

Government Orders

What policy does the Minister of Labour bring to this particular situation which I am sure she is familiar with? On the merits of the situation as she now understands it, is she prepared to tell me and this House that the government will not legislate a settlement—

The Chairman: The member has been here as long as I have and would know the matter he has raised is not relevant to the bill now before the House. If the minister wants to make a comment she can, but it is certainly not relevant to what we are talking about.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Chairman, I have a first question to put this debate into perspective. I keep hearing my colleague talk about strikes and more strikes. I think he mentioned the word five times. To my knowledge and from what I have read about the situation, a report was tabled, the employer implemented it unilaterally while the union was against it. The employer then proceeded to lock out the employees. To my knowledge such was the chain of events. Workers are not on strike, they have been locked-out. This is the first point. Madam Minister, I am asking you to tell us whether I am right or my colleague is right.

As to the actual return to work we have no objections, but we do have objections with what the minister is proposing, a graduated approach. She mentioned earlier a conciliation which effectively took place. Normally, the second stage in labour relations is mediation, followed by arbitration, if need be. I believe that as far as graduated responses are concerned, this one, as my hon. colleague mentioned, is rather swift, since we have already reached the mediation-arbitration stage, only twenty hours after the lock-out started. This is rather quick, and I believe that it sends a dangerous message to Canadian employers as a whole, especially since no life is at risk. I understand that from an economic perspective, this issue is very important.

• (2120)

It is conceivable that, from now on, employers in the rest of Canada are going to say: "If we lock out our workers, what might happen is that the minister and the House of Commons are going to pass back to work legislation which will impose a mediator-arbitrator and they will both abdicate their responsibilities".

My second question to the minister is this: Does she not think that she is going a bit too fast with her graduated back to work measures?

[*English*]

Mr. Maurizio Bevilacqua (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Human Resources Development, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, let me take this opportunity to express my warmest

and sincerest congratulations to the new Minister of Labour who acted very quickly on this issue in a very decisive fashion. I think that was warranted, given the situation we are facing.

The decision to bring in legislation to force people back to their jobs is never taken lightly. It is a step that is only taken when the stakes are too high for a strike to be left to take its course. This is such a time.

Last February, Canada's grain handling and transportation system was disrupted for 11 days when longshoremen on the west coast went on strike. It was a significant contributing factor in the big transportation backlog. This was only the most recent of several work stoppages in recent years that have affected the grains and oilseeds industry. The direct cost of that strike to the industry was estimated at \$35 million above and beyond other significant losses resulting from deferred or lost sales.

Make no mistake about it. Whenever our ability to transport our grains and oilseeds and other crops to port is disrupted, our customers look to other suppliers to meet their needs. These repeated work stoppages no matter what their cause have the same results, a negative impact on our sales. Some of our customers have questioned our reputation for consistent and timely delivery of quality grains and oilseeds.

Last April and May the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food made an important trip to Japan, Korea, China and Hong Kong. While he was there he was told face to face by some very angry customers that they were not happy with Canada's performance. The message was clear: We had better clean up our act or our customers would find other suppliers.

Immediately after that trip, to avoid any finger pointing or buck passing, as he puts it, the minister called together all the major operational players for a face to face meeting in Winnipeg on May 16. The objective of that meeting was to confront the reality of our problems and to work out practical solutions very quickly.

Now we are faced with the same issue for a second consecutive year. No one can guarantee that our customers will indeed be understanding.

I would like to mention a few specific examples of the potential impact of this strike. The Canadian Wheat Board has indicated that its export program for March is 2.9 million tonnes through both east and west coast ports. This represents an estimated sales value of \$511.5 million. Every week the board exports 570,000 tonnes of wheat and barley worth more than \$102 million. Over the balance of the crop year we will export more than one million tonnes a month.

Every tonne not moved in March will roll over into the next month, making it more difficult to maintain the planned export program. It does not take a rocket scientist to see that the potential for lost sales from just one week of lost shipping will have a serious impact on our grain exports.