



News Release

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For Immediate Release.....**

Proposed Conservative EI changes inadequate and will penalize the majority of unemployed, says Federation of Labour

Proposed changes to Canada's Employment Insurance system announced this week by the Harper Conservatives are inadequate and divide the unemployed into two groups – those deemed deserving by the Conservatives of extra benefits and those who are not, says Lana Payne, President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour.

“If you have been laid off and have no job in this crisis, the result is the same. But what the Conservatives are saying with their proposed changes is that some workers who lost their jobs and meet certain conditions will be eligible for extra benefits (between 5 and 20 weeks extra), but anyone who has been laid off once or more in the past five years and have had to avail of the EI system are not deserving of extra benefits and help,” said Ms. Payne.

“This reflects this government's attitude towards the unemployed. They just don't get it or just don't want to get it. These proposed changes - by leaving so many unemployed out - essentially blame people for their job loss by penalizing workers who may have had to avail of EI benefits in the past five years.”

According to a federal government news release issued yesterday, if a worker has collected 35 weeks or more of EI benefits in the last five years, they will not be eligible for these extra benefits.

That means seasonal workers, non-standard workers, long-tenured workers who lost their jobs before a certain date or anyone who might have suffered a layoff or temporary shutdown and collected 35 weeks of EI in the past five years – in other words hundreds of thousands of workers who have experienced job loss in the past five years through no fault of their own - will get no help from this government.

“Workers don't control if there's a layoff or not. Workers don't control the seasonal nature of work. Workers don't control a shutdown. But clearly this government believes workers should be blamed and penalized for being laid off – something out of their control,” said the Federation of Labour President.



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This is a lot like what the Federal Liberals did in the 1990s when they brought in the Employment Insurance Act. Under that legislation, workers were penalized for past EI use under a measure known as the Intensity Rule.

“Working people and Canadians were offended by that kind of mean-spirited rule,” said Ms. Payne. She noted that Canadians, including the labour movement, were so offended that quite a number of Liberal MPs lost their seats in Atlantic Canada and throughout the country. And just as importantly, this part of the legislation and others as a result of a fight-back campaign by the labour movement and its partners was eliminated.

The Federal Conservative government estimates that these new measures will help 190,000 unemployed Canadians. “Do I need to remind them that nearly 500,000 Canadians have lost their jobs since October? What about the other 300,000 Canadians who have been thrown out of work in the past year?” asked Ms. Payne. “And what about the 1.6 million unemployed Canadians?”

As of August, there were 1.6 million Canadians counted as unemployed by Statistics Canada, only half of them were in receipt of EI benefits. “What is perfectly clear is that these proposed changes by the Conservatives won’t help the vast majority of the country’s unemployed.”

And to add insult to injury, what is being completely ignored in this debate around EI is the nearly \$58 billion that Canadian workers and their employers have paid in EI premiums over the past number of years and which have been used for everything but EI benefits, including paying off the deficit and tax cuts to corporate Canada.

Real reform, instead of tinkering, requires an easing of access or qualifying rules, higher benefits and extended duration for all unemployed Canadians, not just a small group.

“It’s time to stop playing politics with Employment Insurance and people’s lives. It’s time to stop using the unemployed as pawns in this game of political one-up-man-ship that has taken over Ottawa and start implementing genuine reforms that really help Canadians,” said Ms. Payne. “Why have we had to wait so long for so little from the federal government during what is the deepest economic downturn since the Great Depression? Why do we have to wait until the country is on the brink of yet another election? This is just not good enough.”

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