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**Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills  
and Social Development and the Status of  
Persons with Disabilities**

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**Thursday, October 8, 2009**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Dean Allison**



## Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Thursday, October 8, 2009

•(1530)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)):** I call this meeting to order pursuant to the order of reference of Tuesday, September 29, 2009, regarding Bill C-50, an act to amend the Employment Insurance Act and to increase benefits.

I want to welcome the minister today. It's great to have you here. I know you're going to speak for a few minutes or so, and then we're going to have a chance to go around the room, as we normally do, and ask some questions on Bill C-50.

Thank you again, Minister, for taking time out of your busy schedule to be here. I'll turn the floor over to you now.

**Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate it.

[Translation]

Good day to my honourable colleagues.

I am here today to speak about Bill C-50—an act to amend the Employment Insurance Act and to increase benefits. It is important legislation designed to support our workforce. With this legislation, we have the opportunity to provide meaningful help to those workers who have lost their jobs because of the recent downturn in the economy.

[English]

This is about fairness. The legislation we're examining today will extend regular employment insurance benefits to unemployed long-tenured workers.

So who are these long-tenured workers? Well, as part of our government's economic action plan's career transition assistance initiative, we define these workers as people who have worked for extended periods and have made limited use of EI benefits. They can be found in all sectors of the economy and right across the country. In fact, it's estimated that roughly half of Canadians who pay EI premiums are long-tenured workers, and roughly one-third of those who have lost their jobs since the end of January 2009 and have made an EI claim are long-tenured workers.

These are Canadians who have contributed to our economy for years and have lost their jobs as a result of the global economic recession. They've worked hard, paid taxes, and played by the rules their whole lives, and of course they have contributed EI premiums each year on the job. These new measures by our Conservative

government for long-tenured workers will provide five to 20 weeks of additional regular benefits, depending on how long an individual has been working and paying EI premiums.

As an example, under the legislation, workers who have contributed to the program in seven of the past 10 years would receive an extra five weeks of employment insurance regular benefits. For every additional year of contributions, the number of weeks of benefits would increase by three weeks, up to the 20-week maximum.

As the bill stands, the start date would be linked to the coming into force of the bill, and the measure would remain in place until September 11, 2010. This means that payments of these extended benefits would continue until the autumn of 2011. Our Conservative government's major concern is that workers who need help receive it. That's why our government will introduce an amendment to fix the start date at January 4, 2009. This is the right thing to do to ensure that no workers fall through the cracks while this bill passes through both Houses of Parliament. Also, our government will introduce a technical amendment that will guarantee that all eligible long-tenured workers will be able to access their maximum benefit. This too is in recognition of the time it takes to receive royal assent on this bill.

To gradually transition out of this measure, the level of additional benefits would be reduced in five-week increments. We're providing support to Canadians when they need it. In fact, Bill C-50 has the potential to help 190,000 unemployed individuals who have worked hard over the years and are now in a very vulnerable state.

•(1535)

[Translation]

We believe this is fair, responsible and the right thing to do at this time. It will help unemployed workers who have worked hard over the years and now, through no fault of their own, are unemployed and need assistance to get through this difficult period.

Mr. Chair, Bill C-50 complements a series of other measures we have introduced in Canada's Economic Action Plan.

[English]

Earlier I mentioned the career transition assistance initiative. With the CTA, we are again supporting long-tenured workers but in a different way—through training. Workers can get their EI benefits extended up to a maximum of two years while they undertake long-term training. They can also get earlier access to EI if they invest in their training using part of their severance package or all of it. Service Canada is offering information sessions across the country to make sure that long-tenured workers are aware of their options.

Through our economic action plan we've also implemented other important measures to support all unemployed Canadians. This government is providing five extra weeks of EI regular benefits and increasing the maximum duration of benefits from 45 to 50 weeks in regions of high unemployment. This measure has already helped over 300,000 Canadians while they search for new employment.

[Translation]

We are also protecting jobs through the Work Sharing program. This is a tremendously successful initiative because it actually prevents people from losing their job in the first place. By enhancing work sharing agreements, we are allowing more flexibility for employers' plans during the recovery period.

[English]

This month, there are approximately 5,800 active work-sharing agreements across the country, supporting some 165,000 Canadians. Some 8,400 families have been helped by our wage-earner protection program. We're also providing an additional \$1.5 billion towards skills training to be delivered by the provinces and territories. This is over and above the normal training funds that we already provide to the provinces and territories. Through our economic action plan, we are investing even more in older workers to ensure that our workforce benefits from their invaluable experience and mentorship.

As I explained earlier, the legislation before us proposes a temporary measure that will provide some much-needed assistance to long-tenured workers throughout the country.

[Translation]

The passage of this bill will make a difference in their lives and the lives of their families. Now let us do our part and assist them when they need it most and support them while they find a job.

[English]

It's the fair thing to do, it's the right thing to do, and it's the responsible thing to do. At this time, we need to stay the course, because our plan is delivering for Canadians. The last thing that Canadians want and need at this time is an unnecessary and unwanted election.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to answer the committee's questions now.

**The Chair:** Once again, thank you, Minister, for being here today and for those opening comments.

As we normally do, we're going to have a first round of questions of seven minutes, starting with the Liberals.

Mr. Savage, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, as a point of clarification that perhaps might not eat into my time, in fact, we didn't have the minister's remarks in front of us. I just want to understand what she said earlier. She's indicating that regardless of when this bill passes and receives royal assent through both Houses of Parliament, the bill will come into force on January 4. Is that what I heard her say?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** That's the amendment we will putting forward at report stage.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** As per the amendment we referenced on Tuesday that we would have put forward, I think that's a step forward.

Thank you. I'm prepared for the clock to start.

I welcome the minister to our committee.

I have some issues with the bill, and I guess that's not a surprise. You talk about Canadians who deserve help getting help, Canadians who have worked hard, who need the help of the government. But only about one-third of those long-tenured workers who have been laid off since January will get benefit from this bill. Anybody who lost their job early in the recession, last year, won't get help from this bill. Do you not consider them deserving? Do you not think they've worked hard?

• (1540)

**Hon. Diane Finley:** There is no question that a lot of people have lost their jobs in this recession. It has been one of the worst in many decades. What we're trying to do here is fulfill a commitment that we made in our economic action plan last January, which was to track what was happening with the economy, what was happening to workers, and to provide targeted assistance to those most in need.

When we did the analysis of layoffs, people who had lost their jobs through no fault of their own, we found that there was a very significant spike, an extra 1.5%, in fact, who lost their jobs in January. By predating this bill to January and now fixing the date at January 4, we will be able to capture the vast majority of those people who are under this classification. Those are the ones who are quite frankly having a really tough time finding a job, because they've been in the workplace a long time. Many of them have limited portable skills, and many of them haven't had the necessity of looking for a job in quite some time. We are seeing that they are having difficulty finding new work.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** How would you classify those people who don't qualify? Are they not also deserving of some assistance from the government—

**Hon. Diane Finley:** What we have, remember—

**Mr. Michael Savage:** —equal assistance from the government?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Let's remember that we have provided an additional five weeks for virtually every person who is claiming employment insurance. We've increased the maximum as well, from 45 to 50 weeks. As well, we've provided unprecedented investments in training to help all of these individuals, whether they're on employment insurance or not, or they've been out of the workforce for quite some time perhaps.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** Okay.

Minister, why did you take the decision not to fund these EI measures in Bill C-50 out of general revenues?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** The employment insurance fund is a stand-alone fund. We did make a commitment that certain initiatives would be funded from general revenue, but the EI benefits are normally funded through the EI fund. That's what it's there for. The premiums are there to raise money to help the unemployed and deliver programs to them. These are programs for the unemployed, so they will be run through the EI program and under the act and under the fund.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** Payroll taxes are very regressive and very hurtful to business. Would it not be better to fund this out of general revenue as opposed to putting it back on the backs of employers and employees specifically?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We do realize that it's important to keep EI premiums as low as possible. That's why in our economic action plan we froze the EI premiums for two years at \$1.73, to make sure there were no disincentives in these particularly tough times to employers keeping people on the job. We also wanted to make sure that employees were able to keep as much money as possible in their pockets. So we did freeze it. Obviously, over time, there will be changes, though we didn't want those changes to happen right now while the economy is at its roughest.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** Thank you.

I'm going to ask Madame Folco if she has some questions.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, last Tuesday, when officials from your department appeared before us, I asked them a question about the kind of analysis that had been done or not done when you made your decision. They replied that there had been no analysis by activity sector. So, of the 190,000 people who were to receive this extra money, how many of them came from the forestry sector and how many came from the automobile sector?

They also told us that they did not know how many of the 190,000 recipients were women. This is my question. The officials told us that there had not been any functional analysis with regard to women nor any sectoral analysis. You are the minister. Why was there no analysis, when we know that women often work part-time? Why was this analysis not done?

• (1545)

**Hon. Diane Finley:** The figure you mentioned, namely the 190,000 people who will receive benefits as a result of this bill, is an overall figure. We established the figure by analyzing certain data: unemployment rates, for example, or the number of people who received letters about the employment transition program. It is an estimate. You are right, we did not do any analysis by sector because the information does not exist. We do not have the capability to analyze every claim for benefits on a sector-by-sector basis or in a lot of detail. It is impossible.

**Ms. Raymonde Folco:** I am sorry for interrupting you. You are telling me that the department does not have the means to analyze

how many women became unemployed, as compared to the number of men.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** No, we know that, despite the fact that women represent 48% of the workforce, they make up only 20% of the people who have lost their jobs. This is due to the recession. Most of the jobs that were lost were held by men. This is the truth.

However, you asked me if we had any details on a sector-by-sector basis. No, we do not have any. We know that women make up only 20% of the unemployed.

**Ms. Raymonde Folco:** Among the women in that 20%, many were working part time when they lost their jobs. It is tremendously difficult for them to find another job similar to the one that they had, because it was a part-time job. It would be a huge benefit to those people if they were included in the 190,000 recipients of your program. Why did you not do more to target those claimants?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Minister, we're over time, so I'll ask you to give a quick response.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Bill C-50 is a targeted initiative. The goal is to help a certain group of people who have lost their jobs. Like all other unemployed people, part-time workers received the five extra weeks that we introduced in January in our Economic Action Plan.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to the Bloc.

Monsieur Lessard, you have seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, I want to thank you for being here today. I also thank the officials who have provided us with information up to this point. I must say that we have learned some things, but we still need more information. Perhaps we will get it today.

According to the figures that we were given, Bill C-50 will benefit 190,000 unemployed people, to the tune of \$735 million. When we ask questions about this, we get explanations about the way in which these results were obtained. Mr. Beauséjour and Mr. Thompson, among others, told us that it was possible to determine the number of persons who are coming close to exhausting their benefits: 30%. Of that percentage, 21% would be eligible. We already know that much. However, to get such accurate results, it seems to us that you must have a certain amount of data by region and by sector.

For the past three weeks, we have asked you what method you used and the results you obtained. We asked the senior officials about this two or three weeks ago. I asked them those questions, as did my colleagues from the House of Commons. We repeated the request two days ago and we still do not have the information. I am repeating the same request today.

Madam Minister, we have before us a disqualification bill. For some years, more specifically for a few months, there has been a consensus to invite the government to make easier rules for accessing employment insurance. You must have spent the entire summer working on the 360-hour issue. But this bill still excludes as many people as it can. Right from the start, 70% of unemployed people who make contributions are excluded, as well as the people whom you exclude with your ratio. Now add the groups that my colleague mentioned earlier and that are especially vulnerable: all the workers in a precarious position, particularly women and young people, workers who collected employment insurance during the last five, six or seven years, workers in the forestry, in the fishery and in tourism. The exclusions are beginning to add up.

You said that you had targeted certain groups of clients. Who are in these groups? We still do not know, unless we make inferences from what you told us. You said that you had considered the number of unemployed people who had been laid off since January, and as you noticed that there were a lot of them, you tried to target them. To do this, you established criteria such as the number of years and the premiums.

Could you tell us why you excluded so many people, what groups of workers you targeted and which regions they live in?

•(1550)

**Hon. Diane Finley:** It is very simple. The people targeted by this bill are the long-tenured workers, both part-time and full-time. According to the polls, these are the people who have the greatest difficulty in finding a new job.

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** I know that you are targeting long-tenured workers. But we here are talking about people who have worked and who have not drawn employment insurance benefits for the past 7, 8 or 10 years. So this mainly includes workers in the automobile industry and in the oil industry. Laying people off in those sectors is something new.

Can we agree that they are the people to be specifically targeted?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Benefits will be available for everybody, in every sector. However, there are a few conditions. A person must have worked for seven years...

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Excuse my reaction to your statements.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Can I answer?

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Yes, do not let me contradict you at all when you say that it is open to all sectors.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** It is.

•(1555)

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Agreed.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We spoke...

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Nonetheless, the fact that it is open to all sectors does not mean that all sectors are eligible. The criteria exclude a whole set of sectors.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We spoke with representatives from various sectors and we asked them if it would work. Even the people from the forestry sector answered that it would. There is a provision whereby workers could have received benefits for an average of 7 weeks per year, which amounts to 35 weeks over 5 years. So workers from the forestry and the manufacturing sectors can have access to this program. This is why we set the threshold at 35 weeks of benefits over five years. We wanted to recognize the differences between sectors. In some, plants close down for the summer, every year.

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** I am sure that you have heard the opinion of...

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Lessard, that's all the time we have. We're going to try to get you back for one more round. I want to try to get as many rounds in as possible.

Mr. Godin, you have seven minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, I would like to understand your point of view more clearly. Earlier, the Liberals claimed that the period allocated for studying the bill should be extended and that January 4 should be kept. This was one of the notices of motion that I proposed to the committee and that was supposed to be debated. Given the current content of the bill, I expect that, if the bill is not passed when we come back from the week's break, the committee will take a week to finish the study. We must be able to hear witnesses. It must also be presented to the Senate. At the beginning of your presentation, I thought that I understood that you are going to submit an amendment so that, on this coming January 4, people will not lose their opportunity to access the program.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We want all the people who lost their jobs in 2009 to have access to these benefits. Given the current form of the bill, the time that will be taken up by debate in the House of Commons, in this committee or in the Senate could turn out to be too long. We want to make sure that the unemployed can receive benefits, maximum benefits, in fact. That is why we will submit an amendment under which benefits will begin on January 4 of this year and not, as currently stipulated, nine months in advance. The second amendment is very technical. It seeks to make sure that there will not be any interruptions.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I just want the people who are listening to us to understand this very clearly. I read in the paper today that the motion that I tabled earlier this week was not passed because the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Bloc voted against it. That was exactly what my motion proposed: to make that the bill is adopted in time so that, in January, people will not lose the benefits to which they could be entitled.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** I am not talking about...

[English]

**The Chair:** Hold on. There is a point of order.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** Yes, I have a point of order. At the last meeting we indicated very clearly that we would propose an amendment very similar to what Mr. Godin is talking about. That's in the record. It's the same thing; we don't want anybody to lose the benefit from this either. Nor did we.... I'm not sure whether he said this, if I correctly heard him, originally, but we did not want to extend the meetings or anything to that effect, either.

**The Chair:** I'll clarify. We all agreed that we needed to hear some witnesses. We wanted to make sure it wasn't delayed. This issue has been dealt with.

I'm going to add the time back. You're still not going to get 15 minutes, but I'll give you a couple of extra seconds.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I would not have done that if somebody was trying to brag, to take it away from....

But anyway....

[Translation]

I would like to ask a second question. You know that a study was done by one of your former colleagues, Monte Solberg. That study dealt with long-tenured workers and specifically recommended that, for a person eligible for employment insurance, severance pay must not affect the employment insurance benefits. At the beginning of this week, once again, we asked your representatives if this would affect the benefits, and they did not know the answer.

If the answer is yes, are you prepared to study that position? As you said, some people have worked hard for a long time and, all of a sudden, they have to face an economic crisis that is not of their making. Negotiations with employers gave them the right to severance pay. But the severance pay must not be affected because they have paid into benefits plans all their lives.

As you said, Madam Minister, some people have worked for many years—you did not specify how many years—let us say 25 or 30, without having to resort to employment insurance, apart from the times when the plant closed down for two weeks in the summer to repair their mills or things like that. We experienced that in our riding, in the mine. We had the same sort of experience at the Belledune foundry: the foundry was closed for a few weeks while the mill was being repaired.

Why should these people be penalized now by going after their severance pay? I would like to know what you think, Madam Minister.

•(1600)

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We are aware of the challenges facing workers, especially long-tenured workers. This is why we made two provisions for them in the Economic Action Plan.

[English]

The first one is that if they choose to invest some or part of their severance in furthering their own education, then they will be allowed to do that and will be able to claim benefits for a longer period of time while they go out on their own initiative to develop new skills for a new job market.

The second aspect is that they would be able to access employment insurance sooner, if they made such a move, because

we recognize that a lot of the jobs among the long-tenured workers are not going to be replaced in a hurry.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Yes, but I would like to come back to my question about Bill C-50.

With the amendments to this bill, will severance pay have any effect on the extra weeks of employment insurance?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We have already done that. We have already recognized that we must give them some breaks if they use their severance pay to invest in themselves.

[English]

The other aspect of this is that we recognize also that it takes longer for long-tenured workers. The report to which you referred stated that it can take up to 35% longer for long-tenured workers, older workers, to find new employment than it does for other workers. That's why we have extended the benefits already for them, by investing. And that's why we're proposing this *projet de loi maintenant*.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** You are still not answering my question. Let me ask it again: under Bill C-50, and given the extra weeks, will employment insurance claimants have to use up their severance pay before they can receive employment insurance benefits?

**Mr. Paul Thompson (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development):** Perhaps I could clarify this. The bill does not contain any measures of that kind because the Employment Insurance Regulations already provide for a benefit period of 104 weeks. This means that people have two full years in which to use their benefits. So the two-year period...

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** If I understand correctly, they will be covered.

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** It is the waiting period.

[English]

The allocation of the severance remains, for the period of time that they're in receipt of separation, but the benefit period is two periods, which is in excess of the normal entitlement for EI.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Thompson and Mr. Godin.

Minister, we're going to move to our last questioner of the first round.

Mr. Komarnicki.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing my time as well.

Welcome, Minister, to the committee. Certainly the amendment ensuring the effective date of legislation as January 4 will be well received by those who are unemployed and affected, and certainly each of the opposition parties has been trying to outdo every other to say that they also agree with it. It's good to see.

You've indicated that you've taken a number of measures in addition to this one with respect to helping the unemployed. But this particular piece of legislation is very specific. How do you see this bill as being consistent or inconsistent with the original mandate or purpose of the employment insurance legislation?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** The original employment insurance legislation was designed to help those who were unfortunate enough to have lost their jobs through no fault of their own. In times like these, in a significant and very serious economic recession, different people are affected differently. This time, we've lost a tremendous number of manufacturing jobs particularly. These are jobs that may not be coming back.

A lot of these individuals have limited portable skills, even though they may have been working in high-paying jobs. Many of those with whom I have spoken may be in skilled trades, but they never bothered to get their final papers for their apprenticeship, for example. So they have difficulty transferring their skills to another job, if indeed one exists. Some of the jobs are going away permanently, unfortunately, and many of these individuals are looking for another job in another field. It's time to change careers.

Finally, many of these people by definition—long-tenured workers—haven't had to look for a job in a very long time. They're not used to what's required or how to do it. They're having to learn these new skills, and Service Canada and many other service delivery groups are helping them learn how to look for a job, how to write a résumé, and how to do an interview. It's taking these individuals much longer for any number of reasons to find a new job. We want to help these people, who have worked hard all their lives, paid into the system, and paid into the EI system. They have families to support. We believe this bill will recognize the contributions they've made and also the difficulties they're facing as a group, difficulties that, shall we say, make it more difficult for them. As I mentioned, in a study that was done under my predecessor, the committee then acknowledged that it can take up to 35% longer for these individuals to find work than people who are not long-tenured workers, people who have been in the marketplace more frequently.

• (1605)

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** I see a quote by Don Drummond, chief economist of the TD Bank. With respect to this particular bill, it said this legislation is “quite powerful, particularly in the current context”, and “appropriately targeted”, and

Without the extension, their benefits would soon expire. Plus, the measure will alleviate some of the pain in the hard-hit auto, forestry and manufacturing sectors....

This was said in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on September 14, 2009.

There is no doubt that in the career transition assistance program, which we have talked about and which also was an initiative taken by this government, there was a bridge to those as well.

What are your thoughts on his comments, and is there a bridging between the career transition assistance initiative and the long-tenured legislation that you're proposing under Bill C-50?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** I was very pleased with Mr. Drummond's comments. He has identified exactly what it is we're doing and why we are trying to do it. He said it's targeted. Yes, it is, because there is a large portion of the unemployed who fall into this class, in

quantities—sheer numbers and percentages—that haven't existed prior to this recession. These are unusual circumstances; they call for unusual measures, targeted measures, that will help people, particularly in those sectors that have been hard-hit. Forestry and manufacturing, including the auto sector, are examples. And let's not forget that a large chunk of the forestry sector is actually manufacturing.

In our discussions and round tables that we have had across the country, we heard that most of the workers who are in these sectors will qualify—normally they would qualify, with the grace period that we've allowed of 35 weeks of EI benefits within the last five years. We're confident that this is going to provide the extra help that these particularly challenged individuals—because of the industries from which they come—are going to need. We need to give them a hand up now to help them take the extra time they need to look for a job.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** I'll pass my time over to my colleague.

**Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Madam Minister, and thanks to your staff. All of us in this room are going through unprecedented economic times, the worst situation in our lives for any one of us. I thank you and your team for the work you have done to date. We had some of your staff at the meeting on Tuesday and they provided a lot of additional answers. I thank them for the time and energy they have put into this bill.

I have the honour of representing constituents in the Okanagan, a beautiful part of British Columbia. We have agriculture and manufacturing, and our science and technology strategies are helping other parts of the country to diversify. And of course we have some of the best wines, in competition with the chair, but we're looking at other ways to diversify.

In British Columbia, wood is good, and it's still one of the biggest economic generators in our province. As Mr. Lessard from Quebec and others around the table have said, the forest sector is a big economic engine for our country. This bill is one piece of assistance to help our forest sectors.

Madam Minister, could you explain or outline some of the other support programs that we've initiated as a government to help the forest workers?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We've introduced a number of initiatives in the last year in recognition of these tough economic times.

One that's been very well received by the forestry sector has been the expansion of our work-sharing program. It's not to be confused with job-sharing. In work-sharing, a company and its employees work with Service Canada to develop a program to avoid layoffs. People in the operation work maybe three or four days a week, but for the day or two a week that they aren't working, they're allowed to collect EI benefits.

This has several advantages. Number one is that the employees get to keep the jobs. They take a slight cut in pay, but it's very little compared to the alternative of being laid off. It also works for the employers from a number of points of view. It keeps them going. Also, to qualify, they must have a recovery plan, so they're obviously thinking about their future. But importantly for them, they don't lose people in whom they've invested significant amounts of time and money in training them so they can perform well on their jobs.

Right now we have some 8,500 work-sharing agreements across the country. Those are protecting the jobs of some 165,000 people, which is a large multiple of the number of jobs we usually have with that.

Also with this program, not only have we made it easier for companies and employees to access the program, but we've extended the benefit period from 38 weeks to 52 weeks. We've made it easier to protect the jobs.

These are people who aren't being laid off. I've had tremendous positive feedback from the forestry sector on that particular initiative. That's just one of many.

• (1610)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Cannan.

We're now going to move to the second round, which will be five minutes. We're going to start with the Liberals and Ms. Minna.

You have five minutes.

**Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister.

First, do you have in the department the segregated data showing how women were affected in this economy versus the general population?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** What we do have are the very, very high-level numbers that I mentioned earlier. While women comprise 48% of the workforce, they comprise 20% of those who have lost their jobs in the last year.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** But do you have the segregated data that shows the analysis? It would be interesting to get that information.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** I don't believe we have—

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** There would be information from the labour force survey of Statistics Canada.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Go ahead.

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** Yes. The Statistics Canada labour force survey would be one of the sources of information. The data we have would be drawn largely from Statistics Canada.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** Minister, was there a gender-based analysis done on this particular bill?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** No, there was not. We'd normally do that, but this was recognition that the benefits are available by attachment to the workforce, by length of employment, and by amount of EI claims. There was recognition in designing it when we said that they

must have participated in seven out of the last 10 years. There may have been women who took time off to have children, for example.

That's why we made two conditions. First, it allowed that time, that extra three-year period, to be out of the workforce for any reason. Secondly, we made sure that when we say they claim benefits for no more than 35 weeks, that's only regular benefits, not special benefits, and 90% of special benefits are used by women.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** In my same question to the officials the other day, they said yes, there had been one. I asked for a copy. Are you telling me now that there was no actual official gender-based analysis done on this bill?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Paul?

**Hon. Maria Minna:** I have another question.

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** If I could clarify, an analysis was done of the bill with gender issues embedded in the analysis, including arriving at the parameters that were...

**Hon. Maria Minna:** Could we get any analysis you did on gender by the week we get back?

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** There's some information we can provide around the determination of the parameters.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** And I'd like to see any data you have within the department on the overall employment rate for women in this economy. That would be interesting.

Madam Minister, your first level is seven out of 10 years. You have said a great deal today about those who deserve, and that it's harder for them to get back into the workforce, and so on. I have immigrants in my riding who have been here and have worked maybe five or six years—or at least the length of time they've been here. They have a very difficult time getting back into the labour force; they have a very difficult time getting into the labour force in the first place. They have worked for six consecutive years but cannot benefit from this. So how do you choose who wins and who loses in what seems to be almost a Russian roulette game, with all due respect? If you work six consecutive years you're not covered; you don't get the extensions.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** This initiative is very specifically targeted at a large group that is identifiable and has gone through a common experience with structural changes in their workplaces and industries. In a report done under the guidance of my predecessor, it was identified that it takes them 35% longer to find work than others.

• (1615)

**Hon. Maria Minna:** I understand that, but what I'm saying to you is that recent immigrants who've worked steadily for five or six years have an even harder time getting back into the labour force than those who have skills and have been here for a long time. So I don't understand this arbitrary cut.

And just to clarify, according to the blues we have here, the officials told us that a gender analysis was done.

I understand the difficulty, but it is just as difficult if not more difficult for these people who lost their jobs—probably from some of the same companies—as the ones who are now going to benefit. I'm not saying they shouldn't benefit, but why cut it off and provide it only to that group when others are going to be left behind?

**The Chair:** Minister, you have 30 seconds left.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There are two parts to that. One, we did recognize that everyone was going to have a tougher time. That's why in the economic action plan we brought in an additional five weeks and raised the maximum. If we had just brought in the five weeks for everyone, a lot of people would have capped out in the high unemployment areas. We wanted to make sure everyone got an additional five weeks, so that's why we provided that for them.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** It's not up to the government to choose and favour. It should be responsible for everyone.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Minna.

We'll move back to the Conservatives for five minutes. I guess we've got Mr. Komarnicki again.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll refer to a quote from Mr. Drummond, TD Bank chief economist. He said in the Canadian Press on August 25, 2009:

I think time is going to prove that the debate we're having on the employment insurance system is focusing on the wrong thing. I think this recession will prove it has been less about an access problem than a duration problem.

He focuses on duration. The career transition assistance program deals with training in the long term and defines long-tenured worker. You've taken the definition and expanded it to this program. How do the two bridge and tie together, and how do they deal with the issue of duration of benefits for those who find themselves without work?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** That ties in with the previous question in some ways. In the career transition assistance program we recognized long-tenured workers. There were specific targeted measures for them, in terms of extra EI benefits. They invested in their own re-education and retraining. There were also retraining opportunities available for all unemployed—those long-tenured workers, but even those who were off EI, whether they had exhausted their benefits or hadn't been in the workforce for many years.

In that career transition initiative we identified the definition of long-tenured workers, and to make sure we were consistent we used the same definition for this bill. Once we had identified that group and defined it, we wanted to make sure we kept that definition. We recognized even last January that this was going to be a challenge, given the make-up of the layoffs we'd seen across the country.

So we made a commitment last January to track how the labour market was working or not; who was being most harshly affected; who was having the biggest challenges; and how we could best help them. This initiative has those things in mind.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** As I understand it then, this is for those who have worked and paid premiums for a long period of time, have not used the system very much, have exhausted the benefits that would normally exist, and find themselves without jobs. This will give

them the extra help they need. It will be based on the five to 20 weeks, depending on their contributions. Is that how it would work?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** That's exactly the way it would work. Those who have been in the workplace for seven out of the last 10 years and have made limited EI claims will get an extra five weeks. For each year after that it will go up by three weeks to a maximum of 20 weeks. So it recognizes people who have been in the workplace a long time and have paid into it for a long time. It has been scientifically identified that these are the individuals who are having the toughest time getting new jobs. They are the ones to whom we're trying to give a hand up and support while they look for those jobs, recognizing it is going to take them longer.

• (1620)

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** Thank you, Minister.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Beaudin and the Bloc for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ):** I thank the honourable minister and her colleagues for being here today.

I want to come back briefly to the issue of assistance for employment transition. If I am not mistaken, there are two initiatives, one initiative extends employment insurance benefits and encourages training, the other initiative provides for investing severance pay in training. Am I right?

Career Transition Assistance is a temporary program, is it not?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Yes, it is temporary.

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** Bill C-50 is also a temporary measure.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** Yes, precisely; it is meant for the people who are the most seriously affected.

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** Fine. Given that both programs are temporary, why did you not conduct a pilot project with Bill C-50, as you did for Career Transition Assistance?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** The initiative that extends the period of benefits and encourages training is a pilot project. We wanted to produce a bill to make sure that everything would be done correctly.

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** As with Career Transition Assistance, you know very well that, if this had been a pilot project, these measures would already have come into force. You knew very well that producing legislation would take some time. There is an October 23rd deadline. The bill was tabled around mid-September. Certainly, if parliamentarians want to do our work with any kind of seriousness, we must get answers to certain questions. It was very clear that the bill would not come into force by the October 23<sup>rd</sup> deadline in any event. Why did you not do a pilot project?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** If we had put forward a pilot project,  
[English]

it would have taken the same amount of time operationally to get things up and running. That would not have been able to speed it up.  
[Translation]

The reasons you just gave are the very same reasons that I mentioned earlier. We will move two amendments, the first should establish January 4<sup>th</sup> as a starting point and the second amendment is a technical one that will provide for the adjustments that we need to make sure that everyone will receive the maximum amount of benefits.

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** Thank you, but I believe that if a pilot project had been in place, the workers would have quickly taken advantage of it. This leads me to believe that, ultimately, you are sort of playing politics on the backs of the unemployed, especially given that, yes, it does take a certain amount of time to go through the legislative process.

Nevertheless, you have said from the outset that this is a temporary measure. So it is an extraordinary measure, a measure taken in a time of crisis. That being the case, why did you give priority to clients who are already enjoying more favourable conditions than younger workers, by giving them extra weeks of benefits, for example? We know for a fact that young workers and especially women are going through very uncertain times. Why was the priority given to long-tenured workers?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** As I said previously, studies have shown that long-tenured workers take 35% longer to find another job. We are aware that it is very difficult for young workers to find jobs at this time. This is why our government allocated an extra \$10 million to the student summer employment program. This created several thousand jobs for students. For the same reason, we  
[English]

brought in a program with the YMCA and YWCA to create more jobs for students. That's coupled with our changes to the student funding programs to help them have the money they need to go to university.

But we did significantly expand both our own hiring and the creation of programs for youth.

• (1625)

[Translation]

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** But the Canada Summer Jobs Program has not yet been indexed, as we are asking, for students who earn the minimum wage. According to a recently published report, the summer job situation for young workers is a disaster. The eligibility

conditions for employment insurance are extremely difficult for young workers and for women to meet. These clients could have been included on an emergency, targeted basis in this time of crisis.

You said that you consulted the forestry sector. Whom did you consult in Quebec?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We often participate in round tables all over Canada with different business representatives. It is not just one meeting; we have a consultation process. Often, they are...

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** Who represented Quebec at the round table?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** I am sorry, but we do not have that information with us.

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** Could you get it for us? We would like to know who was consulted in Quebec.

**Hon. Diane Finley:** We could try to find out, but in many cases, the discussions were informal.

**Mrs. Josée Beaudin:** You must know Mr. Chevrette in Quebec. Was he consulted on Bill C-50?

**Hon. Diane Finley:** I do not have the names, but we will do some research.

[English]

**The Chair:** That's all the time we have.

I want to thank the minister and the staff for coming out today and taking time to talk with us on Bill C-50.

We're going to suspend for about five minutes so that we can switch the witnesses.

Once again, I want to thank you very much.

- \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- (1635)

**The Chair:** If I could ask the members to come back to the table, we're going to get started again.

I want to welcome our witnesses here. We have Erin Weir from the United Steelworkers. Erin, welcome today. Good to see you. Ken Georgetti is from CLC. It's good to see you again, sir. And Rosalie Washington is appearing as an individual.

What we're going to do is give you each some time to have some opening remarks, and then we'll get right to questions as quickly as possible.

I'm going to start over here with you, Erin, if that's possible, and we'll work our way to your right.

**Mr. Erin Weir (Economist, United Steelworkers):** Okay, thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll begin with my conclusion now. Parliament should pass Bill C-50 to provide additional weeks of employment insurance benefits to thousands of long-tenured workers who will otherwise run out of benefits.

Having said that, I'd like to elaborate further on the strengths and weaknesses of this bill as well as needed employment insurance reforms beyond this proposal.

The main strength of the bill is that it would provide a projected billion dollars of further EI benefits to Canadian workers laid off through no fault of their own. We in the labour movement strongly believe that much more is needed, but I recognize that a billion dollars is quite significant.

As one reference point, I know that the parliamentary budget officer estimates that temporarily enacting a national entrance requirement of 360 hours would cost approximately a billion dollars.

So Bill C-50 is roughly comparable to that proposal in terms of the total amount of additional assistance provided.

Another positive aspect of the bill is that it's the first time since the January budget that the government has recognized the need to improve employment insurance in response to the rapid deterioration of Canada's labour market. Since this bill was introduced there have been murmurs of providing EI benefits for parental purposes to self-employed workers; therefore, I am cautiously optimistic that this bill could foreshadow further important improvements to employment insurance.

Conversely, I hope the government will not take the passage of this bill as an indication that the employment insurance file is closed.

A major limitation of Bill C-50 is the fact that the proposed benefit extension would apply only to claims established since January 4. As members of this committee will know, employment insurance claims ordinarily expire after 52 weeks. Many claims established in late 2008 have not yet expired, and I see no reason to exclude these remaining claims from the proposed benefit extension.

In order to shed more light on this difficulty, I looked at the number of claims accepted in each Canadian province before and after January 4. I would draw your attention to this statistical table that I have circulated. I should emphasize that this is not restricted to long-tenured workers, but I believe it nevertheless provides an indication of the proportion of claims likely to be excluded from the benefit extension.

Nationally, for every three claims established during the period covered by the benefit extension, there was one claim established in the period that will be excluded from the extension. However, I would also note that there are some important regional variations. For example in Canada's island provinces, for every three claims established during the period covered by the bill, there were two claims established in the period excluded from the bill.

Once again, it's just not apparent what the reasoning is for excluding these claims established near the end of 2008 that have not yet expired. That said, it is worth noting that proportionally more of those claims established in 2008 would already have been exhausted and could not have been eligible for a benefit extension in any case.

The second major weakness with the bill is the exclusion of workers who have used 36 or more weeks of EI benefits over the five years preceding their current claim. This provision is reminiscent of the federal government's attempt to impose experience rating on the EI program during the 1990s. Forestry

and other hard-hit sectors suffered frequent layoffs even before the current economic crisis. Over the past five years Canadian employers have eliminated half a million manufacturing jobs; therefore, many individuals, through no fault of their own, have already had to use 36 or more weeks of EI benefits.

• (1640)

A point I would emphasize is that individuals who quit their jobs voluntarily or are fired with cause are already denied EI benefits. However, previous involuntary layoffs have caused some long-tenured workers to use 36 or more benefit weeks. If such workers have had the misfortune of being laid off again, why are they any less deserving of extended EI benefits? Once again, I see no good reason for this exclusion from the bill.

Beyond these specific limitations, though, there are many areas of EI reform that this bill simply doesn't touch. Fewer than half of officially unemployed Canadian workers receive EI benefits at all. This fraction should be raised, and it could be raised by making more benefits accessible through a lower entrance requirement for employment insurance.

I recognize that the government has not been particularly keen on that particular reform proposal, so I'm going to identify four other options that could enhance EI.

The first would be to end the clawback of severance benefits against EI benefits. I think this proposal is especially relevant, because it was also recommended by the task force on older workers that inspired Bill C-50.

Second, the government could extend the duration of benefits for a broader range of workers who meet the qualifications for EI but who may not meet the criteria set out in this particular bill.

Third, the government should increase the level of EI benefits. Currently EI replaces just over half of previous insurable earnings—55%, to be precise—but that is capped at only \$450 per week. Clearly it makes sense to increase the level of EI benefits.

Fourth, and finally, the two-week waiting period to receive EI benefits should be removed. I would draw your attention to this letter that I've circulated, which notes that, simply to conform with International Labour Organization standards, Canada should be maintaining a waiting period, if any, of no longer than one week.

In closing, I would say that Bill C-50 is an important step forward, but many further steps are urgently needed.

Thanks very much for your time.

**The Chair:** Thanks, Erin, and thanks for keeping within the timeframe.

To the witnesses, I realize that this was an awfully quick turnaround. We really appreciate you clearing your schedules to be with us today. I just want to say thank you on behalf of the committee.

Ken, the floor is yours, sir. You have seven minutes.

**Mr. Ken Georgetti (President, Canadian Labour Congress):** Thank you very much.

On behalf of the 3.2 million members of our Canadian Labour Congress, I want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to present our views on Bill C-50.

Members of the committee, I am not here today to provide you with our thoughts on the technical aspects of Bill C-50 or whether there should be amendments to improve the bill.

I am here with only one message: pass Bill C-50 quickly so that people like Rosalie Washington, who is here with me today, can get the help they need now. They deserve no less from you and your colleagues in the House of Commons.

But once you've finished that, get back to work and help the other equally deserving unemployed people in this country who are struggling daily and don't qualify for this help. People have run out of or are running out of benefits and have no prospects for work. There are no jobs out there. That's why there was a decline in the number of people receiving EI benefits in August—the benefits are running out.

We spoke to workers in seven communities across Canada this past summer. What we found was a picture of increasing despair and crisis. The people I'm describing to you are real and so are their experiences.

I'm thinking of people like Tom, from New Brunswick. He wrote me earlier this year, looking for help. He was laid off from his job on October 31, 2008. He did everything right. He took a part-time job thinking he'd quickly find another full-time job, but that didn't happen, and eventually he was laid off from that part-time job too. When he applied for EI, he learned that he was 60 hours short of the hours needed to qualify in that area.

Another young man from northern Ontario wrote to me about being deeply in debt because he couldn't find full-time work and he resorted to using his credit cards to buy the necessities like food. He said, "When I needed it most I was denied EI benefits, forcing me to seek low-paying jobs to compensate for what was required, and now my own credit has been destroyed."

I am thinking of people like Tammy, from Oshawa, a single mother of three who worked midnights in a paint shop. "Bankruptcy is the next thing that's in order for me," Tammy said, when the CLC spoke to her.

Are these people living beyond their means? Of course not.

Said a woman named Shannon, from Simcoe, "Have I lived beyond my means?" "No," she said, "I've just simply lived."

In the Miramichi region of New Brunswick, 3,100 people were thrown out of work between August 2008 and August 2009, which was a 30% decrease in the employment rate in that area. Food banks in the Miramichi are seeing a rapid rise in the need for their services. The number of residents in that area declaring bankruptcy is increasing. Many will be forced onto social assistance after their EI runs out.

For many years, our congress has sounded the alarm about the crisis that was unfolding in our manufacturing and forestry industries. Long before this financial tsunami hit full force last September, communities across this country were being devastated by an industrial crisis that had been years in the making.

At one time, the Miramichi had one of the largest pulp and paper mills in Canada, which employed over 1,000 people. Today the largest employer in that region is the hospital.

Unemployed workers in Sault Ste. Marie are facing delays in getting EI benefits. Here's what one steelworker told us. Listen to this:

We're talking about people here who can't eat, can't pay bills. It's totally unacceptable that the people have been laid off work for three months and have received so far nothing because the employer forgot to tick a box.

In Campbell River, British Columbia, the Elk Falls pulp mill shut down its kraft production in July 2008 and with it went 440 jobs. A high Canadian dollar and U.S. subsidies were cited as reasons.

The regional disparity in hours of work needed for EI is stark. Mitch, on layoff in Campbell River, said to us:

I think they need to be more fair in all the regions. Just a little north of here you don't need as many hours. They're working for the same company but they don't need the same hours we need. They get longer benefits and it doesn't take them as long.

Even in areas where the full force of this crisis is less visible, the effects are no less real. In Saskatchewan the resource revenues mask an uneasy truth. Aboriginal and first nations communities in the area say this to us:

Economic crisis? The recession? Our communities would welcome moving up from abject poverty and neglect to the status of a recession.

These are the faces of unemployed Canadians in Canada. These are the stories of people who are looking to parliamentarians for leadership and help.

● (1645)

The economic devastation is affecting communities in ways you cannot imagine. In Oshawa, Simcoe Hall Settlement House has watched the number of people coming through its food banks increase by 20% a month. A skilled tradesperson, a plumber, using the food bank said to us, "Never in a million years did I ever dream I'd be coming to a food bank to feed my family."

Our congress has been on record many times before this committee on what's needed to fix EI so that it works for those it was designed and intended to help. A uniform 360 hours would be good. Longer benefits, of at least 50 weeks, in all regions so that fewer unemployed workers exhaust their claims, particularly in times of economic recession, higher weekly benefits based on the best 12 weeks of earnings before a layoff, and a replacement rate of 60% of insured earnings would be a good start.

The current EI program leaves far too many Canadians, especially women, lower-wage earners, and insecure workers, out in the cold. We're asking you to pass this bill quickly so that those people it is meant to help, long-tenured workers who have not accessed EI much in the past, get what they need now. But we're also saying you have unfinished business and there's more work to be done.

I want to remind members of this committee that since this financial meltdown brought our economy to a grind, the House of Commons has barely been in session to address the urgent needs of Canadians. In the four months following the start of the economic meltdown in September 2008, this Parliament sat for just two weeks. Parliament was dissolved on September 9, 2008, for an early and unnecessary election, and it didn't reconvene until November 18. That session was prorogued just two weeks later and did not come back until January 26 of this year.

I want to also remind the committee that workers and employers have paid over \$55 billion more in premiums into the EI system during the last decade than were paid out in benefits. That's our insurance fund. The huge surplus was spent by successive governments on everything but unemployed Canadians. If the piggy bank had not been robbed, today there would be enough money for unemployed workers.

Workers paid those premiums in the belief that EI was their protection for a rainy day. That day is here. It's pouring out there, and people like Rosalie Washington aren't being helped. It's time for you to turn your attention to the job you were elected to do: protect citizens like her.

• (1650)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ken.

I understand Rosalie doesn't have any prepared comments?

**A voice:** Yes, she does.

**The Chair:** Okay, go ahead, Rosalie. The floor is yours.

**Ms. Rosalie Washington (As an Individual):** I'm here today to speak about working for 20 years and suddenly having no job. The company closed and we're out of a job. We got a severance package, but we have to use our severance package before we get EI. I don't think that's fair. We have families, bills to pay, and we have mortgages. We have a lot of things to take care of. I don't think that's fair.

Passing Bill C-50 would be very helpful. It may not be exactly what we desire at the moment, but if we continue to work on that bill, we can go on to the next step. I'm asking you today to please pass Bill C-50, because it would be very helpful for us. I'm having a very rough time making it with EI payments that I get. It's not very much. I have three kids at home; I have a husband who works at minimum wage. I was the highest paid worker in my house. What do I do?

I'm afraid of what's going to happen in the next few months when there is no EI and I haven't found a job. I go to agencies and I register. I go online and to job sites. I've looked in the paper. I've done all I can do. I'm not giving up on looking for a job, because I can't live on EI. It doesn't pay the bills. I don't feel good on EI; I feel

degraded, because I've always worked and contributed. Now it's time for help. I need help.

There are many more people out there who need help in the workplace, who have lost their jobs, who don't have enough. I'm asking you today to think about it very seriously and to please pass Bill C-50 so we can get help. Working for 20, 25, or 30 years and not having enough to take care of our families and pay our bills is not very nice. We desire jobs. We know right now that we can hardly find a job. I am willing to work at any job, as long as I can get a job. That's my point. I need a job because a job pays the bills. So please, please....

I have a 12-year-old, a 14-year-old, and an 18-year-old at home. What is going to happen to us? There are many more workers out there who have lost their jobs. Please.

Bill C-50 will help. It may not do exactly what we desire it to do, but we can work at that bill and make it better down the road.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Rosalie, for your story. I think you put a face on exactly what this bill is trying to deal with.

I'm going to start our first round with the Liberals and Mr. Savage. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** I think I'm going to go about three and a half or four and then pass to Madam Minna.

Thank you for coming. I want to ask if any of you, particularly the steelworkers or CLC, have done any analysis yourself of this bill. Mr. Weir, you mentioned the fact that the parliamentary budget officer indicated the cost of a 360-hour national standard was \$1.2 billion, which is consistent with other economists' costs. The Prime Minister, as recently as yesterday, said it was a \$4 billion cost, which is a total fabrication, proven to be an untruth but still being spouted by the government.

My concern is, how do we trust the numbers of the government? How do we know there will be \$935 million in assistance, and how do we know there will be 180,000 to 190,000 people captured? Have you done any analysis of this bill, either yourselves or CLC, to see if those numbers are accurate?

• (1655)

**Mr. Erin Weir:** Certainly I and my counterparts at other unions have tried to do that sort of analysis. One of the challenges is that the administrative data required is within HRSDC, and it hasn't been made public, for the most part. I appreciate that department officials have been before this committee, so perhaps they have shed some further light on the numbers, but essentially my best effort to shed some light on them through the available Statistics Canada data is included in the table I passed around, which provides at least some indication of the number of EI claims filed both before and after January 4.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** Mr. Georgetti.

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** I would have the same opinion based on the information we have. Erin's costing was in line with what we had. I think it would be a \$1 billion cost to have a uniform 360 hours based on the calculation and the data we have available to us from HRSDC.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** Ms. Washington, thank you for your testimony. I understand your view, but I also understand the view of a woman whom I met with in my riding earlier in the fall who has worked for 20 years. She doesn't qualify for any benefits whatsoever because she worked part time and she worked an average of 20 to 25 hours a week. When she lost her job—in my area you need 700 hours to qualify—she got nothing. She didn't get any EI whatsoever.

My concern about this legislation, that I would need to have cleared up, is that in my view it legislates a classification of workers, those who are deserving and those who are undeserving. We heard the minister today use terms like “those who deserve help”, “those who work hard”. People who work 20 hours a week work very hard. People who worked 40 hours a week and then were asked by their company a year ago to take reduced hours to keep the company going and then were laid off and found out they didn't qualify deserve help too.

I understand your view about passing it quickly. This committee has heard today that the minister acted on the recommendation of the Liberal Party and Mr. Godin from the other day that we should put a fixed date on this so that no matter how long this takes—and it shouldn't take very long—people will qualify as of the beginning of January. That's my problem. So many people aren't being helped, and the view of the government seems to be that they are not deserving. I think this is something that is very difficult for me to sanction. I wonder if you have a view on this.

**Ms. Rosalie Washington:** People who work part time need to live too. It's not their fault they work part time. Sometimes there's not a full-time position so they work part time, and they have families, just like all of us.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** And they pay into EI.

**Ms. Rosalie Washington:** And they pay into EI also. So they need to live too.

**Mr. Michael Savage:** I agree. Thank you very much.

I'm going to let Ms. Minna ask some questions.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Earlier I was talking to Ms. Washington with respect to women, and to Mr. Georgetti and Mr. Weir as well, if they have any data... The minister earlier said that of the unemployed, 20% are women. Is the number that low? Do you have any data as to what percentage of the current unemployed would be female in our country? Has your organization done any analysis to that effect?

**Mr. Erin Weir:** It would certainly be higher than 20%, if I heard the question correctly. Certainly the unemployment rate is higher among men than among women now, and there were more men in the workforce in total, so there would be more unemployed men than unemployed women, but it would be a relatively even split, as it is in the general population.

**Hon. Maria Minna:** Mr. Georgetti, do you have any statistics?

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** We can't get that data from HRSDC. We've asked for it. We've asked for gender breakdowns and other breakdowns, and we can't get the data.

• (1700)

**Hon. Maria Minna:** Okay. I've asked for the same.

Mr. Chair, could we please ask the department to give this committee that breakdown and the disaggregated data? If we could get it for next week, prior to coming back, so that we could take a look at it, that would be helpful. Maybe we can share it with our witnesses as well.

Thank you. I appreciate that, because that's something I've been trying to get at because of this legislation but also because of what we said earlier with respect to the number of hours.

I understand, and I accept, obviously, Mr. Georgetti and Ms. Washington, what both of you said with respect to passing this bill and the importance to the group of people it benefits. My angst, though, is because of the fact that, as I said to the minister earlier, there are people who work full time. There are immigrants who have worked full time for five, six, or seven years, depending on how long they've been here. It's been a difficult time. Many of them were unemployed or worked part time or had two or three jobs for many years before they got permanent jobs, as we all know. But they're not included. If you have under seven years—that's the minimum number of years under the scale—you're not even part of the program, because somehow you're not deserving or haven't worked hard enough. I'm not quite sure which one the minister is accepting.

Again, I have in my riding an area where there are about 12,000 to 18,000 people, most of them new immigrants. I'm not saying that this bill doesn't help. It helps some people. I guess I'm saying that my angst is that I don't like playing God and choosing who in my riding gets aid to pay their mortgages and who doesn't. My question to all of you is—and it's not fair, I suppose—what the absolute, immediate next thing you would like this committee to do would be, in addition to passing this bill.

**The Chair:** She's over time, but I want you to finish the question.

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** It would be to extend benefits for everyone who's unemployed, quite frankly. There is a fund there. This is the only time in Canada when someone would pay into insurance and then be denied a claim to collect the insurance they paid for. The money is there. Someone spent it, but if you can spend the surplus, then you should find the money when people are in need. The only change I have is that I'd like to see a better bill. But not passing this bill would just hurt more people. That's the only problem we're stuck with. We'd like to see a bill that decreases the hours, increases the duration, and increases the amount.

I'm like Rosalie. I couldn't live on \$50 a day. I don't think you could and I don't think she can. People are being driven into poverty. And when this economic thing turns around, it's going to be that much bigger a struggle to get out of being in abject poverty, and that's a problem for all of us, not just the unemployed.

**The Chair:** Okay. We're now going to move to the next round and Mr. Lessard.

You have the floor for seven minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank my friends from the central labour bodies and I thank Ms. Washington for having come to testify here today. You must be aware that, in the House of Commons, opinion is divided about Bill C-50. This committee is studying it to get a better understanding of it, and most of the time, we are guided by clarifications from people like yourselves.

Sometimes, by wanting to rush things, we miss out on the clarifications. The motion that was tabled yesterday by our colleague Mr. Godin could have deprived us of the clarifications. Others will provide clarification too. When we are just dealing with a technical measure that is intended to determine the way in which the bill will be implemented, an exercise like this is worthwhile in any democracy. I believe that you work in the same way in the labour movement.

Mr. Georgetti, I entirely agree with your opinion about the comprehensive reform of employment insurance that must be done. You probably know that I tabled Bill C-308 on behalf of my party; it includes most of the measures that you mention. During the previous session of Parliament, we, together with the Liberal Party and the NDP, made some headway towards some amendments to the bill. We could have done it, but because of the rules of Parliament and the election, everything was dropped.

I am also reminded that, as we listen to you here, we are consulting, and in every one of our ridings, my colleagues, even those who are now talking and disturbing everyone, are also holding consultations. For a bill of this nature, we consulted with those whom we call the have-nots, as well as labour confederations, groups of the unemployed, and so forth. You are probably aware that they think that this bill should not be held up.

Mr. Chair, this is such a disturbance. I do not know if they are at same meeting as we are. I do not want this to eat into my time. I find it very disturbing and lacking in courtesy towards our guests. I hope that we have not upset them too much.

In a word, this bill establishes that there are good unemployed people and bad unemployed people, with all the disqualification that implies. You have done an extraordinary job, as we have, in amending the employment insurance system so that more unemployed people can have access to it. However, this bill contains measures that will eliminate as many people as possible. The minister has said that this bill is for those workers who have become unemployed through no fault of their own. There cannot be many unemployed people who are responsible for their own unemployment. I think that we share this opinion.

This bill is based on a similar principle. I would like to hear more from you about the good and bad aspects of this bill. Let me finish with this, just to make myself clear. This bill disqualifies people. Senior officials told us that, of the 757,000 unemployed people in July, only 30% were close to exhausting their benefits. Twenty-one per cent of this group would be affected by Bill C-50; that comes to 49,600 unemployed people in all of Canada. This is far from the figure of 190,000 unemployed.

● (1705)

I would especially like to hear from you, Mr. Georgetti, and probably you too, Mr. Weir, because, like the NDP, you maintained that the real figure was not \$935 million but \$1 billion. To get to \$1 billion, 85% of the claimants would have to have exhausted their benefits.

I would like to hear what you have to say about that.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Who would like to answer that?

We're actually out of time, but I'm going to allow a response of about 30 seconds.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Erin Weir:** I think that you are right about the serious problems posed by this bill, but ultimately, I feel that it gives extra help to unemployed people who need it, and therefore it is important to have this bill. That is our bottom line.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Ken.

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** We're negotiators, and if something is on the table that will benefit a lot of people and we say we'll take it, it never stops us from working for the rest. The alternative...as I said previously, we wouldn't be happy if no one got it, and at least someone here will benefit. We have to keep grabbing what's on the table.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Rosalie, did you want to comment?

**Ms. Rosalie Washington:** This bill could be tabled for the workers out there to suit all the workers who have paid into EI. It's something we have to work at. We can't just let it go by. Once you pay into EI, you should be able to receive something.

Madam was saying that she has people in her riding who have worked for seven years, but cannot...because they were at different stages before. Once they pay into EI, they should be able to receive something in spite of how many years they've been in the workplace. Unemployment insurance is for all those who work. That's what it's there for. They pay into it and they should be able to receive something from it.

We should be able to table a bill to suit the workers. It may not be perfect, but we can work at it. It's something to work at. Each and every person who works needs EI when they're not working. They need some kind of fund to tide them over until they get a job. Without those funds to tide them over, where are they going to get money to take care of their bills and households?

• (1710)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Madame Folco.

**Ms. Raymonde Folco:** I apologize for this, Mr. Chair, but this is not the first time that you or people in other committees have done this. I know that you do this unwittingly, but when you address the men you address them as "Mr.", and when you address Madam Washington, you call her by her first name. I know this isn't meant to be disrespectful, but I'd appreciate it if you would call Madam Washington, Madam Washington, just as you call Mr. Weir, Mr. Weir, and Mr. Georgetti, Mr. Georgetti.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you for the information.

I'll now move to Mr. Godin.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to welcome our witnesses.

So that no one is offended, I will address you as Ms. Washington. I can guarantee, Ms. Washington, that the NDP will vote for Bill C-50 and that you will have it. I can guarantee you that. Some political parties have already stated publicly that they will not support it. But I am one who believes that we must keep working hard to improve the employment insurance system.

This is not the first time that the employment insurance system has been changed without solving the entire problem. When the Liberal government came up with a bill about the 14 best weeks, I can assure you that, at home, we wanted the 12 best weeks. But we did not reject the 14 best weeks, because it was an improvement for the workers.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, we have a point of order.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Mr. Chair, we deal with witnesses here in an entirely proper way, I feel. When we participated, like the Liberals, in no way did we discredit the positions of the other parties. Mr. Chair, this is not an exercise in political rhetoric; it is in order to better understand peoples' positions.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** That's not a point of order.

Thank you.

We'll add to your time, Mr. Godin.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree that it was not a point of order: I am still in Canada and I have freedom of speech.

We heard about the changes that were made. Just now, the Liberal Party asked some questions. I do not know whether my colleague Mr. Lessard feels that I am now entitled to ask questions too, but I remember hearing, for example, that this did not help people in Nova Scotia because it takes 700 hours to be entitled to employment insurance benefits. The Employment Insurance Act should be amended, but let us not forget that the bill was introduced by the Liberals in 1996. If there are people in Nova Scotia today who do not qualify for employment insurance because of the required 700 hours, it is because of the employment insurance reform that was done in 1996. At that time, there was an economic crisis and all the fishers in the Atlantic provinces lost their jobs; at the same time, the employment insurance fund was robbed like never before. To be precise, \$57 billion were taken from the employment insurance fund and transferred to general revenue.

Mr. Georgetti, as the president of more than 2 million workers in Canada, could you tell us once more how damaging that reform was? Are you asking all political parties to support this bill despite the fact that it does not make all the changes that the workers need? It was the workers who contributed to employment insurance, it is insurance for the workers. It belongs to the employers and to the workers; it is not so that the government can fill its coffers and say how well it is managing the budget. The workers are the ones who need this fund during a time of economic crisis or when they lose their jobs, not the government.

• (1715)

[*English*]

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** Thank you.

This is a great system that was put in place a long time ago to help Canadians in times of unemployment, particularly seasonal workers and other workers. Over time it has been diluted and changed and modified, to the extent now that we find ourselves in a position where most unemployed can't get the insurance they paid for.

That's a travesty. That is, frankly, a theft of money that we deferred from our wages and our payrolls to protect us in times of need.

As I said, in fact, even to our Prime Minister, it matters not to me whether the government is Liberal or Conservative; the last name is still the government. Our government has made a system that was designed to help ordinary working people through tough times into a system of us paying money to be disbursed to people who frankly don't need it. Now Rosalie Washington, who does need it, and the others I've illustrated who are in dire need of this system, are being denied the insurance they need.

As I said before, if this were any other insurance package, there would be a lawsuit of magnificent proportions, and the judgment would be in favour of the needy, not the greedy.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Bill C-50 will not help everybody any more than the 14 best weeks did, we cannot kid ourselves. Three years ago, when the five-week extension was introduced, and pilot projects were set up, the Liberals were very satisfied. But pilot projects are sometimes only available in one area of the country and not others, and that is exactly what happened. The pilot projects on the five-week extension ran for three years. I would have thought that, after three years, the government would be in a position to determine whether workers need the five weeks or not.

When you look at the proposed changes, are you not concerned? We have proposals for pilot projects, even for temporary measures, rather than proposals for reforming the employment insurance system in a way that will help people who need it in the long term.

[English]

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** Certainly. We agree completely. People need this system.

I saw in the paper yesterday comments from the mayor of Toronto, whose budget is going to go up—a 20% increase in welfare rates. Remember, the people you represent are also citizens of a province, are citizens of a municipality. So some people, some citizens, are picking up the tab at some place or another.

The problem we have with the system, Mr. Godin, is that we set up an insurance program federally so that the money would be paid here, and the debt is being transferred to the provinces and to the cities, where they're going to have to pay welfare in place of EI.

Frankly, we as taxpayers are paying twice. We paid our insurance. It wasn't there. We have to pay our taxes, whether they're municipal taxes or provincial taxes, to pick up the costs and the obligation of the federal government. It should be the obligation of the federal government to pay this bill.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I am not sure whether you are aware that the NDP currently has 12 bills before the House of Commons seeking to amend the employment insurance system. One of the reasons is that, earlier this decade, I personally tabled a bill proposing comprehensive changes to employment insurance. But the Liberals, who had a majority government at the time, said that it would be too expensive. They could perhaps accept some of the bills, reforming one element of the system at a time. The NDP has 12 bills, the Bloc has six, the Liberals have two, and the Conservatives have one. Changes have been suggested, but at this rate, if we continue to pass one bill each time there is an election, it will take 32 years to reform employment insurance.

[English]

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** Frankly, you should all think.... I think the temptation of the size of this fund when it's in surplus is too much for a government to handle. I think the system needs to be overhauled, but the control can't be just with a majority government.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Do you think that the bill will help only workers in Ontario or do you think that, in spite of its limitations, it will help workers all across Canada?

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Godin, we're over time. I'll let him finish the answer to that question.

Mr. Weir.

[Translation]

**Mr. Erin Weir:** It will help some workers in all provinces. It is not only for Ontarians; it is for workers in all provinces, but it is not for all workers in all provinces.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** We agree that not all workers will benefit, that is for sure.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to the last round, the last questioner. Mr. Komarnicki, you have ten minutes.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the responses that were made, and obviously, with passion and determination and with the request that Bill C-50 move quickly. I know Mr. Georgetti has indicated that you take what's on the table and keep working. It's not perfect, but it certainly addresses the needs of a good number of people. I read from your press release of September 14 that you were essentially pleased with the government's proposed changes, but as you say, there is more work to do.

What message do you have for the leader of the Liberal Party, the opposition, who opposed this particular legislature before it came to committee, and voted against it, presumably to try to force an election during this difficult economic time, when these benefits are what they are? What message would you have for him, and to the committee members here who oppose the legislation, notwithstanding that it's helping some of the people that are affected in this particular time?

• (1720)

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** While we appreciate and share their concerns about the shortcomings of this bill, we've impressed upon them, and we continue to impress upon them, that we need to get this bill passed, because it will help a great number of people. But we ask them, as we ask you, to not stop working to improve employment insurance and to put it back into the state it should be, which is to provide protection for all workers who are unemployed, regardless of how many hours they've worked, how long they've worked, and where they come from to do that.

We've had the same message for them as we've had for you and all parliamentarians, which is to pass this bill and do more for unemployed people. It's not their fault that they're unemployed, and they need help. I think you would agree with that.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** In essence, you're saying quit playing politics with this issue and stand up and vote for the bill as it now is.

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** I wouldn't accuse anyone in this room of playing politics. That's your job, quite frankly. But from our side to you, you haven't done enough for the unemployed as the governing party, and the message we have for you is to get back to the drawing table, talk to your Prime Minister, the Minister of HRSDC, and the finance minister to do the job you were elected to do. That is to represent and help the people who elected you here in Parliament.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** You would agree with me, though, that you would approach this in a piece-by-piece basis, do as much as you can for the moment to achieve what's available. I take it you agreed that the five weeks of additional benefits to the unemployed was a good step forward when it was introduced?

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** Yes.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** The extra moneys that were put into skills, training, and upgrading—the \$1.5 billion on top of \$2.5 billion—were a good step and something that you would have supported?

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** We then expanded the work-sharing program that helped about 168,000 people to maintain and keep their jobs. You're saying that's a good step in terms of helping people?

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** We've been on the record with that, absolutely.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** And certainly the step taken here will help additional people.

When you put all of that together, would you agree, then, that the steps are taken in the right direction?

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** Yes. But to qualify that, it's still not enough, sir, and we'd like you to do more.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** There's always room for more, but you're satisfied with the steps that have been taken so far.

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** We're not satisfied; we acknowledge that they're positive steps, but we think far more needs to be done.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** Then again, Mr. Erin Weir, you said in the *Hamilton Spectator* of September 29, 2009, that the increasing number of exhaustees, those who are coming off the system, “underscores the importance of enacting the proposed benefit extension for some long-tenured workers”.

I take it you still stand by that, and you continue to call for speedy passage of Bill C-50?

**Mr. Erin Weir:** Yes, absolutely. I began my remarks today by calling upon Parliament to pass the bill. That certainly remains my union's position.

I'd certainly echo what Ken said, that many more improvements are needed. Although there have been a number of improvements, which you've identified, those improvements are starting from a very low base, starting from a system that was completely inadequate. I think to get EI to where we need it, further improvements are also going to be required.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** Let me ask you this, as a point of question for the Liberal leader of the opposition, the members of the Liberal

Party. Do you expect them, and want them, to stand up and vote in favour of this bill?

**Mr. Erin Weir:** Yes, I'd like to see Parliament pass this bill.

● (1725)

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** Now, the fact that we've actually had a program, called the career transition assistance initiative, that helped those who were long-tenured to receive up to two years in benefits if they were engaged in training...was a positive long-term benefit. Do you see what we're proposing in Bill C-50 as being a bridge to that, and an extension of that, that's quite useful for that particular class of workers?

**Mr. Erin Weir:** Yes, I think that's fair to say.

I think the other way to look at Bill C-50 is that it's potentially a substitute that does something for those workers who aren't in a position to avail themselves of training opportunities. I know that lots of workers who do meet the long-tenured criteria haven't been able to find qualifying training opportunities. At least Bill C-50 will give them some extended benefits, some additional income to live on, to try to weather the economic downturn.

**Mr. Ed Komarnicki:** I guess I would conclude by just pointing out that back in the nineties—I think it's been alluded to already—when the unemployment rate was near where it is today, the system was significantly gutted, if you want to call it that, by the then Liberal government. The steps that we've taken here are sort of a progression in the other direction.

You'd agree with me on that?

**Mr. Erin Weir:** Yes, absolutely. As I said, I think the system was at a very low base going into the economic crisis. It was probably the weakest EI system Canada has had going into any recent post-war recession. We have seen some modest improvements, but as I said, more are required.

Just on the analogy, though, to the changes that were made in the 1990s, one feature of this bill that is slightly troubling is this business of excluding workers who have already had to use 36 or more weeks of benefits. To me that's very reminiscent of the experience rating that the Government of Canada tried to shove into employment insurance during the 1990s. We haven't gotten completely away from that problem yet.

**Mr. Ken Georgetti:** I want to just step in and make one point.

The benefit level in 1990 was higher. In the 1990 recession, it was higher than it is today.

So this system today is worse than it was in the recession in 1990.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Komarnicki.

I want to thank Mr. Weir and Mr. Georgetti.

Again, Ms. Washington, I meant no disrespect. I really appreciate you sharing your story. It was very powerful, and it speaks to why this bill needs to be passed very quickly. Thank you for being here today.

The meeting is adjourned.





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