



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 052

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Friday, February 3, 2023



Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): I will call to order the 52nd meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will commence its study on the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23: vote 1b under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and votes 1b and 5b under Department of Employment and Social Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022, and therefore its members are attending virtually and here in the room.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I will recognize you before you speak. You have the option of speaking in either official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available. If there is a problem with interpretation and translation services, please get my attention. We'll suspend while they are being corrected.

There is a speaking order. To get my attention, simply raise your hand. If you're on screen, use the "raise hand" icon. I will remind all members and witnesses to address their comments through the chair. In accordance with our routine motion, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests. All the witnesses are in the room.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks, followed by questions.

Appearing this morning is the Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Labour, who will be speaking and taking questions on the study matter before the committee for the next hour.

Mr. O'Regan, you have five minutes.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Labour): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning to you.

Good morning to the members of the committee on a very cold morning. I'm joined by my deputy minister, Sandra Hassan, and by Brian Leonard from my department.

Of course, we are meeting today on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

My job as the Minister of Labour is to support workers and employers and to create good jobs. Most importantly, what we can do for Canadians and for our country as a whole is to make sure that

every worker has a good, well-paid, stable job, jobs that they can be proud of, with people who respect them and respect their skills.

The tripartite relationship between our government, unions and employers is essential to this work. That tripartite relationship is what makes our economy so strong. I'm very proud of the relationships I've built with workers and industry.

This year, we requested \$3.1 million to support the implementation of 10 days of paid sick leave for all workers within the federal jurisdiction. The legislation and regulations came into force on December 1. Paid sick leave will protect workers and their families and will protect their jobs, protect their colleagues and protect our economy. It means that workers won't have to choose between getting paid and getting better.

The legislation for paid sick leave was passed unanimously in the House. I want to recognize the strong working relationship with my critic at the time, who now serves on this committee, the member for Parry Sound—Muskoka, as well as the member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, the deputy leader of the NDP.

We'll use this new funding to develop training, update information technology systems and adapt our compliance and enforcement strategies.

We also requested \$1.7 million to support the completion of the Employment Equity Act review. This is operating funding for skills and resources required to support the next phase of the review that is following the release of the task force report.

• (0850)

[Translation]

In keeping with my mandate, we will amend the Canada Labour Code to include mental health as a specific component of occupational health and safety. We will require federally regulated employers to take preventive measures to address workplace stress issues and injury risks.

In addition, we believe in equity, diversity and inclusion in the workplace. The working group reviewing the Employment Equity Act has resumed its work and should complete its analysis this summer. I look forward to reading its findings.

I am also quite proud to say that Canada, along with the provinces and territories, has ratified International Labour Organization Convention No. 190, which will help eliminate violence and harassment in the workplace. During this event, I was joined by my colleague, the member for Thérèse-De Blainville, who sits on this committee.

[English]

We are doing big things for workers, and we are doing big things for employers in this country. We are making workplaces safer, healthier and better places to be. That is good for workers. It is good for employers. It is good for our economy.

I will leave it there, Mr. Chair. I look forward to taking questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We'll now go to questions. The first round goes to Mr. Lewis.

Go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mr. Chris Lewis (Essex, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before committee this morning.

I appreciate your final couple of statements suggesting that we're doing things for workers. I believe that, collectively across Canada, there has never been a more important time to do things for our workforce.

My first question is for you, Minister. Syncreon workers from Essex-Windsor—and it could be more than Syncreon but specifically for this company, which has since been shut down—were let down by the EI system when their manufacturing site closed. The qualifying number of hours for EI, to my understanding, is currently set at 560 in Windsor and 700 in Huron County, which ironically is Essex County. The EI hours are set by the place of residence of the worker, not the location of the employment, and this has caused an inequality in benefit support to those in the Essex County area.

Would you support setting qualifying hours based on the location of employment and not the place of residence?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: As the member well knows, I appreciate the severity of this issue. I've been down to the region. I visited you when I was down there. My colleague Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk, who is the local member of Parliament there, has been bringing this forward. I know this is something Minister Carla Qualtrough has been watching, and EI falls under her purview.

What can I say? Having so many workers find out by robocall that they no longer had a job is not preferable, to put it mildly. I don't know if Minister Qualtrough is watching these proceedings necessarily, but as soon as this hearing is over, I will be sure to bring it to her attention once again.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Minister.

Just as a follow-up to that, in this case many of the workers who were laid off did not qualify for EI because they had worked for only 200 hours between May 1 and October 31, 2022. Understanding that the severance pay was money collected from their wages and owed to the workers and that many of these workers had already

taken out massive personal loans over the last two years to make ends meet, do you think that exceptions should have been made with regard to extending the temporary EI measures with respect to qualifying hours and on suspending the allocation of severance pay?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Lewis, I might be best to keep my thoughts on the matter to myself, because there are policies and regulations and so on that are involved here.

All of that is to say that my heart goes out to a lot of people in your region who, I know, have borne the brunt of this. My colleagues here and I will be sure to bring this matter to the attention of our colleagues in ESDC following this hearing.

• (0855)

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Minister.

We heard earlier this week that the printers at the Windsor Star are going to cut 40, 50 or 60 jobs there as well. We are probably going to be revisiting this.

On Driver Inc.-type employment and truck drivers' employment status issues, truck drivers have complained that they are being taken advantage of by trucking companies. They are asked to identify as being self-employed, which leaves them without health insurance, contributions to CPP and other benefits. This means they are in a vulnerable situation without the rights of a full-time employee.

I know that some recent initiatives by you and the ministry of labour are going to put in place fines for those companies that categorize their drivers incorrectly. Do you think the legislation will have enough teeth to change the status quo? If so, how can we protect truck drivers more comprehensively and increase the number of drivers entering the supply chain?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We refer to the Driver Inc. model as a kind of misclassification of new workers. Truck drivers are not aware, but suddenly they are classified as independent contractors.

We amended the labour code by prohibiting the misclassification of workers, and we have been inspecting work sites since then. Where we find people in non-compliance, we will take action through orders and fines and even prosecutions. We have the authority to do that. We expect all employers to treat their employees fairly, and those who don't will face the consequences.

We're committed to protecting workers in this space. We will continue to work with the sector directly to figure this out and to make sure that people are treated fairly.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Minister, for that very thoughtful answer.

I have about one minute left, so I'm going to dive into the last question I have for you.

We all agree there's a severe labour shortage across Canada from coast to coast to coast. It's specifically in our skilled trades. I think about the Gordie Howe bridge and the remarkable folks, both men and women, who are working so diligently to finish the busiest international border crossing in North America. When that is done in 2025, Minister, those folks are going to need a home.

My private member's bill, Bill C-241, will allow these same trades folks to travel across the country, go to the new Gordie Howe bridge, wherever that may be, and write off their expenses.

Minister, what are your thoughts on that? Would the Liberals be supporting this when it comes back for third reading?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: One of the first things I did as Minister of Labour was to support the labour mobility tax deduction. That's mainly because it's how so many people out my way get to work. Many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians travel back and forth to this day, all the time, to Saskatchewan and Alberta to work in the oil patch. I'm very proud of the fact that they contributed quite mightily to the building of the oil patch out west.

One of the things that we found unfair was that you had salesmen who could go back and forth. They could make deductions, but the actual people who were doing the work with that equipment couldn't. We've made headway there.

I'll leave it at that, other than to say that my heart's there. That's for sure.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Coteau, for six minutes.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you so much, Minister, for being here, and thank you to the officials joining you today.

You've been on the job now for about a year and a half. One of the most substantial implementations of a big change has been the 10 paid sick days. It was a big issue in my home riding and in my province of Ontario. It was a big issue right across the country.

Can you take a few moments to share with us what the implementation process has looked like over the last little while?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I appreciate the question.

First of all, yes, I want to acknowledge the hard work of some of the members in this room who helped to get that passed unanimously. Paid sick leave is a big deal. I have also been encouraging my provincial counterparts to take note of it and consider it.

As you pointed out, right now this is not something.... In the throes of COVID, as we were trying to deal with that, if you had told me we would be coming out of this and confronting the most significant labour shortage in Canadian history with the highest employment rate and the lowest unemployment rate in Canadian history, I wouldn't have believed you. But here we are. It's extraordinary, but it does have its own challenges.

One of the benefits of paid sick leave is that—we believe in looking at other jurisdictions where it's occurred—it will lead to higher worker retention. Where workers are treated well, they will stay in the jobs where they are at if they feel the full benefit.

It was also in our experience...and this is something that came up as we were looking at how businesses are going to confront this. One of the things we know is that most workers don't take the full 10 days. In federal jurisdictions, by the way, I should also add that a number of employers were already offering 10 days, close to it or more. The 10 days is just what we are asking for. It's the minimum. We find that most workers take anywhere from four to seven days. The cost to employers is not sizable, but they do benefit from retention.

Right now, I'm happy to say that, as of February 1, workers in federal jurisdictions accumulated their fourth day. They automatically received three days on December 31, and they will continue to accumulate them throughout the course of the year. It's happening.

● (0900)

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you so much. We appreciate the work you're doing. I know that residents in my riding appreciate the work you're doing.

I recently took a look at your mandate letter. There's a piece around mental health in the workplace. You've been asked to look for ways to improve mental health in the workplace across the country. Can you talk a bit about that? What are the challenges, trend lines and strategies you're going to put in place to look for ways to improve mental health in the workplace?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm very happy you asked this question. It's something that's very near and dear to my heart. I was a former ambassador for Bell Let's Talk. I've been very public about some of my own challenges.

You have half a million Canadians who miss work each week due to mental illness. That is sizable. Each one is a case of somebody who is suffering. Crassly—if I can add this, too—cumulatively, that is a real hit on the economy.

Workers are people. People have complex lives. They have complex needs. I think there are two ways that I, as Minister of Labour, want to try to close this gap for workers. Number one is making mental health a component of workplace health and safety. Number two is the right to disconnect.

Mental health is health. You hear that increasingly often. It's a good thing, but we really have to absorb that and we have to absorb that in our public policy. We need to consider it, and such injuries associated with it need to be covered by occupational health and safety requirements as much as physical injuries, because mental health is physical health too. By not addressing this, the Canadian economy is losing an estimated \$6 billion each year in productivity. An estimated one in three workplace disability claims in Canada right now is related to mental illness.

It's something I take very seriously. It underlines a lot of what we are trying to do right now in labour.

On things like the right to disconnect, I'd say to watch this space. The idea of the right to disconnect was a policy that was being contemplated well before COVID, but now, when we look at everything that has changed in the workplace as a result of COVID, it has never been more pressing.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Minister, diversity, inclusion and equity are huge issues for which I've looked for ways to improve over the years in politics. We have a workforce in which we have a lot of people. Unemployment rates are the lowest they've ever been. We have an integration of women into the workforce beyond the numbers we've seen in the past, but there are still some groups that are not quite there. These are some young people, remote and rural communities, racialized Canadians and, perhaps, some indigenous communities.

Can you talk about how we look for ways to improve and create more diversity and inclusion in the workplace overall? What are your thoughts on that issue?

• (0905)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We've seen more progress in diversity in the workforce in the past two years than we perhaps ever have in Canadian history. That is because we've had such low unemployment numbers and high employment numbers. We have seen the marketplace in this instance move far faster than any government program could ever do, and I'm delighted by that.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you so much, Minister.

The Chair: Madame Chabot, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Greetings, fellow committee members.

Minister, thank you for being here today.

I would like to begin by commending two things you mentioned.

First of all, there was the entry into force of Bill C-3, which, among other things, provides 10 days of banked paid sick leave. This is a major step forward. The Bloc Québécois is proud to have helped make it possible.

In addition, the International Labour Organisation's Convention No. 190 on violence and harassment in the workplace has been ratified. We know that this is an ongoing phenomenon in the workplace. In order to make workplaces safe, it is absolutely necessary to eliminate this issue. We now need to ensure that our labour codes and standards, both at the federal level and in Quebec and the provinces, comply with this convention.

There is another high-priority issue that workers care deeply about, and that is the issue of anti-scab legislation. I know that this is included in your mandate.

On January 30, as consultations on this issue were winding down, there was a demonstration on Parliament Hill. The demonstration was held in front of Parliament Hill and was attended by workers from the company Océan remorquage Sorel, in the port of Sorel-Tracy, who have been on work stoppage since last June. The employer is in no hurry to resolve the situation, given the presence

of scabs since the beginning of the conflict. This is unacceptable. I would have liked to be there to greet them, but I was in Geneva at the time. This issue is a priority for the Bloc Québécois. We have already introduced 11 bills to address it. I tabled the most recent one. If you wish to take it on, we would be pleased.

Now that consultations are finished, when can we expect to see the introduction of a bill on anti-scab legislation? Can you give us a deadline?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Thank you for the question.

We prohibit the use of replacement workers. We make sure that the collective bargaining process is as free and fair as it can be, so that workers are empowered to ask for more when they feel they deserve more for the work they do.

[*English*]

I sat in on many of these consultations. I think I sat in on all of them on replacement workers. We decided to make sure that employers and employees had the opportunity to sit down in the same room together and air their concerns and grievances to one another, as well as where they saw the benefits.

To get to where you were going with your question on those consultations, right now we are still going through what we heard. What we have committed, with the NDP, is that we will be introducing legislation by the end of this year. Having gone through these fairly extensive and very frank consultations that, again, I sat in on myself, I think we have an opportunity to make sure we get this right.

The consultations were extremely important. I realize that the issue of replacement workers is not new to the House. I realize that the private members' bills have been introduced in the House on several occasions, but we have a strong and proud history in this department, and in labour in this country, of tripartite negotiations and sitting down with employers and employees. I wanted to take it a step further. I wanted to make sure that everybody was in the same room so that we had very fulsome discussions on how this could best be implemented in the interest of workers and in the interest of the economy as a whole. I think we're getting there.

• (0910)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Let me ask you another question, Minister: why wait until the end of the year? If the NDP-Liberal coalition is already working on this issue, why not move more quickly? Why not move forward faster than 12 months from now?

[*English*]

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I think the devil is in the details, as they usually are in these things. I think this is a big move. It is a big move not just for employees. On the day we announced it, I said that this was an absolutely seminal day for workers in this country. It is something that for decades they have been asking for: a ban on replacement workers. Having said that, we also have to make sure that we take into account employers and the effect it will have on them, and that's very important.

One of the reasons I obviously support this move is that it will keep people at the table. It will keep parties at the table. They will not be distracted by anything else that is happening outside. Replacement workers and their usage can leave long-lasting effects on employee-employer relationships within a company—very long-lasting—and I want people focused at the table. We have had incredible success. I wish I could take the credit for it, but it is the officials within my department who know how to mitigate and conciliate. We have a success rate in the 90% range in making sure that we come to an agreement with parties without there being work stoppages.

The tone of that table, of all parties believing they have a neutral body here in our government that will attempt to mitigate these disputes, is absolutely essential. I need to make sure that I have the trust of all parties on board.

We stand by our commitment, though, and our commitment is to make sure the legislation is introduced by the end of this year.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

We have Madam Zarrillo for six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Last time you were here, we spoke of the need for menstrual equity at work. I want to thank you for advancing that work. The folks of B.C. are very excited about that.

We know that EI and labour policy were traditionally focused on men, and there is a lot of catching up to do to put a gender lens on both EI and labour. With that in mind, this committee has a study on the care economy coming out soon, a study on workers who traditionally have been ignored—mostly women, immigrant women—and taken for granted even though their work truly underpins the economy in health, wellness, child care and education, all of those factors that are key to a healthy economy. I'm just going to ask that you please watch for that important study and the recommendations.

Part of that is the working conditions of nurses, one of the most dangerous jobs in Canada. I'm wondering how C190 will protect nurses.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: On convention 190 from the International Labour Organization, which we just ratified in Geneva, I think what's interesting about C190 is that it actually is inspired by Bill C-65, which of course came into effect here in this country on the issue of sexual harassment.

For anybody who doubts Canada's leadership in the world when it comes to field of labour, my chest swelled, my shoulders were back and my head was held high in Geneva when we were reminded by the International Labour Organization that they took inspiration for C190 from Bill C-65. Bill C-65 would be the more relevant legislation, obviously, in this country. It will create a safer work-

place that will protect those who are suffering from threats of or acts of sexual harassment.

We came down very forcibly, particularly after we saw threats and actions against nurses and support workers during COVID. I am the son of a nurse, very proudly so, and we won't tolerate that. We simply won't.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Minister. The nurses would benefit from hearing more of that from you, even in the press, in the media.

The last time you were here, you also spoke of mental health supports for trades. I was thinking at the time about health care workers. I was wondering if the care professions are also going to benefit from mental health supports and policies.

Also, why hasn't the Liberal government spent the \$4.5 billion promised for mental health support?

● (0915)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm going to look to my deputy, perhaps, to see if she wants to answer that specifically on the \$4.5 billion.

Ms. Sandra Hassan (Deputy Minister of Labour and Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): On your first question about the care professionals, those who fall under federal jurisdiction would of course be covered by the bill Minister O'Regan referred to, Bill C-65, and we do have nurses who are under federal jurisdiction.

In terms of the money spent, we do have in the labour programs some programs that are grants and contributions aimed at mental health programs, but to your specific question, I'll have to come back. I'm not sure if it was under our portfolio.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you. I'd like to know where they intersect.

I have one other quick question. This is specific to something in my riding, and maybe for other Ukrainian unaccompanied minors who have come to this country.

I had a young man in my office recently who is here as an unaccompanied minor, but doesn't have the ability to work. He isn't able to have any of his own money from having a small job, or even, as we approach summer, to be able to work in the summer.

I wonder if there's an opportunity for some intersection on immigration, so that the Ukrainian unaccompanied minors could get some leeway on their visas to be able to do some work to have their own money. Right now, they're relying on their sponsor families.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I can certainly take up that issue with the ministers involved. That would be the Minister of Immigration and, potentially Minister Qualtrough as well. This is something that I think we all feel very passionately about across party lines. There's no question about it.

I think that's a very good and specific concern.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

I still have another minute. That's wonderful. I want to give the minister that minute to talk about the estimates. We're here about the estimates today.

Is there anything else you would like this committee to know about spending and some of the grants that are potentially coming out of your ministry? I'd love to know what to watch for, for my community as well.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: This is your opportunity to shine, Brian.

Mr. Brian Leonard (Associate Director General, Corporate Financial Planning, Department of Employment and Social Development): Okay.

For the labour program, the Minister of Labour is responsible for two grants and contribution programs. They are the labour funding program and the workplace harassment and violence prevention fund. The total for those two combined is \$13.3 million this current fiscal year. Neither is being topped up through the supplementary estimates (B).

In terms of what these programs do and who they could help, Deputy, could I pass this back to you?

Ms. Sandra Hassan: We use those funds for co-operation with external stakeholders to allow them to develop programs that will address harassment and violence. For example, funds have been allocated to various universities where programs specific to certain communities have been developed.

We also have some in certain industrial sectors where the prevalence of harassment and violence, for example, is to be addressed through specific education and other types of programs of that nature.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

We'll go to Madam Ferreri for five minutes, please.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for attending today.

I want to start out with child care. We're seeing this CWELCC program and Bill C-35 being rolled out and discussed in the House right now. Anybody who's been following this or who works in the industry knows there's significant burnout. Wages are not keeping people in this industry. I have letters here in front of me from a day care in Simcoe County that has had to shorten its hours because of labour shortages.

The promise is 250,000 early child care workers. This is wading into a lot of provincial jurisdictions when we look at child care and these agreements. You're already wading into that kind of jurisdiction, so at a federal level, there's a lot of anticipation that you will have a national strategy around how you're going to meet these demands.

I'm curious what that is. This number is lovely, and it's lovely to hear that you're going to hire this many, but you can't even retain or recruit the people you need now. Why wasn't a national child care strategy put into that bill? Do you have one?

• (0920)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I appreciate the question. It is a concern. You have to make sure that workers, particularly workers in very vulnerable occupations, are looked after.

I come from a provincial government. I worked in a provincial government for five years. Trust me, as natural resources minister, I was schooled in what is in provincial jurisdiction and what is in federal jurisdiction.

I would say it's very important to clarify that we're not the ones doing the hiring, but we are the ones doing the funding. We leave it to provinces and actors within provincially regulated jurisdictions to do that hiring. We leave it to them to do that. I'm very conscious of—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I'm sorry, Minister. With all due respect, that's fine, but there's a federal promise of 250,000. Are you just going to say that's your promise, but there's no plan for how to help the provinces meet that demand?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: First of all, while it's a shared concern, don't doubt the ability or the motivation of provincial authorities. They also recognize that this is a problem and I fully expect they will be able to deal with it in a manner that is best for their particular provinces.

I'm very mindful of provincial jurisdiction on these sorts of things. I'm proud of the fact that we are funding day care nationally, but I really do believe that the implementation of it is in provincial jurisdiction and we have to be mindful of that.

I think the federal government has a history of often poking its nose too far where it shouldn't be, but I think it's important that we fund it.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: On the record, you're setting yourself up for massive failure because, if there's no plan in place, money is not going to solve this problem.

You have to have these workers in place in order to care for our children. Children are at the crux of this and there's no plan. You are saying that you'll let the provinces deal with it, but you're mandating it. That's passing the buck.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We're coming to an agreement with provinces and territories on funding. Each province is developing plans that are specific to the province—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Wouldn't you think that you need a national—

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

We have just recently completed our study on the workforce. Clearly the labour shortages, as reflected in that report, do not fit within this minister's mandate. I thought we'd be coming back to that when our report was released and we would have a discussion with—

The Chair: Mr. Van Bynen, that is not a point of order.

Ms. Ferreri, you have the floor, please.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you.

I guess what I would ask is this: Do you not think there would be significant value to setting the federal government and the provinces up for success if there was a national labour strategy around this?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I find it most effective, particularly in this field, for each province to deal with it in the way that is most effective and specific to its province.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you.

I have a phone message here from someone who works in human resources. On the 10 days of paid sick leave, I think we all agree we want Canadians to be able to take a sick day when they need it.

She is a human resources manager and her concern is that these new provisions were really intended for government workers and it wasn't considered how it would impact other federally regulated employers, such as manufacturing. She said that, in just a month, the attendance has significantly dropped. It's destroying their ability to get the work done. In a supply management crisis, this has been a sort of unintended consequence of this program.

Is there any effort to correct this or acknowledge it?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We consulted heavily with employers and with unions on how we would implement these 10 paid days. I can't speak to what the person who has texted you may be saying anecdotally, but right now, accumulatively, they have access to only three days at this point in time. They have to be accumulated over the course of this year, so if they're taking any more than that, then potentially they're unpaid or, potentially, they are paid because there are many employers within the federal jurisdiction have met the 10-day mark or are close to meeting the 10-day mark.

I don't begin in a position where I believe that workers will immediately run out there and take advantage of these things.

● (0925)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I don't think it was taken advantage of—

The Chair: There was additional time for the point of order, but your time has now concluded.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, and thank you, Minister.

We will now move to Mr. Van Bynen for five minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The pandemic has taken a significant toll on workers. Whether it was working from home, spending long hours on screens, stocking shelves with groceries or health care professionals working overtime to care for patients, workers were experiencing burnout and high levels of stress and anxiety. This can have a host of impacts.

We were just in Geneva where Canada ratified the International Labour Organization's convention 190. How does that help workers? To carry that further, how does ILO C190 fit within what the government has done to confront violence and harassment in the workplace?

You've told us where Canada stands, but I'd be interested in knowing what more can be done. What are you giving some consideration to for the future?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We brought into force Bill C-65 so employees now can expect better time frames for resolution. There's the confidentiality of all parties involved. There's protection for employees victimized by third parties and others. I think the most important thing—and what I do appreciate about Bill C-65—is that we now have the legal obligation for employers to sit down with their employees and talk about sexual harassment.

The other part that I'd like to talk about actually gets back to the questions we were talking about with child care. The closer you can arrive at solutions on the ground, the better. The less that distant government is involved in arriving at these solutions, the better. What we're doing with Bill C-65 is saying that each workplace sit down with their employees and their employer and come up with a sexual harassment policy that's going to work. We've given, as I've said, some parameters on time frames, on confidentiality, on protection for employees who may be victimized by a third party. Other than that, the less the government is involved, and the more that employers and employees can arrive at these solutions themselves so that they're specific to their workplace, the better.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

That's a great segue. In the past year we've seen many opportunities where labour agreements have been reached at the bargaining table. This is good news for workers and employers, and all Canadians.

The Canadian economy relies on workers in federally regulated sectors. Going into 2023, how would you characterize the relationship among government, business and labour?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: To speak to the importance of some of the industries within federal jurisdiction, I remember quite clearly that it would have been roughly about this time last year when we were dealing with CP Rail. Suddenly I'm getting frequent daily texts from the U.S. ambassador to Canada and then the Secretary of Labor, who informed me that he was texting from the White House and that this was a concern. Canadian Pacific, CP Rail and CN Rail are big movers and shakers in the United States and Canada, and making sure we have stability there is incredibly important.

I can tell you about one of the biggest takeaways from my year and a half now as labour minister. In the ministries that I have held in government, I have dealt with some extraordinary public servants. The people in the federal mediation and conciliation service are exceptional. They know how to sit down and find agreement when you think no agreement can be reached. I'm not going to say that we didn't have a number of nail-biter situations, but they managed to get all parties to sit down and understand the implications of a work stoppage to the Canadian economy.

I would venture to say that these officials have managed to save our economy billions of dollars—billions—in the past year alone. There were so many, whether it be with CP, CN, Via, Loomis, Purolator, WestJet—any one of those. Cumulatively, what that would have done to the Canadian economy at a very vulnerable point in time over the past year coming out of COVID-19, I don't want to think about. I've thought about it too much. Thankfully, for a number of these issues, we've turned a corner. These officials are to be commended by all of us, if you ask me.

• (0930)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: We've seen a very significant transition in our economy, a higher reliance on technology and artificial intelligence. What are you considering on a go-forward basis to manage the transition into the new economy, the digital economy, the green economy? How are you managing that, or do you have any specific projects in mind to address that issue?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Certainly on the issue of AI and automation, my eyes are wide open to it, but more importantly, I think the eyes of a lot of the union leadership and employers are also wide open to it. We are in an age of labour shortages, and I can tell you right now that all the AI in the world is not going to solve the fact that we have a skilled labour shortage and a trades shortage. There's still a lot of room for growth in those areas. These are the people who build homes. This country experiences a shortage in homes, for instance. They're the ones who know how to lower emissions in pipelines. They're the ones who know how to build up renewables. I'm a big fan of the trades, and that isn't going to change.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I have two questions for the minister.

My first question pertains to minimum wage.

In 2021, the federal minimum wage rose to \$15. In 2022, it was indexed. In 2023, given the economic situation, would you be in favour of raising it to about \$18, as advocated by several unions?

[*English*]

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Madame Chabot, I would have to say that I appreciate the suggestion. I'm not in a position to answer. I think that would be complicated. I think the economy right now is fragile enough. A minister surmising on such issues could have implications, so I have to be very careful about what I would say about that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: At least I got to ask the question. Thank you.

My second question has to do with introducing a bill and comprehensive measures to ensure a just transition. Which is, in fact, mentioned in your mandate letter. You share that responsibility with other ministers.

During pre-budget consultations, the Canadian Labour Congress made its case to obtain the money needed by workers, who are part of the solution, in the context of climate change and the just transition. As we know, the transition to address climate change could result in job losses in some sectors. So it is important to support workers.

What is the game plan on this issue?

[*English*]

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I could wax on for quite a long time on this issue. I am excited about the opportunities here. I confront those who treat this as a source of anxiety and I resent those who politically stoke those anxieties. I come from an oil-producing province. I realized a long time ago that there were far too many politicians, frankly, who were stoking anxiety in an area where I see tremendous growth.

The reason I see tremendous growth is that we need workers to lower emissions in the oil industry. The oil industry in this country is not going anywhere. We are the fourth-biggest producers of oil and fifth-biggest producers of natural gas in the world. I take great pride in the workers who have built those industries, but I look at them now and I'm working with them to say, "We urgently need you to lower emissions. We need you to show the same ingenuity and hard work that you did in building this industry to change it so we lower emissions within that industry and we build up renewables." We can and we will do both. We are one of the very few countries in the world with the wealth of natural resources that we have and the technical know-how. I regret the fact that over the years we have made workers feel excluded when they are absolutely central—central—to getting this important work done.

When we went through COVID, one of my biggest concerns was that COVID and an oil price war happened at the same time. Everybody forgets this. I remember looking at the price of oil hitting negative \$35, and for Canada that was a big moment. How do we work together to make sure we retain people in the industry? I need more people in the energy industry, in the oil and gas industry, in order to lower those emissions. I think using things like orphan wells, for instance.... It's not a perfect system, but we managed to keep workers in the industry doing good work.

We have lots of challenges ahead. I went to Edmonton about a week ago to meet with the Alberta Federation of Labour. These are people I keep in very close contact with on both the employer and employee side. It is our national mission. It is our national mission right now, and we have a chance to shine. The world is watching Canada on this. I'm very proud of the work that's being done and I'm ambitious about the work that we can do.

• (0935)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Madam Zarrillo, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Of course, I need to talk about anti-scab legislation. Right now we are on the precipice of having anti-scab legislation passed. We know that there is long-standing exploitation of workers in this country. I spoke earlier about women and immigrants in this country who have long been exploited in the care economy.

Workers deserve this protection. The bulk of the work has been done. All that is needed now is for the Liberals to pass it. My question is this: When is that going to happen?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: As we've agreed with the NDP, we will be introducing that legislation by the end of this year.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm wondering if it's going to come in the next couple of months. Is it going to come before we break for the summer?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We will introduce it, as agreed, by the end of this year. I really do want to make sure that we get this right. We want to make sure that the collective bargaining process is as free and as fair as it possibly can be for workers, so that they are equipped to ask for more when they feel they should have the right to do so. We want to make sure that it does nothing but benefit the economy by making sure that we go about what I think is a fundamental change in the collective bargaining process in a way that maintains stability for our economy.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: In the last minute that I have, I want to re-visit, again, the issue of mobility. One of my colleagues earlier raised the issue of mobility for persons in trades. I want to ask about mobility for health care workers, so that health care workers are able to move nationally across the provinces.

Is that something that's also being discussed?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Health care workers and the regulation of health care workers are clearly under provincial jurisdiction. As we deal with significant labour shortages in the health care field, the ability of workers to move around the country as well as having their credentials recognized in other jurisdictions is something a lot of people would like to see.

I'm not going to step into the lane of the Minister of Health or the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, but I'm sure that discussions are being held.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

To conclude, we'll go to Mr. Lewis for five minutes, and then we'll finish with Mrs. Martinez Ferrada for five minutes.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have a couple of questions.

Minister, I want to speak about just transition for a moment. I as well have met with a lot of skilled labour, both union and non-unionized trades, across the country. I hear a lot of concern with regard to our oil sands. We all agree that the environment is vitally important. We have people who have skilled trades that are kind of losing their jobs. When I say just kind of, I mean not a little bit. When we look at Saskatchewan, plants are closing and folks have nowhere to go. Many of these folks are 40, 45 or 50 years old, and are not necessarily wanting to go back to college to learn a new trade.

Minister, can you confirm, or can you give us some direction that we're not going to risk high-paying jobs for the folks across Canada due to just transition?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Risk...? I want more of them. I need more of them. I need to encourage more people to get into the energy industry and the oil and gas industry, specifically into renewables, because I need lower emissions. We need to do that in order to meet our international commitments, but also because the global marketplace is looking for that. It's looking for sources of oil that are lower emitting. For instance, I'm very proud of the fact that, although we didn't have much to do with it, we found Hibernia. We're developing Hibernia. Hibernia continues to expand, and it has some of the lightest sweetest crude in the world.

One of the most important things we can do is to actually allow workers to lead this. I've been saying this for quite some time, and it's beginning to sink in with labour leadership in Alberta, in Saskatchewan and in Newfoundland and Labrador. They know I mean it. We have doubled UTIP, the union training and innovation program. We are specifically working with unions to not only fund them properly but to make sure that any training programs for new opportunities in the energy industry are led by them. They recognize them, they point them out, and we will help fund them.

I'm very serious about this.

• (0940)

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you very much, Minister. I will certainly follow up with you on that. Again, I know that we both speak to the same people, and I also hear major concerns. We'll certainly work together on that front, Minister.

In the 2022 fall economic statement, and I don't want to get into the lack of consultation. There was a major lack of consultation, meaning that the time frame. There was just a little over a month and about 10 of those days were over Christmas. My question, specifically, Minister...and hopefully you will have the answer.

When we talk about the credits for environmental jobs being done, be it windmills or solar, there's certain criteria that these companies have to meet. Regarding that criteria, if we go specifically to windmills and solar, the criteria is 30%. Today, the majority of these skilled trades folks don't actually fall under a Red Seal type program. They are skilled trades within their own industry, but they don't fall under the skilled trades.

I have about a minute and 15 seconds left. Will these companies be able to apply for that credit? If somebody was trained by the company and knows exactly how to build a solar panel or exactly how to put up a wind farm, but isn't necessarily a Red Seal, will the company be able to apply for these credits?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Specifically to Red Seal, let me get back to you, Mr. Lewis.

All I can tell you is that I met with Gil McGowan in Edmonton about 10 days ago, maybe less. I'm trying to think now. It was about a week ago. We continue to talk and work with them on exactly how these are going to work. They will lead the charge on how these happen. We're not doing anything that's not in their best interests.

Mr. Chris Lewis: Thank you, Minister. We'll follow up.

Mr. Chair, may I give my colleague the last 30 seconds, please?

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

You mentioned that you want more people working in the oil and gas sector, which seems to really contradict what the Minister of Environment says. Is he in agreement with the comment that you just made? Is he in alignment with that type of comment?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes. We have to lower emissions. There's only one group of people who know how to lower emissions, and that's skilled trades workers. They're the only ones who know how to tighten the screws on a pipeline. They are the only ones who know how to erect renewables, and they are the only ones who put up solar panels. We need more people in our energy industry in order to do the things we're demanding. It's certainly not me or, generally speaking, most people here in Ottawa who talk about it.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: The other comment you made was that we needed to get more of our resources to market, yet that's contradictory to the Prime Minister's and to your government's turning down requests from both Germany and Japan to supply LNG.

How do you reconcile that?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It's not contradicting TMX being built right now out in B.C., as you know. We will look at any project in which we can export Canada's natural resources and help our allies increase energy security.

The other big thing is that, when you have energy security, it lowers emissions. The other big one that we all know, because we're all members of Parliament, is affordability and making sure that we tackle that as well. That's an incredibly important thing. This is a huge challenge ahead. As I said, this is our national mission, and I know we don't always agree on it.

I would say this, if I could have one second. Wherever we can, we need to just temper the emotions on this, because there are so many workers, so many families and so many constituents in my riding who would get all worked up about this when, in fact, we have to work together on this. We really do. It is too important. It's even beyond party politics, if you ask me.

I'm delighted with the reaction we've gotten from Premier Smith. She also doesn't believe in talking about just transition. As members of this committee and other committees that I've appeared in front of know, I hate the words "just transition", because workers hate the words "just transition". We've been saying "sustainable jobs" for some time. I will do anything to make sure that workers know that, not only are they included in this, they will lead it.

• (0945)

The Chair: Thank you.

For the final questioning, we have Madame Martinez Ferrada for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here today.

I would like to come back to the Employment Equity Act and give you an opportunity to provide us with greater detail on all the work you are doing in reviewing this legislation. More specifically, the supplementary budget provides amounts for contributions and grants. Could you expand on what these additional requested funds will allow you to undertake?

Following that, I have some questions about diversity and inclusion within the public service, including management positions.

Let's begin with the Employment Equity Act.

[*English*]

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Women deserve equal pay for work of equal value. Let me just begin by saying that.

We've listened to employers, we've listened to unions and we've listened to workers and advocates to make sure that women are compensated at the same rate as men. We introduced the Pay Equity Act that came into force in 2021. We also appointed a pay equity commissioner to support compliance.

The Pay Equity Act directs employers to take proactive steps to make sure that they are providing equal pay for work of equal value. It has brought about a dramatic shift in how the right to pay equity is protected in federally regulated workplaces.

The new regime is administered and enforced by Canada's federal pay equity commissioner, who is supported by the pay equity division at the Canadian Human Rights Commission. We'll keep working with them to implement the Pay Equity Act. We have regulations that will be moving forward that will strengthen the commissioner's ability to encourage compliance. That's the key, making sure that we have compliance.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Minister.

Although we all completely agree with the principle of equal pay, I do have a question that I was not expecting to have to ask.

I understand the principle of equal pay, but what about the capacity for equal participation in decision-making, especially for women? How do we ensure that women have equal access to decision-making positions? How do we ensure that there is parity in decision-making and policy positions in government?

[*English*]

When you speak about equal pay, how do we have access to the same equal opportunities?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'll make a few brief remarks, and then I'll perhaps ask my deputy minister to flesh it out a little more.

In 2018, we provided \$3 million over five years to provide pay transparency for federally regulated private sector employees, with the aim of reducing those wage gaps. We will continue with this work with pay equity legislation, pay transparency, Canada-wide early learning and the child care system.

Maybe I can....

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sandra Hassan: Another issue is the review of the Employment Equity Act, which is under way. Work was begun and then suspended due to the election, but resumed in January 2022.

The chair of the committee, which consists of a dozen people, is currently completing the report. We will soon have it and we hope to publish it sometime in 2023. This report will allow us to ascertain the status of employment equity, not only for women, but also for other groups designated in the act, such as persons with disabilities, indigenous communities, and visible minorities.

In the context of reviewing the act, amounts were presented in supplementary estimates (B). To move forward with this work, we are awaiting the report. We can then determine options for reviewing the act. The report is expected this spring, and we plan to publish it once it is available in both official languages.

• (0950)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Very well.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

[*English*]

Thank you, committee members.

Thank you, Minister.

That concludes the first hour. I would just comment to the committee that at times we probably were outside the scope of the supplementaries, but both the committee and the minister seemed to be enjoying the debate. I give a lot of latitude unless somebody objects.

Thank you, Minister and witnesses, for attending.

We will now suspend for a few moments while we go in camera for the rest of the committee's business.

Again, thank you, Minister. Your passion showed in some of your interventions in relation to workers. Again, thank you for your time before the committee this morning.

We'll suspend for three minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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