



DEBATES OF THE SENATE

1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT • VOLUME 148 • NUMBER 130

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT Employment Insurance

Question by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Wednesday, December 12, 2012

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[Translation]

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, last week, the government announced the elimination of special employment insurance benefits for migrant workers who are employed under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Foreign workers do not have access to regular employment insurance benefits. However, since 2002, they have been able to claim special maternity, compassionate care and sickness benefits.

Foreign workers pay employment insurance premiums. They have contributed millions of dollars to this social protection fund. Yet now they will no longer be able to receive benefits.

Can the Leader of the Government in the Senate tell us why the government has decided to deprive foreign workers of these benefits and why these workers will still have to pay into the employment insurance system even though they will no longer have access to EI?

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, these people are temporary foreign workers. They are in the country on a temporary basis for specific jobs. They leave the country. The Employment Insurance system is meant to assist people living in Canada who are looking for jobs to replace the jobs that they have lost. Temporary foreign workers are temporary foreign workers. They are not part of the Canadian workforce per se. Therefore, Employment Insurance benefits cannot be paid to people who are not here actively seeking employment, because they are temporary foreign workers and they obviously are not here on a permanent basis.

Senator Tardif: If that is the case and they are to be barred from receiving any benefits from the EI system, why should they be forced to pay into it?

Senator LeBreton: On the whole issue of temporary foreign workers, obviously, before bringing temporary foreign workers

in, the object is to ensure that there are not Canadians who can fill these jobs.

The issue has not changed; they are temporary foreign workers. They come here on a short-term basis to fill specific jobs and then they leave. The Employment Insurance system is designed for Canadians who need it. One of the stipulations of people who receive Employment Insurance is that they have to prove that they are actively seeking a job. They can hardly do that if they are living in Mexico.

Senator Tardif: The minister has not responded to the question. Why are temporary foreign workers being forced to pay into the EI system if they are being denied any benefits? Are we creating a second class of labourers here? It is well-known that temporary foreign workers are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse because of their lack of status, their isolation and their lack of access to information as to their rights.

Senator Mercer: It is a human rights issue.

Senator Tardif: The government is putting in place policies to increase the number of temporary foreign workers. They are becoming a hidden pillar of our economy. The number of migrant workers admitted in Canada has grown by 40 per cent since 2006. We now have almost 450,000 migrant workers in Canada, and those are 2011 statistics.

If the government is eliminating the few special benefits that they were able to receive, for which they have paid EI, why are they taking away these benefits? That is not the Canadian way, honourable senators. Why is the government not treating migrant workers with the same basic fairness that every person deserves?

Senator LeBreton: Different companies bring in temporary foreign workers — hopefully after they have satisfied themselves that there are no Canadians to fill these positions. The companies that bring them in apply all of the normal procedures when they are here. However, the Employment Insurance system is meant to benefit Canadians as they seek another job. Temporary foreign workers, in the country on a temporary basis for a specific job, are obviously not, then, when the job ends, actively seeking employment. They go back to their home country. Therefore, they are not actively seeking employment and are not eligible for Employment Insurance benefits.