

MAY
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Reaction to EI Reform



Seasonal workers or 'Frequent Claimants' appear to be targeted by changes to the Employment Insurance program announced yesterday. Frequent claimants are described as claimants who had three or more regular or fishing claims and received over 60 weeks of benefits in the last 5 years. Those claimants will be required to expand their job search to jobs similar to that they would normally perform at the beginning of their claim. They must accept wages starting at 80 percent of their previous hourly wage.

After receiving benefits for seven weeks, they will be required to accept any work they are qualified to perform, with on the job training if required. Minister Diane Finley says workers will not be cut off if they live in an area where there are no jobs, and she expects only 1 per cent of workers will be cut off. The changes were put in place to prevent abuse and to address the growing problem of employers having to hire temporary foreign workers while Canadians are making claims for Employment Insurance.

FFAW President Earle McCurdy says the changes paint seasonal workers as third-class citizens. On VOCM Nightline with Pete Soucy, McCurdy called the three-tiered structure offensive.

He says it's all part of larger changes that include keeping people in the workforce beyond 65. He says that might be fine for someone who has an office job, but for someone who works hard

physical labour, your body is pretty spent by the time you reach 65.

Bonavista Mayor Betty Fitzgerald calls the federal EI changes another attack on the working poor.

MP Gerry Byrne says the changes will have far-reaching effects on this province. Byrne says for so-called frequent claimants, you must take a job that is up to an hour's drive away for a cut in pay of up to 20 percent.

Don, who does long-haul trucking in western Canada, told VOCM Nightline his Alberta employer told him there was no work for him because the company had hired some workers from Serbia to take advantage of government subsidies.

The Executive Director of the Employers' Council has been banging the drum on EI reform for some time. Richard Alexander says local employers have had a very hard job to keep workers because of what he calls a very generous EI system. Alexander says employers have told him they've had people refuse work and ask for layoffs because of the system, and these changes will help to address those problems.

He says there's been a lot of misinformation about what government is doing. He says government is going to try to make incentives for people to take similar positions in their communities, and he calls that positive for the province.