

Labour leaders: changes target seasonal workers

By DANIEL MACEachern
AND JAMES MCLEOD

THE TELEGRAM

Local labour leaders Thursday condemned proposed changes to the federal employment insurance (EI) program as an assault on seasonal workers and their wages.

Federal Human Resources Minister Diane Finley on Thursday announced an overhaul of the employment insurance system, including a definition of what constitutes "suitable employment" — a job that is within a one-hour commute.

The reforms include a sliding scale for three categories of EI recipients. "Long-tenured" workers who have received fewer than 35 weeks of EI in the past five years can restrict their job searches to positions that

pay at least 90 per cent of their previous jobs. After 18 weeks, they will be expected to take work that pays 80 per cent of their previous salary.

On the other end of the scale are "frequent" users, defined as someone with three or more regular or fishing claims and 60 or more weeks of benefits over the last five years.

Those workers have just six weeks to find a job with at least 80 per cent of their previous salaries, after which they're expected to take any work at 70 per cent of previous earnings.

Between "frequent" and "long-tenured" workers are "occasional claimants" must accept work paying at least 90 per cent of their previous scale in the first six weeks, 80 per cent in the next 12 weeks and 70 per cent after 18 weeks on benefits.

See TAKE, page A5

Take aim at unemployment, not workers: labour leader ... Continued from page A1

Lana Payne, president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour, said the proposed changes — as well as other changes announced by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government, to Old Age Security and temporary foreign workers' restrictions — cater to cheap labour dependency and will suppress workers' wages.

"It'd be really nice if the Harper government actually attacked unemployment instead of unemployed workers, because that's what we got out of this," Payne said. "There's a blame game going on. They're blaming seasonal workers because they work in seasonal industries. They're blaming the unemployed because they've been put out of work, and they're saying, 'By the way, you need to be prepared to take a job that pays you on average 30 per cent less.' And so the end result of all of this, in my opinion, is we're going to see a downward pressure on wages."

Earle McCurdy, president of the Fish, Food and Allied Workers union, said the government hasn't released enough information on how the proposed changes will work — but he doesn't like what he's heard so far.

"This issue of three tiers, I think, is a real backwards step," he said. "It's almost as though seasonal



Lana Payne



Earle McCurdy



Richard Alexander

workers are kind of third-class citizens with respect to the EI program. That's how I see that unfolding."

McCurdy slammed the federal government for including EI changes in its sweeping budget implementation bill instead of tackling EI reform in stand-alone legislation. "That gives a tremendous amount of power, of course, to the cabinet," he said.

Local business leaders — who have long called for changes to Canada's EI program — applauded the proposed changes.

Richard Alexander, executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Employers' Council, said the changes reflect today's econom-

ic and demographic realities.

"I think these changes are a step in the right direction," he said. "This is going to help employers fill vacancies within their organizations, and it's also going to provide assistance for individuals to come off EI and get into gainful employment. There was a lot of concern that this was going to gut rural Newfoundland and all these things, but I think the changes will be positively received by the employer community, and workers as well."

Bradley George, director of provincial affairs for the Newfoundland and Labrador branch of the Canadian Federation of Independ-

ent Business, said 40 per cent of the federation's members, in a recent survey, say they're competing with the EI system for workers.

"Given that shortage of labour is such a huge issue for our members right now — I mean, it's the No. 1 issue for small business owners — we're glad to see that there's going to be some form of EI reform," he said. "We're going to be monitoring the implementation of these changes closely to ensure that they have a meaningful impact on encouraging EI recipients back to work, while respecting the reality of seasonal industries, because we are a seasonal province."

Premier Kathy Dunderdale said Thursday afternoon that she was still getting up to speed on the EI changes, but she'll know more after Joan Burke, minister responsible for labour issues, speaks to Finlay.

Dunderdale didn't fully embrace the basic ideas around changing EI, but she accepted some of the federal government's arguments. She said she's hearing from fish plants that are struggling to find workers

even as other communities have high unemployment.

"Fish plants are having trouble recruiting people and some of them are coming and talking to us about bringing in immigrants because there's not enough people to fill the jobs," she said.

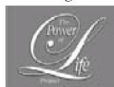
At the same time, Dunderdale said food production is generally subsidized in Canada, and that there is no subsidy for the fishery except for EI.

"Seasonal work is associated with food production in this country, and you can't separate the two in terms of the fishery."

In the House of Assembly, Liberal Leader Dwight Ball called on Dunderdale to be more vocal.

"The premiers of Nova Scotia and P.E.I. are warning Ottawa it is wading into dangerous political waters on EI reform, calling for a public debate on the issue of seasonal work," Ball said.

dmaceachern@thetelegram.com
Twitter: TelegramDaniel
jmcloed@thetelegram.com



B0846