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

EVIDENCE

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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey



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

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• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)):** Good morning, committee members.

The clerk has advised me that we have a quorum and that the witnesses are all appearing in the room. We have two members appearing virtually. They have been sound tested and approved.

With that, I will call meeting number 136 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities to order.

As I indicated, today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the procedures adopted by the House of Commons. You have the option to participate in the official language of your choice by using translation services in the room on the headset. For those appearing virtually, click on the globe icon at the bottom of your Surface tablet to choose the official language of your choice.

If there's an interruption, please get my attention by raising your hand. We'll suspend while it is being corrected. I would like to advise those in the room with devices to please turn any alarms or whatever other noises come from your Surface tablets or mobile devices off, so that they do not cause an issue for the translation services.

Please, to get my attention, raise your hand in the room or use the "raise hand" symbol on your Surface and I will recognize you. Wait until I recognize you by name before you proceed.

Please refrain from touching the boom on your mic because it does cause a popping sound.

This morning's HUMA meeting is together. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5) and the motion that was adopted by the committee on September the 17, 2024, the committee is commencing consideration of supplementary estimates (B) and ministerial priorities for the return of Parliament and their mandates.

With us today is the Honourable Stephen MacKinnon, Minister of Labour and Seniors.

Is this your first opportunity before HUMA?

I thought so. Welcome, Minister, to HUMA. In the past, we have sat at similar tables.

With him is chief financial officer, Mr. Wojo Zielonka; Ms. Elisha Ram, senior assistant deputy minister, income security and so-

cial development; and Mr. Gary Robertson, senior assistant deputy minister, policy, dispute, resolution and international affairs.

Minister, you have five minutes to give opening comments. The floor is yours.

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon (Minister of Labour and Seniors):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, good morning. I hope you won't be too tough on me as a new minister.

I was very glad to receive this invitation. It is an honour to appear before the committee for the first time as Minister of Labour and Seniors, after my appointment this past July.

[English]

Mr. Chair, workplaces are fairer and workers are safer because of this government. We've provided 10 days of paid sick leave per year, so no one has to choose between staying home sick or paying their bills. We're protecting gig workers against misclassification and wage theft. We banned the use of replacement workers during labour disputes. That will be coming into force next year. There's still more to come.

We are implementing a new leave for parents welcoming a child through adoption and surrogacy, as well as new three-day paid leave for employees who face a pregnancy loss.

We are protecting the right to disconnect to help restore our much-needed balance between work and home life.

We advanced one of the most significant changes to Canadian labour law in decades, which was banning replacement workers during strikes or lockouts. Replacement workers can prolong disputes, tip the scales at the bargaining table and poison workplaces. We're proud to have put a stop to it.

This government respects the collective bargaining process. This year we successfully supported parties in negotiating new collective agreements. It's not easy and I look forward to the opportunity to talk more about this today with you and the members, Mr. Chair. When parties put in the work at the table, negotiated agreements are possible and are always the best way forward.

I'm also proud of the work we've done for seniors. We've backed our seniors and helped make life more affordable, allowing them to age with dignity. We introduced the Canadian dental care plan, with nearly three million seniors now enrolled and one million having received care.

We increased the OAS for the most vulnerable seniors—those 75 and over. That's three million people receiving an extra \$1,000 every year. We increased the GIS, the guaranteed income supplement, and raised the earnings exemption so that working seniors can keep more of what they earn. We reversed the previous government's plan to raise the retirement age to 67, saving the retirements of one million seniors every year.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The work continues, work that I am honoured to undertake. In August, I announced the latest call for proposals for the New Horizons for Seniors Program. Last year, over 900,000 seniors participated in 3,500 projects funded through the program.

Our government is committed to ensuring a safe future for Canadian seniors, ending the mistreatment of older persons and fighting poverty among seniors. Our approach is working. For instance, in my province of Quebec, the senior poverty rate has dropped 57% thanks to direct investments by our government.

I am very proud of the work this government and this Parliament have done to support workers and seniors. I am delighted to be able to build on my predecessors' achievements and to continue delivering results for Canadians.

I will leave it there, Mr. Chair. I look forward to answering the committee's questions.

Thank you for the warm welcome and the opportunity.

[*English*]

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

We'll open the floor for the first six-minute round.

Mr. Seeback, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, in the last three months, you've taken the unprecedented step of twice using section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to ask the Canada Industrial Relations Board to effectively take away from workers the right to strike, so they had to resume their duties. That's unprecedented in the history of the country. It's been universally condemned by labour unions. In fact, Frank Morena, in an email to me, asked why the government should do the dirty work of bad employers.

There is also an issue with respect to a long-standing strike that's been going on in Kanata. I asked you a question about it in question period and I've reached out to the union since question period, and it's said a couple of things. One is that the members and the local have still not heard anything from Minister MacKinnon. The other is that their union members are holding out hope that labour laws are not just for big companies and corporations, and that the help comes before their members and families are completely financially ruined.

That Unifor local has asked you to intervene. What I find really hard to understand is that when unions are asking you not to intervene, you intervene. However, when a union is actually asking you to intervene because we have an employer that is effectively union-busting and trying to break this union—this union took the unprecedented step of asking you to intervene—it hears crickets from you.

You intervene when unions don't want it, and you won't intervene when they want it. How can you rationalize this decision?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I appreciate that question.

I'll deal first with the Best Theratronics issue in the second part of your question. Indeed, that is an employer under federal jurisdiction because it produces nuclear devices and medical devices with a very high-skilled, important workforce. Whether or not those numbers are small or large, the situation we have is indeed very aggravating, and I understand the members.

I met with both Unifor and PSAC, which also has members with that particular employer. We've made repeated attempts to communicate with the owner of that business, who has proven elusive not only to the union representatives, but also to us. It is a very aggravating situation when the federal labour minister calls upon an employer to discuss a labour stoppage and there is no response.

I can tell you today, and this has been true for many days and weeks now, that I've asked the department for options to deal with this situation. Not presenting oneself at the bargaining table and responding to good-faith offers from employee representatives is not okay. It cannot stand. You can be certain, Mr. Seeback, that I'll be addressing it.

With respect to section 107 more generally, I would maintain that it was the most pro-labour decision possible in both the case of rail and the case of the ports. The Canadian economy was bleeding hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars a day and was faced with more staggering losses. I had interventions from—

• (1110)

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** I'm sorry, Minister. I didn't ask you to rationalize your decision with respect to those two things, so I don't need to hear your rationalization.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** What are you asking me, then?

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** My question was on why, when a union's asking you to intervene, you don't. You've delivered some more thin gruel today for this Unifor local. They've asked you to intervene. It's an unprecedented step for a union to ask a minister to make a referral, and you continue to use flowery words: I've asked my department for information and options.

You've got lots of options. In fact, in the last three months, you've used section 107 in an unprecedented fashion. Now you actually have the opportunity to benefit a group of workers where an employer is acting in incredibly bad faith, and has been doing so for months. I know you've received the information. They've forwarded you the information about how this employer has called the workers lazy and is threatening to just never come to the table. He has not come to the table.

Why won't you exercise your power to benefit this union when you're so easily available to exercise your power in other circumstances? That's the question.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Mr. Seeback, I think I just answered that question. The fact is that we have a non-responsive owner. We have a situation where people have been out on strike for many months now. That is unfortunate and unacceptable in a world where the employer refuses to negotiate. We are going to be addressing this situation.

**The Chair:** You have six seconds.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** As per your answer in question period, your answer today will provide very cold comfort for these workers who are facing a Christmas without a job.

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

We'll go to Mr. Kusmierczyk for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing my time with my colleague from London North Centre.

Minister, a couple of weeks ago I had the honour of hosting you in Windsor-Essex. We had a chance to tour the Gordie Howe International Bridge, a \$6.4-billion investment on the part of this government. It is absolutely transforming our region. It is supercharging our region. A total of 16 million worker hours were committed by the incredible workers of our region to build not only the bridge but also the ports of entry, which we got a chance to tour.

Minister, when it comes to these historic generational investments like the Gordie Howe bridge that our government is making, what impact is it having on Canadian workers?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** The Gordie Howe bridge, as I think you and I discussed with the folks there and with the workers there on the occasion of our visit, gives me and should give all Canadians confidence that we can get big things done. This will be a trade-enabling, tourism-enabling enhancement to our economy, our national economy and obviously the economy of southwestern Ontario.

I can only tip my hat. It's no surprise to me that responsible for this incredible achievement are the workers of Windsor-Essex. They have pointed the way for Canadians so many times by their hard work, by showing up and putting in the hours to create these

nation-building projects. It's an incredible addition to the skyline in our country. I think all Canadians should be proud. I certainly hope they all go and visit Windsor-Essex to see this magnificent engineering and construction accomplishment and also spare a thought for those who have toiled over many, many hours, but I know proudly so, to build this incredible structure.

• (1115)

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Minister, I'm sitting next to my colleague from London North Centre. They will be receiving a significant federal investment in the form of a battery plant in St. Thomas, which is completely revitalizing that community in southwestern Ontario. Of course, we know that in Windsor we also received the very first EV battery plant in Canada, the largest auto investment in the history of this country. In my region, the NextStar battery plant is already employing 2,000 construction workers. The first 500 workers who will be building batteries have already been hired. So 2,500 workers will be building batteries for generations to come.

We had a chance to meet with the construction trades—the ironworkers, the millwrights, the IBEW in Windsor—to talk about the NextStar battery plant. What did you hear from that meeting?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I was so proud to visit that training facility with you and to meet the representatives of all of the construction trades in Windsor—Essex, as well as national representatives of Canada's building trades. We have worked hard, you and I, and other ministers, to ensure that Canadian content and Canadian workers are maximized in the construction phase of that project. It really put paid to a lot of the criticisms when you see the first 500 Canadians show up for work, for a permanent job at that facility.

I can only say to the people in Windsor—Essex that the future is incredibly bright because of these investments, because of the foresight of my colleagues and because of a dynamic partnership with the Province of Ontario. Those have made it possible to have the automobile industry enter its new electrically generated phase with the benefit of Canadian construction talent and Canadian auto worker talent in those factories in St. Thomas, in the Honda facilities and in all of these other facilities, including the one in Windsor, for decades to come. It's incredible to see. Families know they can settle down in Windsor, can raise a family, can prosper, and can pass on a generational investment to their children and a generational contribution to our economy and to the auto industry.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Thank you so much, Minister.

I just wanted to say, before I turn things over, that it is crazy that two years since we announced the battery plant investment in Windsor, Conservative colleagues still do not support that major investment in auto workers, in my community, in St. Thomas and up and down the 401.

Thank you.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** The silence speaks volumes, and certainly when you consider that these are investments that are being touted by Premier Ford and his ministers, and by Mr. Piccini, whom I deal with a lot. They are, quite rightly, proud of their part in this partnership. I know that silence speaks volumes to the people of Windsor—Essex and to the people of London, indeed.

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.):** Fifteen seconds?

**The Chair:** Now you have ten.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** Minister, thank you for being here.

If, at some point, if you have an opportunity to talk about the Conservative policy document or update that talks about right-to-work legislation in Canada, it would be very interesting to hear the implications for labour.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos. That concludes your time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you may go ahead for six minutes.

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

Thank you for being here, Minister. As you know, this is an important committee.

The committee recently studied a bill your predecessor introduced to prohibit the use of replacement workers during labour disputes. The idea behind the legislation is to maintain industrial peace, to ensure that bargaining rights can be fully exercised and so on.

Minister, nowhere in your mandate letter, which wasn't renewed, does it say how the Minister of Labour is going to promote the fundamental rights set out in our charters. I am talking about labour rights that everyone respects and wants to advance, specifically, the right to organize, the right to bargain freely and the right to strike. In 1985, they were recognized as fundamental rights, including by the Supreme Court in *Saskatchewan Federation of Labour v. Saskatchewan*.

I must say, you have been quite busy since you took office. I want to highlight some of the things you've done. You made use, in an unprecedented way, of a new toy the columnists refer to as section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, to steamroll the right to strike and to impose binding arbitration. That was akin to forcing working conditions on workers because the decision was binding.

How do you justify that when free bargaining is a right?

Do you not see that as limiting the right to bargain?

• (1120)

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Thank you for your question.

As you explained so well, freedom of association is a right that can be asserted through a labour dispute. I believe our collective bargaining system is a model for the world.

That said, we were dealing with two fairly similar situations. On one hand, the economy was only beginning to recover after the pandemic. On the other, we had to take action to protect not just the health of Canadians, but also the economy. That also meant we had to protect the jobs of many union members in other sectors, some of whom reached out to me—

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, Minister.

The decision is going to be challenged in court.

[*English*]

**Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.):** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry, Madame Chabot.

In the minister's backdrop, there's a political advertisement. I would ask if that can stop being displayed. I think it's "make Canada great again" or something.

**The Chair:** His staff should be over here. If that's reserved for media, I would ask you respect that it is for the media, please.

Thank you, madame.

I would ask you to respect the fact that it's designated for media, please.

Madame Chabot, continue.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Did you stop the clock, Mr. Chair? I just want to make sure.

[*English*]

**Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC):** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

My apologies for interrupting.

Many of these meeting rooms do not have appropriate and full facilities for staff, and we are in a meeting room today. I was quite surprised that we were moved to this meeting room, because we were originally in a different meeting room in West Block, which is larger and where staff have full ability and desks whereas we're in this small room.

There are issues in this room with sound, and they had to turn off one of the monitors earlier. We've had issues in this room, so I was really surprised that, when we have a minister here, we're in this type of room where our staff don't have full ability to function, and there are technical issues ongoing in this room.

Thank you.

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

I do not choose the room. That was the House administration, as you all know.

Madame Chabot, continue. You will have your full six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I didn't finish answering.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Minister, I asked you how you were going to promote those fundamental rights.

We heard you loud and clear, especially during the port dispute in Montreal. You talked about economic destruction. As far as we are concerned, as far as workers are concerned, this is serious. Rail and port employers are not negotiating, they are turning up the pressure, they are moving ahead of time to reduce the impact on the supply chain, and they are locking out workers. Then they are waiting for the government to step in.

Instead of supporting the free bargaining process and giving the parties the opportunity to reach an agreement, the government is using a section in the Canada Labour Code to impose measures. Of course, unions are going to legally challenge a decision that, for all intents and purposes, restricts the right to bargain. In the minds of many affected workers, bargaining means nothing anymore. You know full well that services that advance the country's economic interests are not considered essential services. Only services that, if disrupted, would jeopardize public health or safety are considered essential services.

There will be a meeting, but if this is indicative of what you will do in the future, it is worrisome. A dispute is happening right now, and we hope you will do everything you can to protect labour rights.

How do you see labour relations going forward, keeping in mind those fundamental rights?

• (1125)

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I stand by the Canada Labour Code. Although I do hear what you're—

[*English*]

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** We still do see that political advertising in the background. I'd just kindly ask the staff member to please adhere to those rules and find another place to sit.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I would just remind those in the room that with in camera angles, the rules of the House of Commons do still follow here, so I would ask you to respect them. You know what they are.

Mr. Minister, continue.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** We may not agree on the issue, but I will stick to the Canada Labour Code. Section 107, which the Parliament of Canada passed, exists to maintain industrial peace.

I want to point out two things, Ms. Chabot.

First, how can we not listen to manufacturers, small and medium-sized businesses, and even Quebec unions that are speaking out to say that their workers are two days away from mass layoffs?

Second, how can we not listen to municipalities that are saying they are worried about the health of their citizens because of a potential chlorine shortage?

In the background of all that, the economy is being impacted. The economic impact of the port shutdowns in eastern and western Canada is estimated at \$1.2 billion in total.

Ms. Chabot, I think any labour minister who basically is—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister and Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Thank you, Madam Chabot.

Madam Zarrillo, go ahead for six minutes.

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

I'm happy to have the minister here today. I have some questions for the minister on corporate greed and how it's affecting Canadians and seniors.

I'll just start by prefacing my remarks that it may not seem that corporate greed falls into the labour and seniors portfolio, but it certainly does. I think about the ILWU workers of Local 514, who have been talking about Dubai Ports World and the fact that in Australia, it hasn't been paying its taxes. The port workers here are asking if the same thing is happening in Canada. They know that DP World, or Dubai Ports World, owns a majority of the ports in western Canada and that it's been reported that Ports World has been dodging taxes in Australia. The port workers certainly want to know if it's dodging taxes here. There's no transparency on that in Canada.

I'm interested to know what the minister thinks about the lack of transparency in relation to corporate greed and how it affects labour in Canada.

• (1130)

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Obviously, for privacy and other reasons, I am not privy to the tax information of individuals or corporations, but I do expect that Canadian laws and tax laws are respected at all times.

I can say more generally, with respect to the west coast ports, that we had a major work stoppage in the summer of 2023.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** I'm sorry. I have very limited time and want to go to the theme of corporate responsibility and ethics as they relate to Revera.

Revera is...owned by the Public Sector Pension Investment Board...a Canadian Crown corporation and one of Canada's largest public sector pension funds. Excessive and preventable COVID-19 deaths [happened] at Revera's Canadian facilities.

I want to say, Minister, that this is related to corporate culture, greed and the move away from caring for people and to trying to make money.

I'm looking at two reports here.

One is called "Revera Living, Making a Killing". It was done by the Centre for International Corporate Tax Accountability and Research. It says, "Revera, a private corporation", is operating in the U.K. and has shown "a pattern of aggressive corporate tax avoidance" and a lack of ethical corporate conduct in Canada.

I have another report here that was also done by the Centre for International Corporate Tax Accountability. CUPE raised this one about the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board's financial and ethical failures as they invest in long-term care. This was in France, where millions of dollars were lost and care for seniors was absolutely devastating.

This is important, because it's housing and protection for seniors. We have two of Canada's pension plans putting profit before people. I'm interested in what you think about this, because CUPE themselves made three recommendations to the government: Federal governments should prohibit pension funds, including CPPIB, from investing in long-term care; private long-term care facilities should be returned to the public sector; and the federal government should publicly review the Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board Act's requirements regarding the board's risk management. I would also say that the federal government needs to review PSPIB regarding compliance with their own ethical standards.

What do you think about these investment boards and the way they're operating—putting profits ahead of seniors?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Thank you for that question, Ms. Zarrillo.

I would start by saying that long-term care providers across the country provide invaluable services to seniors and people with disabilities. I think Canadians would join with you in saying that they did not and will not accept the conditions on display across that sector during the height of the COVID pandemic. People in long-term care deserve safe, quality care. We're going to continue to work with provinces, territories and the sector to ensure Canadians receive the highest quality of care.

I am aware of the allegations you made. These facilities are subject to licensing, inspection and, indeed, the laws of the provinces where they operate. They do not operate within federal jurisdiction.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you, Minister. I'm sorry. I don't have a lot of time.

I want to point out that what I'm talking about here is a culture in our investment boards—in the government's wholly owned subsidiaries. These are the government's wholly owned Crown corporations, where there is a culture of putting profits before people. It's affecting seniors and their lives not just in Canada but also in Eu-

rope. In the United Kingdom and Europe, they have decided they're going to look after their profits ahead of people

I want to know what you think about that corporate culture. What we have here is a corporate culture problem, Minister, that is killing people.

**The Chair:** Give a short answer.

• (1135)

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I think what is required are robust standards, licensing requirements and, indeed, laws in those jurisdictions to make sure our seniors are protected and well looked after, and that they can count, on a day-to-day basis, on the kind of care they're getting.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Zarrillo.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Do you think—

**The Chair:** Madame Zarrillo, your time has gone over by a good bit.

Next is Mrs. Gray for five minutes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, Food Banks Canada says that food bank access has increased by 90% in the last five years, and that seniors are the fastest-growing group accessing them. Feed Ontario says that the number of seniors accessing food banks has roughly doubled in six years. The Central Okanagan Food Bank in my region now serves thousands of seniors, as food bank demand increased 59% in the last two years alone.

As the minister for seniors, have you gone to the Prime Minister and voiced your concern about the cost of living crisis that has increased food bank usage for seniors?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Well, of course, any one person needing to rely on the services of a food bank is one too many and we must all devote ourselves to eradicating poverty for every age group in this country. In my case, obviously, my particular area of concern is seniors.

I would point out that seniors' poverty has come down in this country. I talked about the numbers in Quebec, but we can talk about reductions across the board in seniors' poverty in Canada, such that seniors are less likely to live in poverty than the average Canadian is. That was not always true during my lifetime. That is currently the fact.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Thank you, Minister.

Given the ongoing cost of living crisis for seniors, do you believe that now is the time to be raising taxes, such as the carbon tax on groceries and fuel that will be coming this April?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I certainly don't believe it's the time to be voting against dental care. I don't believe it's the time to be voting against increases—as your party did—to various benefits for seniors.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** The question was about increasing taxes, Minister.



**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I'm talking about providing direct, tangible financial benefits to seniors—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** You're increasing costs for seniors, Minister.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** —that your party has opposed systematically for our entire time in government.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** That wasn't my question, Minister.

For my next question, over the last nine years of your government, thousands of union jobs supporting families have been lost in the forestry sector, especially in British Columbia, and a report by B.C. Forestry Workers showed almost 4,000 sawmill workers lost their jobs from 2018 to 2023.

This September alone, 500 jobs were lost from sawmill closures in Vanderhoof and Fort St. John in British Columbia. As a labour minister, are you concerned about the loss of these union forestry jobs?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Indeed, and that's why we wanted to make sure that our supply chains and our logistics in this country provided certainty for our forest product exports: for OSB, for softwood lumber and for other forest products.

British Columbia is an incredible world leader in forestry practices and provides some of the best forest products in the world. We should be very proud of those workers. We need to continue to invest in that sector, and we need to continue to make sure it's an important part of the Canadian economy. We should all be proud of British Columbia and its forestry industry.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Minister, your government has been in power for nine years, with three U.S. administrations, and you haven't secured a softwood lumber agreement, which the previous Conservative government secured back in 2006. Have you met with the international trade minister to fight for the importance of a softwood lumber agreement to protect forestry union jobs that are being lost?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Yes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Okay.

When were those meetings?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** We have them regularly.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Okay. That's great.

Can you table for the committee the meetings that were specifically related to your fighting for forestry workers in meeting with the minister of international trade?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Sure. I'll do that right now. We are seatmates in the House of Commons and we talk every single day—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Casual conversations aren't the same as you and your department getting together and you fighting for forestry workers and setting up meetings and letting the minister know.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** We speak every single day about softwood lumber and about that dispute. I can tell you that the minister is seized with this issue and wants to get a fair deal for the Canadian forest industry.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Well, after nine years, I would say that it hasn't happened, and it's been an absolute failure—

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I would ask what—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Your fighting hasn't changed that—

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Well, I would ask what you have done to go and meet with congresspeople in Washington state or other places, who are defying rulings of world trade organizations and others and putting up these phony disputes—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Minister, again, you've been in government nine years, and you've had three U.S. administrations, and these are really serious job losses.

My last questions here relate to September 22 and the Ministry of Natural Resources' "just transition" plan, which states that there will be an elimination of 2.7 million jobs in agriculture, energy, manufacturing, construction and transportation. Have you done analysis on how many union job losses these would be and also union versus non-union and comparing paid pension and benefits to any type of re-skilled jobs that might occur?

• (1140)

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I don't believe those numbers. I think they're phony.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Gray. Your time is up.

Next is Mr. Collins for five minutes.

**Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.):** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Minister, welcome to the committee.

Some days it's very difficult to listen to some of the questions the Conservatives ask, both here at the committee and in the House, when they pretend to support unionized workers.

One thing I'm aware of is history. Representing my constituents in the province of Ontario, I think back to the days of Mike Harris and the common sense revolution, when tens of thousands of unionized employees took to the streets of Ontario because he undermined the collective bargaining rights of those workers.

History also reminds me of, most recently, of Premier Ford's 1% wage cap on government employees. That, again, is legislation by a Conservative government that completely undermines the rights of unionized employees.

Of course, we don't have to look too far back in history to the Leader of the Opposition, who was in my community not too long ago as part of his "make Canada great again" tour, courting unionized employees and officials. There was no mention, of course, of two bills, Bill C-377 and Bill C-525, which are probably some of the most anti-union legislation that we've seen to date.

There's a common theme here with one party both at the provincial and federal levels. It's hard on days like today to listen to some of these questions when they pretend to stick up for unionized rights and employees.

Can I get your take on that?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** The people of Ontario shudder when they hear those two words that Mr. Harris used to so often evoke, and now we're hearing them again.

What union members whom I know understand is that this is a party that proposes to emasculate the Canada Labour Code and workers' rights, and one can only rely on their own words.

In the Conservative Party's declaration—not the Progressive Conservative Party's, obviously—you have section 17(iv), that “supports right to work legislation to allow optional union membership including student unions”. That's very specific language. That says to me that the Conservatives under Mr. Poilievre, who was a boorish and vocal advocate for union-busting legislation in the past—the ones you talked about—would again return to this playbook of union-busting and of requiring unions to unilaterally disarm in front of employers, to cease advocating for social justice and, indeed, providing options so that workers would not have to join a union in unionized workplaces.

That would be a 100-year pullback on the accomplishments of the Canada Labour Code and other labour codes across this country. Unions are quite right to fear it.

**Mr. Chad Collins:** Thanks, Minister.

Mr. Chair, I'll cede the rest of my time to my friend and colleague Mr. Coteau.

**The Chair:** He's not here.

**Mr. Chad Collins:** We'll go to Mr. Fragiskatos.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** There is a lot of generosity on this side of the table, Mr. Chair.

You've touched on it, Minister, but could you go a bit more into the implications of what the Conservatives have in this official—again, clear as day—policy document on page 6, updated as recently as September 23?

What would right-to-work legislation mean for unions and workers in Canada? What would the consequences of that be?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** It would mean that, in any given industry under federal regulation, union membership would be optional, that you would have non-unionized workers allowed to work beside unionized workers or have no unionized workers in what were previously unionized workplaces.

Right-to-work legislation is the kind of legislation you see in places like Alabama, Mississippi and places where they want to keep unions away, because they don't like the kinds of things that unions advocate for: good paycheques, leave, sick leave and safety and occupational practices that favour workers, protect them and make sure they're well paid.

Conservatives are against that. They're against it in Mississippi, and they're against it in Canada, apparently. It's written right here, black on white.

• (1145)

**The Chair:** You have 10 seconds.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** I'm fine, Chair.

Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, go ahead. You have two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, an important bill, Bill C-319, seeks to ensure that everyone 65 or older receiving old age security is treated fairly. The bill would increase the pension amount by 10% to end the unfairness.

The bill would also increase the amount pensioners get to keep in their pockets before their guaranteed income supplement is clawed back. The committee had the pleasure of studying the bill, which had unanimous support.

Do you think it's important that the bill receive a royal recommendation? That is the only step left in restoring fairness for seniors.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I think it is always essential to protect seniors, especially vulnerable seniors. In fact, that is what this government has always done and what it will seek to do going forward.

Ms. Chabot, on one hand, the Bloc Québécois recommended the change, but on the other, the Bloc has systematically voted against any form of support or help we wanted to give seniors. I am a bit puzzled at that.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Unlike [*Inaudible—Editor*].

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** We introduced a dental plan that provides thousands—

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I would call that truthiness, Minister.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** It's not truthiness. It's a fact.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** You know full well how votes in the House work. We don't vote on spending measures line by line. We vote on a series of—

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** If I understand correctly, you are in favour of the Canadian dental care plan. Is that what you're saying today?

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Minister, I am the one asking the questions today.

I asked you a very specific question. Are you willing to support Bill C-319, which would restore fairness to seniors receiving old age security? Are you willing to support the recommendation to ensure that the bill receives royal assent?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** We plan to fulfill our commitments.

Ms. Chabot, when you had the chance to support seniors by giving them access to thousands of dollars in dental care coverage, you did not do it.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Minister—

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** If that wasn't important enough to convince you to support the budget of the entire government—

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** You are avoiding the question. That tells me you don't want to answer.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** You are the one avoiding questions, Ms. Chabot.

**The Chair:** Ms. Chabot, your time is up.

[*English*]

Madame Zarrillo, you have two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you.

I want to go to the minister about elder abuse and its definition in the Criminal Code, but I first want to reiterate to the minister how concerned I am about the investment choices of the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board and the Public Sector Pension Investment Board. I would ask the minister to work with his colleagues to review their ethics standards. Really, what are they investing in and how might that be hurting people?

In the mandate letter, Minister, there was a point about continuing “to work with the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada to strengthen Canada’s approach to elder abuse by finalizing the national definition”. I’m really interested in this. I have had a number of seniors come to my office who have been robbed of their retirement savings. They’re being called “scams” in the media, but they’re not scams. They’re being robbed, and they have no recourse. There is no ability for them to regain their money.

I have a person in my community who came to see me recently. He has lost almost \$600,000. That’s all of his retirement savings. He’s just retired and feels that he’s going to have to go back to work.

Could you give us an update on what is happening with the finalization of the definition, and are financial crimes listed under elder abuse?

• (1150)

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** As my colleague knows, there’s no official definition of “elder abuse” in the Criminal Code. For my part, that’s something that needs to change. Indeed, my mandate letter describes a requirement for me to work with my colleague, the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, on that very initiative.

What I can say is that we’ve all heard in our constituencies the kinds of heartbreaking stories the member describes. It is patently unacceptable. Indeed, the law requires further precision and we’re going to continue working in that direction.

I do want to point to a couple of measures, though, outside of that specific initiative. The tenant protection fund and the blueprint for a renters’ bill of rights will help seniors who face renovation and sometimes the kinds of abuses that are perpetrated on them by landlords. That is a significant component of the kinds of elder abuse that you describe, Ms. Zarrillo.

I think that as a society, we’re going to have to continue to come to grips with and confront elder abuse, make sure it’s banned in all its forms, and continue to work for a future where seniors don’t have to worry about these things.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

Mr. Seeback.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you inherited the mandate letter of the Prime Minister to the previous minister. In that letter, it says, “With the support of the Minister of Public Safety, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement and the Minister of International Trade...introduce legislation to eradicate forced labour from Canadian supply chains”. That’s from 2021.

I asked the Minister of International Trade at committee in 2022 what’s been accomplished. The answer was zero. You’ve seized absolutely zero goods made with forced labour from China.

Now, contrast that with \$3.62 billion seized by the United States. This is an abysmal failure by you and by your government to crack down on forced labour, which has enabled China to continue to use forced labour.

You understand what forced labour is, right? They are abusing people and these goods are coming into Canada untouched.

What do you have to say to Uyghurs, whose labour is being forcibly used, about your complete and absolute catastrophic failure to do anything to stop these goods from coming into Canada?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Of course, this Parliament passed Bill S-211, which deals with this. The Minister of International Trade has carriage of the forced labour file. Canada intends to be a leader in this sector.

What I would say to you, Mr. Seeback, is to go back and talk to your House leader. End the filibuster, so that Canada—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** No, I’m sorry.

The mandate letter says that you’re responsible for introducing legislation. You’re talking about a piece of legislation by a backbench MP, who made an optional reporting requirement.

Is this your robust action to crack down on force labour? That is an embarrassing answer.

The United States has seized \$3.62 billion worth of goods. They’re making a difference. This country has seized nothing and your answer to this very serious issue is some backbench member’s bill.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** No, it's the law of Canada and I dare you to talk to John McKay, who knows more about this issue than I dare say you do, about world practices and about his bill. I think I would enjoy a debate between you, Mr. Seeback, and John—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** I suspect you know very little about the bill because here's what it does: It requires a new website to be created to track results of voluntary information.

Is this your robust action?

Look, Minister, this is an embarrassment. Your standing here trying to defend it is even more of an embarrassment. The United States has an entities list, where it has all of the companies that it knows use forced labour. Those companies cannot ship goods into the United States.

Does Canada have an entities list?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Canada intends to be a world leader on the issue of forced labour.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Yes, and the cheque's in the mail.

This does nothing for Uyghurs suffering from forced labour.

• (1155)

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** Do you know what you need to do? You need to stop gaslighting Canadians by telling them—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** No, you're gaslighting Canadians by pretending you've done something. You've done nothing.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** My colleague, the Minister of International Trade—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** You've created a voluntary website.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** We are working on the issue of forced labour—

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** We intend to respect our commitment, but we walk into Parliament every day to hear you talking against your own motion. This is ridiculous. It's absurd.

Canadians expect that we act on issues—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Where's the bill? Where's the bill?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** —with respect to labour in Canada, with respect to seniors in Canada, and we expect—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** If this is about Parliament obstructing, where's the bill? There's no bill.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** —that the Conservative Party of Canada—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** You have no bill tabled on this.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** —will stop gaslighting the people of Canada with yourphony, fake filibuster.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Order, order.

What is it?

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Mr. Chair, I just wanted to bring to your attention that he's yelling into the microphone. This really does impact our translators.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

The member has the right to question as he chooses, but please respect the translation services.

Mr. Seeback, you have an hour...you have a minute and 10 seconds.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** I'd like an hour.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** We don't have that much time.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Minister, you have not tabled a bill. Neither the Minister of Labour nor the Minister of International Trade has done so. Your government has not tabled a bill. Canadians have no idea if they're purchasing goods made with forced labour. The United States has an entities list. You could copy that list and cut down on the number of products made with forced labour in this country in a second. You haven't done it. The standard in the United States is that companies have to prove that their goods are not made with forced labour. Okay? That makes it very difficult for those things to come in.

Your government set the standard in Canada that CBSA has to prove the goods were made with forced labour, which is why nothing gets seized. Why would you set the threshold to make it impossible for goods to be seized, and so goods made by forced labour then end up in our supply chains?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** As you know, this government has consulted heavily and has already passed a bill, and is—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** It's not a government bill. That's not true.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I'm sorry, but it's the law of Canada now, Mr. Seeback. I don't know—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** It created a website.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I don't know if you're aware, but we have this law. It's Bill S-211. The government is continuing to work on enhancements and improvements to that, but your party stands up every day—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** It's tough action that Uyghurs will appreciate.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** —and filibusters Parliament so that we cannot get—

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** There's no bill that you're talking about. There's no bill.

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** It's very hard to take you seriously when you won't allow the government to present bills that Canadians are asking for.

**The Chair:** Mr. Minister and Mr. Seeback, your time is over.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** You don't have a bill on this. It's all theatre.

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

Mr. Collins, you have five minutes, or whatever's left.

**Mr. Chad Collins:** After that exchange, I'm almost tempted to cede my time to Mr. Seeback, Minister.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** I'll take it.

**Mr. Chad Collins:** Minister, part of the “make Canada great again” agenda is to fix the budget. You've seen the bumper stickers out there. As we know, I think a big part of that is going to be cuts to social programs.

You listed in your opening statement many of the programs our government has implemented to help seniors. Many of the affordable housing programs we have, which are a first in 30 years, go a long way to getting seniors off the affordable housing wait-lists in many communities across the country. You talked about reinstating the age of retirement from 67 to 65; of course, the Leader of the Opposition was a part of that process in cutting support for seniors. Then you talked about the dental plan that's gone a long way to assist seniors with improvements in that area.

The Leader of the Opposition hasn't been very clear about what social programs he would cut if he were to become Prime Minister, but I think we have a sneaking suspicion of what that list would include, that it would probably include almost everything you rhymed off at the beginning of the meeting.

Can you talk about what a Conservative government would do to the programs that we've implemented not just for seniors but for Canadian taxpayers across the country?

**Hon. Steven MacKinnon:** I think Canadians, especially Canadian seniors, have a right to fear the worst. I can only base this on what they've just done in their proposal for housing. They proposed to withdraw all federal supports for housing in this country. It's hard to listen to Conservatives talk about housing when they propose to take the means for the government to address the housing issue away from the government. Indeed, Mr. Collins, I think Canadian seniors have a right to be worried.

Here's a list of things they voted against that seniors have come to count on in this country.

We reversed the age of eligibility for OAS—from 67 back to 65. You will remember that Mr. Harper went to the Davos World Economic Forum and talked with the folks in Switzerland about how he would adjust and cut pensions for seniors. He did not choose to do that in Canada. We thought that was wrong. We reversed it. We increased OAS by 10% for those who are age 75 plus. Conservatives voted against that. I think Canadian seniors have a right to assume that OAS enhancements will be coming back by 10%.

GIS increased by \$1,000 a year, decreasing seniors' poverty, as I outlined earlier. We increased the GIS earning exemption by over 40%, allowing seniors to earn a bit of extra money if they wish

without being penalized on the benefits they receive. Conservatives voted against that, and seniors have a right to assume this would be taken away from them.

We improved the Canada Pension Plan for future retirees. Conservatives call that a tax. I call it investing. When I make a pension contribution, I call it investing and saving for my future. One is allowed to assume they're going to take that away.

We invested \$90 million through the “age well at home” initiative. Conservatives voted against that.

There was \$70 million for New Horizons. Conservatives voted against that.

You know, of course, that the single largest expansion of Medicare in the history of the program is the Canadian dental program. This is going to help low-income seniors today. Conservatives and the Bloc both voted against that. Shame on them.

I think Canadians have a right to be worried that all of those things would be taken away, if only because Conservatives opposed their implementation.

● (1200)

**Mr. Chad Collins:** I agree.

Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you for being on time.

Thank you, Mr. Minister.

We're a little over the hour. We'll suspend while we transition to the last hour.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before HUMA today on this issue.

We will suspend for three minutes.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

**The Chair:** Committee members, welcome back to the second hour of this particular meeting.

As you are aware, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 8, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of workers in the seasonal industry and the employment insurance program.

I would like to welcome Ms. Mandy Symonds back.

Ms. Symonds, thank you for being available again. We had issues with sound last time, but I'm told we're okay this time.

I also welcome Mrs. Tulk-Lane, who was unable to attend the last meeting.

Each of you will have five minutes for your opening statements. I will start with you, Mrs. Tulk-Lane, for five minutes. Then we'll go to you, Ms. Symonds.

Mrs. Tulk-Lane, you have the floor.

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane (Chief Executive Officer, Atlantic Chamber of Commerce):** Thank you so much.

Am I coming through loud and clear?

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** Excellent.

This is my first time appearing before a committee, so I thank you. It's been interesting to watch the last hour.

I'm the CEO of the Atlantic Chamber of Commerce. For those of you who aren't familiar with provincial chambers, I represent Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. My job differs from grassroots chambers. I serve 90 chambers and boards of trade. It's interesting getting to work with all them. We have a reach of over 16,000 businesses within our membership across Atlantic Canada.

I'm not an expert on the employment insurance system. It's a complex system that's been around for a long time. What I do believe I'm an expert in or what I do know is that after working with small to medium-sized businesses over many, many years, they really can't take on any more financial increases. We know that one of our top three policy areas is securing good talent and labour. The employment insurance system is of great importance to the chamber network, the membership and the small businesses they serve.

We are not recommending that any blanket changes be made to the employment insurance system as it pertains to seasonal workers. We really believe that seasonal workers are a special case. They're so, so important to Atlantic Canada and many of our rural and remote areas. I think we really need to look at how we're supporting them, change the narrative and the story on seasonal workers, and find solutions that really help them.

I want to share with you a few other things we've been hearing from employers as it pertains to the EI system and what changes would be made for seasonal workers. As I stated, they're critically important. However, employers would not want to see any increases to premiums, especially the smaller businesses right now that are struggling to even stay alive. As I mentioned, finding that labour is critical. For us, seasonal employees are so important to these small businesses. We're talking fishing, farming and tourism in the Atlantic region. We really need to find a way to continue to link the employees with the employer and come up with some creative solutions on how we can do that.

Again, we need to make sure we're not making blanket changes to the system. We're looking at a small group of people here who

are repeat users. We have to figure out what that looks like for seasonal workers and how we talk about their importance and what they mean to the economy.

I have also shared a number of different solutions and ideas that I hope the committee can take a look at as we, again, talk differently about this. I'd also like to offer our network of 90 chambers to be there as a support, as you continue this conversation, in terms of how we can help change this conversation and feed into it in whatever way possible.

Thank you so much. I'll open the floor for questions.

• (1210)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Tulk-Lane.

Before we go to questions, we'll hear from Ms. Symonds.

Ms. Symonds, you have the floor for up to five minutes.

**Ms. Mandy Symonds (President, Southern Nova Scotia Seasonal Workers Alliance):** Hi. My name is Mandy Symonds. I am president of the Southern Nova Scotia Seasonal Workers Alliance and I am a seasonal worker.

I am a single person and I try to run my home on my income as a seasonal worker. The life of a seasonal worker is very difficult. You're worrying about paying bills: Will you get enough hours and make enough money for when you are off work so that you will have decent employment insurance? How much work will there be this season?

Weather and other factors, such as the price at the wharf and the catches, help determine how much work there will be. I live in an area with high seasonal work. There is not much else for jobs. It is almost impossible to buy a home or a new car when the bank looks at your income and you're a seasonal worker.

The problem with employment insurance is that the divisor, or the best weeks, is way too high for someone making \$15,000 a year. With 20 as the divisor into 50% of \$15,000, that equals around \$412.50. Then you have to take out income tax. You get a little over \$300 a week. For 630 hours you get employment insurance for 17 weeks. If you qualify, you get an extra five, for a total of 22 weeks.

There is no guarantee when it comes how much work you will have during a season. There may be lots of work at one plant. Then again, you may have to work at two or more plants in order to get enough insurable hours for employment insurance.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Did you conclude, Madame Symonds?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We will begin the first round.

Before I do that, I want to welcome MP Van Popta to the committee.

We will begin with Ms. Gray for six minutes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

My first questions are for the Atlantic Chamber of Commerce.

In March 2024, your organization called for the end of the Liberal carbon tax. Your organization reported that “Two-thirds of Atlantic Canadian businesses report experiencing negative consequences, with a majority indicating the impact of the carbon tax is extremely negative.”

How has the carbon tax impacted some of your seasonal employers, particularly those in sectors that are reliant on heavy fuel use?

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** Thank you, Ms. Gray.

I actually didn't prepare to speak to the carbon tax today. I was really focused on the seasonal workers, so if I can share information at a later date, I'd be pleased to do that.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Great. Thank you very much.

As part of that, in speaking with the members of your organization, those cost impacts really do impede their hiring ability. The reason this is relevant is that any time that a business has increased costs, it makes it more difficult for them to invest and, in particular, to hire more or to give more hours to workers.

Can you speak to that?

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** Definitely.

As I said, I'd want to reach out to the members to specifically ask and try to get evidence on this, as it's not something....

You're right. As I mentioned, really, any cost right now, even if it were a slight increase, as we talked about, as it affects premiums, anything that can be done for savings for small businesses is something right now. That's so important versus anything that is going to add a burden.

Again, when we talk about these small employers, and when we talk about an employee and the costs, some of them have 10 employees; it's not just that one employee. We're going to times that by 10, so it makes it that much more difficult at the end of the day when they're looking what they're bringing in, especially in tourism, I would say, or in restaurants.

These businesses that we're hearing from are struggling a little more than some others right now, when we talk about seasonal and tourism areas. I will definitely be able to dig into that again to compare it and to find out how they're doing when it comes to the carbon tax that we spoke out against.

• (1215)

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Thank you very much for that.

We're talking about workers today. We're talking about seasonal workers. Any time that a business—in particular, a small business—has fewer resources, it makes it more difficult for them to expand or to hire more people. How businesses are doing is really relevant to this conversation.

We've seen reports from other organizations on how many small businesses are carrying more debt than they did before the pandemic, and they haven't been able to pay off debt. In fact, many businesses, especially those in the tourism industry, are not back at the same level of sales and revenue that they had prepandemic. In addition to having more debt, they're not able to pay off the debt, which means that they also can't spend any money on marketing or on hiring more people.

Can you speak to that?

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** Yes, I can, and I'd like to share on some of the comments you just made.

It also speaks to the bigger problem that we've been talking about with all the chambers across Canada, and it speaks to productivity. When a small business is worried about who's going to open the doors this morning, if a staff member didn't come in, or a labourer, then they can't focus on being more productive and implementing innovative solutions.

The other thing they're not able to even get to or able to talk about—which is something we're trying to educate them about—is how to scale up to export. If they can't even take care of keeping the doors open or if they're struggling with labour, then having these other conversations about becoming more productive and putting more investments into digitalization and innovation, and thinking about exporting are completely off the table.

You're right. These discussions around having employment insurance, finding good labour and making sure we don't disincentivize work for people are going to be critical in order to grow our small businesses and to help the ones that we have been able to scale up and to become more productive. It really is truly all tied together. Every penny counts when we're talking about these SMEs.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Thank you for that.

In talking about the tourism aspect with many of your members, we've seen how many people, many Canadians, are not able to travel as much and have summer vacations. Also, it maybe not even be from a tourism perspective. They may not be going to restaurants as often and may not have as much disposable income. Of course, we see record numbers going to food banks. We see how people are having a tough time affording basic necessities. Of course, when you're having a tough time with that, you're not able to go out with disposable income.

Can you speak to that, to how many of your members are seeing how the cost of living crisis is continuing to affect families, their businesses and their revenue?

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** For many, many years—and I will go back to the prepandemic period—we were talking a lot in the Atlantic region about extending the season and creating a shoulder season. Now, all you have to do is take a look at many of your restaurants and tourism operators. They're not even open—I don't know if you've noticed—on Mondays and Tuesdays. They're really just focused on Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Again, this all comes back to being able to stay open, the cost of doing business and having the labour that you need. I think it's as simple as that. We're not seeing people with that extra little bit of money in their pocket. They're not even able to travel at home.

We talk about staycations. We're not even seeing that anymore. People aren't able to even do staycations, stay within Atlantic Canada or even travel within my own province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It's just too hard with the price of gas.

The businesses are suffering from people not being able to have any disposable income. They're definitely feeling it, and they're trying to be more innovative, but it's definitely a challenge.

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

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** It's back to the carbon tax like we were talking about at the beginning.

• (1220)

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

We'll go to Mr. Kusmierczyk for six minutes.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say thank you, Ms. Symonds, for coming here today to testify in front of committee and to bring forward your lived experience as a seasonal worker and the concerns of the Southern Nova Scotia Seasonal Workers Alliance. I think it's important that we focus today on hearing from workers, talk about seasonal workers and talk about employment insurance. It's important that we focus on that and that this remains the focus of our discussions here today.

I also want to take a second to thank my colleague Madame Chabot for bringing this important study forward, for spearheading it and bringing us here together. This is an important issue, so I want to say thank you to my colleague for bringing this important conversation to light.

Ms. Symonds, there are 350,000 seasonal workers across Canada. Many of them are concentrated in Quebec and the Atlantic

provinces. I want to ask you a general question. What are the most pressing challenges that seasonal workers face regarding employment insurance?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** The most pressing challenge is the hours and the divisor. Our hours are 630. They don't go below that, and they will go to 700 off and on. It depends on the EI rate, which is posted every month. It's reviewed.

We don't make \$25,000. I don't make \$25,000 juggling working at two lobster plants. You don't work eight to five. I go in at 2:00 in the morning to one. At 8:00 I might drive a half an hour to another, trying so hard to make sure that I get enough hours to make my EI last.

To get max EI, I need to make around \$26,000 dollars. Max EI is a dream; it's not reality. People who make \$26,000 and above get more money. The person who really needs the money will get less. It's no fault of their own. Because of the weather or different things, you don't get work every day. It's frustrating. It's hard to explain, but it's just difficult.

On the hours, the divisor, they call it the “best weeks”. Ours is 20, and we're getting 55% of our earnings divided by 20. That's a high divisor. The people who get less money like me really need it to run my their homes. I'm not ever going to get max no matter how hard I try.

I'm a volunteer advocate for seasonal workers, and I'm in with groups from New Brunswick, Quebec and across Canada. We do Zoom meetings and stuff and compare notes about what's going on, and we just keep fighting and keep hoping that someday this reform that was promised years ago, which I was in on the consultations for, isn't a pipe dream and becomes a reality.

Thank you.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Ms. Symonds, I so appreciate your testimony. I think you're doing a fantastic job of giving us an insight into what seasonal workers experience. Would you mind just talking a little bit about what an average day for you looks like as a seasonal worker, what industry you work in, and maybe just give us a sense of what a week could look like in your world?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** I work in the lobster industry. In southern Nova Scotia mainly it's a big part of the economy. Dumping Day is coming next week and you'll see the MPs and MLAs out there wishing the lobstermen a safe, prosperous trip. I always post and remind them about the seasonal workers in the lobster pounds. Without them, the lobsters do not move. They're not worth anything if we don't go in.



My typical day might start at three in the morning. I know the day before. And I've gone to work at three in the morning until six. I'll grab a coffee at McDonald's and drive a half hour and text my boss at the other place and tell them I'll be asleep in your parking lot, grabbing a half hour sleep, just before I start my next job at the other lobster pound. To juggle both, it's a hard thing to do when they need you and somebody else needs you.

In the off-season, they say, why can't you get a job? My season runs from the end of November to the end of May, but there are always lobsters in the pound until fall. I might have a really busy week and then some days, some weeks, it might be 20 hours a week.

• (1225)

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** It's fair to say there's a fair bit of uncertainty in that line of work, I imagine. You mentioned something I picked up on. You said there's no guarantee you will get work. Talk about that a little bit, the fact that there's no certainty about whether you might get work or not. Help us understand that.

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** There's lobster, there's groundfish. Quota cuts have been very steep in the groundfishing fleet. That's a big factor. If the government makes a cut, you're going to give somebody who works on groundfish less work. For lobster, the catch has dropped. The bulk of the lobster is caught in the first two weeks. Then you have weather storms that play a big part. Then around the first of January some boats might bring their traps back in because of the damage the weather does to the traps. The price of traps has doubled from \$100 to \$200 a trap. It's all cost to them, as to when they can go out, the price of fuel, and as to where they would go day after day they don't do that no more.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Symonds and Mr. Kusmierczyk.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, please go ahead. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your presentations, ladies.

Ms. Symonds, this study shows how important seasonal industries in your sector are for southern Nova Scotia's economy.

You talked about the impact of seasonal work on day-to-day life. How much of the economy would you say seasonal work represents, ballpark? For example, is it 30%?

Are seasonal industries essential to the region's vitality?

[English]

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** The lobster industry is 90% of the economy for Shelburne County and Yarmouth County. It's a great area. It employs a lot of jobs, between 20 to 50 workers at each lobster pound. In my small town, last year, a lobster cannery was built, whereas one closed down two hours away because of lack of lobster.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you.

Like many of your colleagues, I believe we need to take care of seasonal workers in regions or provinces where seasonal industries play an important role in the economy.

As we all know, seasonal work goes hand in hand with employment insurance. Seasonal workers experience a black hole, or gap, in other words, a period without income or employment between the weeks they work and when the season starts again.

Is that the reality of the people you represent? If so, how many weeks long is that gap?

[English]

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** If you qualify for EI with 630 hours, it gives you 17 weeks of employment insurance. If you qualify for the five extra weeks, that would give you 22 weeks.

The black hole is a big reality. We have a second food bank that is in high demand. It's so sad to see people have to swallow their pride and go to a food bank.

Things have changed so much with the downturn in the groundfish fishery, with quota cuts and with lobster catches dropping. There are double the lobster pounds around here. Where there were 10 now there are 20, so everybody gets a little work.

It's frustrating that no matter how hard you try or look for other places...you check job banks and there is nothing. There is no other big business within hours of here.

Thank you.

• (1230)

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Ms. Symonds, I think that clearly illustrates why the employment insurance system needs to be strengthened. We want to keep these important industries and workers in our regions.

We've heard solutions that would involve lowering the number of hours needed to qualify for benefits or raising the number of weeks of benefits. I will give you two examples. The first option would involve setting the total number of hours needed to qualify for benefits at 420. The second option would involve raising the minimum number of weeks of benefits to 35.

Given your relationships with other groups, would you say those are helpful solutions? Do you have other recommendations that would help?

[English]

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** With the other groups, we always agree on 420 hours. You should be entitled to 20 to 25 weeks of EI when you put in the minimum number of hours. With 55% of your earnings and with the cost of living the way it is now, we have to get that up to 70%. The divisor at 20 is brutal. It really is. When you divide 20 into 55% of your earnings, that's way too high.

Like I said, max EI is a dream, but it's not a reality for many in the lobster pounds. You struggle, you go to food banks and you don't travel much. You just make the best of what you have.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Do I have enough time for a short question, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** Yes, go ahead.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Are there seasonal workers who are leaving these industries for good to find job security in other sectors, because of your reality?

If so, what is the impact?

[English]

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** They look for other work. Some have taken the CCA. It was offered free in Nova Scotia, so they took it and graduated and are out of the lobster industry, but there are only so many jobs as a CCA. There's not many other jobs in this area or zone to go to.

Lobster is a big part of the economy, so when you take the seasonal workers out, the whole economy will crash here. It's a big area.

If we're not making money, we're not spending it. We've lost a bank and a gas station in my little town. It's just the start of things to come. It's disastrous to see.

[Translation]

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

[English]

We'll go to Ms. Zarrillo for six minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I am going to start with some questions for Witness Symonds.

I'm interested in two areas. This is kind of a modernization project on EI. It needs to be modernized. We know that. If we're going to open it up, it would be good to have a real understanding of how gender and climate change have impacted your work and seasonal workers.

I say that because when EI was first put together, they weren't really considering that women had work or full-time work, so we know there are many gaps. I think about maternity leave if you're a seasonal worker. I'm interested in how that affected you differently than it might affect other workers.

Then for climate change, can you just explain or describe how your work situation has changed over time with the change in climate? You even said "weather" a few times.

Has that changed over the years? How is it affecting work?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** On the gender, I, as a woman, a female I know that females always get paid less, so maximum EI is not going to happen. You have single mums, and it breaks your heart when you hear their stories. We don't get as much work as a male does. They go and load boats and we don't. We're just mostly in the pans and stuff. Even though they work, we go and work just as hard as the men at times. We get paid less, and we'll get less EI for less time.

On the climate change, yes, the storms are more frequent in the winter, which means that if the boats don't get out for days, you know that there's not going to be any work.

Also, it changes the habitat of lobsters. They shift a little.

They say they're shifting now to the warmer waters. They're moving.

When the lobster starts, the catches will be down again. They were down I think 20% last year. They're looking for a little drop this year with the climate change.

Thank you.

• (1235)

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** That's interesting.

I note that the majority of seasonal workers are men, and that's across all of Canada.

Obviously, the Atlantic provinces have the most seasonal workers, but what are the conversations that happen in the pans around the needs of single parents and women? What are those conversations? What are the needs in relation to income supplements, to income and even to EI?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** They need to get more money out of EI and pay bills. So many are struggling with their children. They've had school programs. People have donated money for breakfasts at the local schools and different things. It's just stress all the time, it really is. They'll ask me: "Am I close to my hours? What do you think I'll get?"

When I tell them they're going to get \$300 and something a week and the rents have gone through the roof, it's hard. It really is heart-breaking. People are messaging and asking you things and you've got to tell them the bad news: that you haven't been on a claim three out of five years, so you're not going to get the five extra weeks, or you're not entitled to the four extra that ran out in September and things like that.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Witness Symonds, you mentioned that you were part of a round table or a consultation. Can you talk about what that was? It was a government consultation, I guess. Was that provincial or federal? I wonder if you wouldn't mind letting us know if the federal government has had any consultation that you know of with seasonal workers in the lobster industry over the last couple of years.

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** On the consultation, the commissioner for workers, Pierre Laliberté, does Zoom meetings with us. He helps us seasonal workers. I'm going to Moncton on the twenty-sixth, and on the twenty-seventh there are meetings with Atlantic provinces and members of employment insurance.

On the consultations, we all agree—the groups—on what we should ask for. It's a round table: 420 hours, 25 weeks of EI, 70% of your earnings, and a lower divisor, lower best weeks. We all agree on the same things. That was, oh my gosh, four or five years ago and—

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Did you ever hear anything back? Were there any changes? No?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** No.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** You mentioned the gender wage gap. Has that been discussed at the round table?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** It's starting to, more and more. I mean, men will get a couple of dollars more than us, and they might work a little harder, but we work hard too. Nobody loves these jobs, but they're part of the economy, and when there isn't much else around, that's all there is. There are young ones coming in all the time, and I just tell them to go back to school.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Right. Thank you so much.

Witness Tulk-Lane, I wanted to ask about the employers and the profile of seasonal workers for your members and for the members. What is the profile of a seasonal worker? I'm asking about the relation. Do they need housing? Are they coming from different provinces? Are they locals? I'm really trying to get an understanding of who is working in the seasonal industry.

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** It's a little hard for me to speak to the businesses, as I'm almost a step removed. My members are the chamber. What I'm hearing is anything that they feed up to me that they're hearing, but I can definitely tell you that.... I mentioned our priorities, labour being one. One of the other top ones that has crept up is housing. Around employer circles and employer tables, we're seeing more social discussions now. Housing and health care are top on our agendas.

It's definitely quite a switch from a decade ago, when you'd sit in a room with employers and you'd talk about different things. Housing is actually one of our top priorities from an Atlantic chamber perspective. We're working with all the chambers and trying to fig-

ure out where we fit in as employers, because that housing piece definitely links to recruitment and retention of employees and labour.

Housing, I would say, is up there. As an employer association, I think we're still trying to find our place at the table with the village of people when it comes to housing. It is critical, and it does affect being able to hire a staff person or recruit someone to your community when there is no housing. We do have some—

• (1240)

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

Madam Tulk-Lane, I'm sure you'll get another question where you can continue on.

We'll now move to Mr. Aitchison for five minutes.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. Tulk-Lane, you started to talk about housing, and you acknowledged that it is one of the big issues that your member organizations are hearing from their members.

Are you aware that when it comes to the construction of new homes, no one makes more money on new homes than governments at all levels—provincial, federal and municipal? Were you aware that government makes about 30% on every house?

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** I've heard it discussed, but I haven't dug in or done any research on it.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** It's one of those areas where I think we could do a lot to reduce the cost of new homes by reducing the impact of government. I'll leave that with you so you're aware of it as well.

I'd like to move on to Ms. Symonds.

Ms. Symonds, I really appreciate what you're sharing with the committee; it's quite moving what you're sharing with us. As I've listened to you speak, I've been imagining the change you've seen in your community over your lifetime and over your career in the industry and how the industry has changed.

I'm wondering if you could speak more about this. You mentioned at one point how the cost of traps has doubled and the cost of fuel has gone up. I, of course, focus on housing—the cost of housing—and all these areas.

Can you speak to the cost of housing? Have you seen a big change in the cost of housing in your communities? We talk about big cities all the time, but not always about small communities, so I'm curious to know if you can speak to us about the cost of housing in your community.

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** The cost of housing has skyrocketed through the roof. It's unimaginable. Nobody's building a new home around here anymore. I see people are starting to live more in campers. I hope someday that's not me and that's not a lot of other people, because if you can't afford the rent and you can't afford to build, where do you go from there? It's very frustrating. It's like a dead end.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Can you speak to how much rents have changed, for example? You said they have skyrocketed and no new homes are getting built. Obviously, that has a massive impact on folks who are seasonally employed as they have mortgages and they're trying to pay their mortgages after interest rates spiked last year.

Do you have any experience with people you know who are in that circumstance and are struggling to pay their mortgages?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Yes. When their mortgage renews, they don't know how they're going to handle it because they have to pay their mortgage, pay their regular bills and pay for food.

Rents have gone from \$500 a month for a one-bedroom apartment to right now, where there are a couple new apartment buildings that have been built—smaller ones—where it's \$1,200 a month in rent, and then you have your utilities. A senior I spoke to is looking for a roommate because his rent is \$1,200 and he's had to go back to work in order to pay the rent and the utilities.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** He has had to go back to seasonal work, I assume. Is that correct?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Yes.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** He's working longer just to barely get ahead, or just to barely get by, I guess, and not even get ahead.

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Yes. He's 70 years old.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** That's unbelievable.

You mentioned the cost of fuel for the boats and the challenge of keeping the fleet fuelled to get out there. I'm assuming it's gone up quite a bit, especially with things like carbon taxes and whatnot.

Can you speak to the cost of fuel and what it costs to operate lobster boats now?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** To go out on a day to set traps, which they will do Monday, weather permitting, is \$1,000 or more. Some boats will be overloaded, which is dangerous; we've seen it before. Last winter, a guy was lost overboard.

There's the price of traps, and the price of bait has tripled with the shortage of ground fish, which is used for bait in the lobster industry. Since there isn't much of that around, the price has tripled.

I wouldn't want to guess. In a month, bait is \$6,000 and fuel is about \$10,000. In terms of traps, if they get caught in a storm and don't get them in, that's more expense bringing the traps back in when a storm's coming. You don't want them smashed and ending up on the beaches.

Yes, lobstering is very costly.

• (1245)

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Were you suggesting that some boat captains will overload their boats because of the cost of fuel? Do they need to try to get more?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Sometimes, yes. I just saw a picture on social media. Sometimes when I go to the wharf and I look at them boats....

They're loading up now for opening day on Monday, which is another thing. It gets delayed. It was delayed a week one year that we lost work, and we were late starting, so that is all a factor in the EI and hours.

Weather determines a lot on when these boats go, whether it be for lobsters or groundfish. There's no guarantee of how much work there is, and there's no big industry here. They're beautiful little coastal communities, but there is no—

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** They are, indeed.

**The Chair:** Thank you Mr. Aitchison and Ms. Symonds.

We will now go to Mr. Kusmierczyk, for five minutes.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Thank you Mr. Chair, and thank you so much to the both of our witnesses for your excellent testimony here today.

I just want to go back really quickly to Ms. Symonds. Do you see climate change as having an impact on the lobster fishery and the seasonal work?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Yes. Climate change plays a lot as to where the lobsters go when they molt in different stages and stuff. Are they way out in deeper water or are they in the warmer water—the weather, the temperature, the storms in the fall, the storms in the winter usually hitting in January.

We live right along the ocean, so the wind, all of it, the boats don't get out sometimes for a week. As I said, next Monday is dumping day, as they call it in southwest Nova Scotia, and DFO and the government regulate when the boats can go out. They won't let them go out if it's blowing hard.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** We've seen changes. I thank you for that testimony. You have been there. You have seen it. We've seen, for example, the decline of northern shrimp in the Gaspé area because of the warming ocean.

In your time—and I'm just curious how long you've been in the lobster sector—have you seen changes in the climate?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** I have been doing this since I was 15 years old. I am almost 61.

Over time, I never worried about EI. I went from lobster to groundfish, back to lobster to groundfish. EI wasn't a thing. With the downturn since the 1980s, and then in the 90s it started going down. Now all we have left is lobster. It's sad, and it's scary because that is on shaky ground.

The lobster moved from southwest Nova Scotia, and then in Newfoundland and PEI, their catches went up a little bit. In southwest Nova Scotia, we get lobsters from Deer Island now, and they will get them from PEI when they open.

Even though our season is six months, there are storms and everything, and we depend on other districts for their lobsters too.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Would you say that we ought to do something about climate change? Is it important? Is that an important factor do you think?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** It is in the molten, in all the stages of the lobster and the different fish. Yes, it plays a big part in where they go.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** I thank you for that so much. Thank you so much for your testimony. Truly, it has been absolutely fantastic.

I do have a question for Ms. Tulk-Lane on housing, if it's okay, because I know it was raised by my Conservative colleagues.

The Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber put out a post that reads:

The Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce...welcomes recent commitments to accelerate housing development, including the announcement that the Town of Cornwall has reached an agreement with the federal government to fast-track more than 140 homes over the next three years through the Housing Accelerator Fund

It continues on to say:

Earlier this month, our Chamber also welcomed the announcement that the City of Charlottetown will receive \$10 million through the Housing Accelerator Fund to fast-track 300 new housing units over the next three years.

This is interesting because the Conservatives right now are saying that the moment they get in, the first thing they will do is axe the housing accelerator fund. It's to the point where the Leader of the Opposition has banned his Conservative MPs not only from advocating for the housing accelerator fund but even from talking about the housing accelerator fund.

In light of what we've heard from the Charlottetown chamber of commerce, is the Conservative plan to cut housing funds a good idea in the context of what you said about this being an important issue of discussion?

• (1250)

**Mrs. Rhonda Tulk-Lane:** Thanks for the question.

I want to give a bit of context. I have 90 members. It's hard sometimes to stay on top of what 90 of them are saying on social media, so I wasn't aware of their posts. Again, I'm just trying to support them.

What I'm going to say to this is that employers and employers' groups will avail themselves of pots of funding and money from all colours of government when it helps our members and employers.

That's as much as I am probably going to share on that one, right now.

Thank you.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** That's a great answer. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** You have 10 seconds.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Again, I just want to say to both of you that it was fantastic testimony. I really appreciate your tremendous work on behalf of your members, and the excellent insights you shared with us here today. You are welcome back any time.

Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Symonds, thank you for your insight. Thank you as well for your dedication to this work, which is so vital to your beautiful part of the country.

You said that your sector made up 90% of the economy in your area. That is huge. I shudder to think what the impact would be on the economy if those jobs disappeared, so it's all the more important to take care of seasonal workers. Thank you for illustrating that so well.

There are challenges, yes, but there are also solutions. Some go back five years, such as the pilot project that was launched in some regions to provide workers with five additional weeks of employment insurance benefits. The purpose of reforming the EI system is to preserve good jobs, like the work you are doing.

You talked about 20 being the divisor for calculating benefits. This may be a bit technical for the committee members.

Regardless, do you have a recommendation to propose? How would you fix that aspect of the system?

[*English*]

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** On the divisor, I email MPs and go to the MLAs in both zones—Yarmouth and the other one. I just keep fighting and fighting. The divisor has to come way down to 10—to something livable. When you divide that into 55% of your earnings, which are below \$20,000, it's not a lot of money going to workers.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I imagine that the discussions you'll be having in a few weeks with the employment insurance working group will focus on necessary EI reforms like that.

Is that correct?

[English]

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Yes, the reform, the best weeks and the divisor are the main things.

[Translation]

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

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, Ms. Symonds.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Ms. Zarrillo, before we continue, Mrs. Tulk-Lane had to leave the meeting, so we just have Ms. Symonds with us.

You have two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you so much.

I really thank you, Witness Symonds, for all the expertise you've shared with us today. Also, you mentioned that you're talking to the next generation. I want to thank you for your mentorship and for caring about the work you do and the industry you support.

I have a couple of questions about the employers.

I'm interested to know how employers have changed over time, and how they're doing financially. Also, are they all Canadian companies, or is it going offshore?

• (1255)

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** The lobster pans are owned by people from China, the United States and Germany. The employers I work for and some of the local ones are great to us. We used to have meals cooked for the first two weeks for free. They do different things to hold onto their workers, because a good worker is a valued worker. They're flexible in giving us extra work doing maintenance or some painting. They try to help us out as much as they can.

Financially, some owners of the lobster pans are better off than others. It depends on how much lobster you can hold and different things—how much you get for them on the market.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** That's interesting. Do you have any idea about those overseas companies and what their profits are like? Are they making good profits from the labour of panners like you and fishers?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** China is doing really well because it bought the local bank that closed and turned it into a restaurant.

I don't like to talk about foreign workers too much, but foreign workers come here and they're going to get so much work. They'll have a roof over their head, whereas we're not guaranteed anything. There are a lot more foreign workers here now.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** How has that changed over time, percentage-wise, in the pan?

**Ms. Mandy Symonds:** Three years ago, there were no foreign workers here and now there might be around 100 foreign workers here working in the lobster pans.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** All right.

I want you to know that if you're out having those conversations, you can say MP Bonita Zarrillo and the NDP absolutely support your ask for a divisor that is smaller. We certainly need to make sure that people can pay their rent, feed their families and have a good quality of life, so we really support you in the work you do.

You can say that to anyone if it's going to help move this along, because it seems unbelievable that you'd be waiting five years for any movement on what we know needs to be done.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

Thank you, Ms. Symonds, for your testimony today and, again, for sharing your time after the difficulties and technical issues we had last time. I thank you for your very good testimony. I understand this issue well and thank you for your advocacy.

With that, committee members, I have three budgets that were circulated that I need your approval for.

The first one is for \$3,500. That was prepared to handle the supplementary estimates. This was circulated. It's \$3,500 for the ministerial appearances on supplementary estimates.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** I know this is a favourite of Mr. Aitchison.

Does the committee approve the budget of \$14,500 to do this study, Madame Chabot, that we're currently doing? It is an estimate, depending on where the witnesses come from.

Does the committee approve the budget of \$14,500?

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** That's what a budget is. It's an estimate.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Does the committee approve the budget of \$1,250 prepared for the briefing with the president and CEO of the CMHC, which is scheduled for December 10?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** The deadline for the list for Bill—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** No.

**The Chair:** Committee members, I welcome the jovial mood.

We need a deadline for the witness list for Bill C-378. I believe it's your colleague's, Ms. Gray. A suggestion could be Friday, November 22. The committee previously agreed that each party would invite one witness.

What deadline does the committee wish to set for the name of the witness for each party? Is November 22 okay?

(Motion agreed to)

• (1300)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

With that, is it the wish of the committee to adjourn?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned.

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