that was said a few minutes ago, that I think we should accept the principle advocated in the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, namely, that women stand on their own feet. We have to move more and more in that direction. I do not think there should be a means test on unemployment insurance. I do not think that a pregnant woman seeking a benefit, one who is off work because of pregnancy, should be asked any questions about the income of other members of her family. Once we get into the business of means testing we destroy the basic principle of unemployment insurance.

The fourth element in this legislation that we welcome is the provision for shorter periods in order to qualify for unemployment insurance benefit. Some people think the periods have been made too short, that it will make it awfully easy to obtain benefits, and so on. The possibility of obtaining employment is becoming more and more beyond the control of the individual. Whether or not employment is available is a social fact. It is something about which government policy has a great deal to do. As long as people can establish genuine attachment to the labour market, they should get the benefit of this legislation. As a matter of fact, I suggest that we might have to go further.

There are times when people such as teachers—and in this respect I take their side—undergo several years of training to become qualified and then find there is no job available. They are just as much attached to the labour market as the worker who has had eight weeks unskilled labour in a factory. I am glad to see the Minister of Labour (Mr. Mackasey) nodding his head. He agrees that in some cases we will have to find a way to provide these benefits for those who have worked for fewer than eight weeks. What the government is doing through this legislation is recognizing the right to coverage, provided a genuine attachment to the labour force has been established. I believe I have said enough that is good about this bill to bring a smile to the face of the minister. I would not want him to think—

Mr. Mackasey: Lower contributions.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): The minister wants me to refer to the lower contributions. That is good. Is there anything else that I have missed?

Mr. Francis: You are doing very well.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I hope the minister, who is adding to my list of favourable items, will be ready to add to my other list. He probably has one or two he will mention.

The first point I want to make with regard to shortcomings in the legislation is in connection with the wait-