



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 133**

Thursday, October 31, 2024



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.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 133 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. All witnesses have completed the required connection test in advance of the meeting. All have been briefed on how to ensure that they are participating in the official language of their choice.

For those in the room, you can choose the interpretation from your headsets. I would advise any members in the room to check their devices and make sure the alarms are turned off so that we do not have an issue for the interpreters. As well, please refrain from tapping on the microphone boom, as it can cause issues for the interpreters.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 8, 2024, the committee is commencing its study of workers in the seasonal industry and the employment insurance program.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, we are commencing the study that you proposed.

[English]

In the first round we have Ms. Line Sirois, chief executive officer, Action-Chômage Côte-Nord, by video conference; Mr. Paul Pinchbeck, president and chief executive officer, Canadian Ski Council; and Mr. Fernand Thibodeau, spokesperson, Seasonal Workers Help and Support.

Each of you will have five minutes for your opening statements, followed by questions from the committee members. I will advise you of when your five minutes is over so that you can conclude your comments.

[Translation]

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau (Spokesperson, Seasonal Workers Help and Support):** What did you say, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** Pardon me?

[English]

We will have IT call you, Mr. Thibodeau.

We will begin with Madame Sirois for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Ms. Line Sirois (Chief Executive Officer, Action-Chômage Côte-Nord):** Hello.

My name is Line Sirois and I am the CEO of Action-Chômage Côte-Nord.

Action-Chômage Côte-Nord is a grassroots organization that was founded in November 2003. Its purpose is to defend the rights of workers on the north shore. For a variety of reasons, these people need the social safety net that employment insurance provides in order to meet their basic needs. Over the last 20 years, our organization has therefore worked to organize jobless workers on the north shore, especially seasonal industry workers. I am referring particularly to the commercial fishing, forestry, peat bog, biore-sources, recreation and tourism, accommodation, and food and beverage sectors and to outfitters and excursion operators. Our objective is to provide them with assistance and support in their dealings with Service Canada, to inform them of their rights, and to support them in making claims.

We have to stop talking about seasonal workers, since the people we are talking about are workers in seasonal industry. The government needs to adopt a vision that focuses on the business as a seasonal employer. We have to stop thinking about the employee as a seasonal worker. It is the worker's job that is seasonal, not the worker.

Particularly considering the variations in climate across our huge country, seasonal industry is an inherent aspect of the Canadian economy. The seasonal nature of employment is a characteristic feature of certain industries, such as forestry, agriculture and tourism.

According to a study done by Segma Recherche at the request of Action-Chômage, approximately one quarter of the labour force on the upper north shore works in one of the various seasonal sectors or another. In some regions of the country, it is thought that more than a third of the available jobs are seasonal jobs.

Segma also reports that 21.5% of those seasonal jobs are part-time and a majority of them are held by women. That situation means that the women are markedly more susceptible than the men to being affected by the well-known black hole of employment insurance: a period without benefits that can be as long as 18 weeks.

The employment insurance scheme is in a constant struggle to adapt to these facts. Year after year, thousands of workers have to deal with the black hole. Every year, some workers return to the same seasonal job, but the number of hours they need to qualify for employment insurance and the number of weeks of benefits they are entitled to vary based on the unemployment rate.

The unemployment rate, and thus the benefit rate, is calculated based on the number of hours worked in a particular region. While some regions have major industrial, mining or hydroelectric operations that provide many jobs, seasonal industry workers have to work more hours than people who live in a region where there are few or no big industries. The seasonal unemployment rate on the upper north shore is therefore similar to the rate in the Gaspé, while the benefit level is lower than in the Gaspé, given that it has major industrial operations, as in the case of Fermont.

As things stand now, people will need to have worked more hours to qualify for employment insurance in some regions even though they are similar in socio-economic or demographic terms. Seasonal jobs, however, are time-limited. This is the very picture of a vicious circle.

In light of what we have said, it seems clear that the regional unemployment rate does not in any way reflect the situation of seasonal industry workers. We can also conclude from this that the principle of redrawing the employment insurance administrative regions is itself not working. The scheme should reflect the situation in the regions, but that is not what it does. The result is that people are leaving.

On this point, do you know that the north shore is the only region in Quebec where the population is declining? The flaws in the employment insurance scheme are not unrelated to this situation. The seasonal industry issue is an illustration of the incongruity in the act and the fact that the various pilot projects that have been adopted, modified or revoked by the federal government in recent years have not succeeded in solving the problem.

There are numerous administrative tangles and traps hidden in this clumsy, ill-adapted scheme that seems to be designed to deter claimants. It means that in Minganie, not only do people have to have worked more hours to qualify for benefits, but they also have to prove, for example, that they have made three claims in a row, to be recognized as seasonal workers.

• (1105)

They must never have left, however justified, urgent or unforeseeable the situation. In its present form, the scheme does not promote social justice. It is unjust and biased and it seems to want to punish workers who work in remote places in sectors like food and beverage and commercial fisheries, and for outfitters.

The approach is so brutal that last year, three workers went down with their ship and lost their lives on the lower north shore. According to Andrew Etheridge, the former mayor of Blanc-Sablon, these fishers had braved the poor sailing conditions to achieve their quota and thus hope to be eligible for employment insurance.

Action-Chômage Côte-Nord and its allies have known for years what the solutions are that would enable workers to get through pe-

riods of unemployment with dignity. The government has all the tools that it needs for improving—

**The Chair:** Ms. Sirois?

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Yes, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[English]

Your time has gone over. You can continue when you answer questions.

• (1110)

[Translation]

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Right.

[English]

**The Chair:** We will now move to Mr. Pinchbeck for five minutes.

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Ski Council):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. The opportunity to come before you all today is very much welcomed by our ski areas from coast to coast to coast.

Here's a bit about my organization. The Canadian Ski Council is the national association that represents the interests of alpine and cross-country ski areas in Canada. Our mission is to assist in growing the snow sports industry in Canada through consumer-facing programs that encourage all Canadians to enjoy the physical and mental well-being that come from year-round, outdoor activity. We also have a mandate to support our industry with research and data gathering, education and other supports that enhance their business acumen and success.

To open today's meeting, I think it's important to set the stage for Canada's ski areas. We have 240 active ski areas located in all 10 provinces and three territories. We are a national body. More than 2.5 million Canadians actively skied or snowboarded last season. The resulting economic impact was a little over \$5 billion for Canada.

In a normal year, over two million of our 21 million skier visits come from the United States and international destinations, making us a large part of winter tourism success for Canada as well.

One of the large challenges we have is that ski areas in Canada are often described as large, corporate-owned entities. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth, as the bulk of Canadian ski areas are privately owned, small and mid-sized enterprises across the country.

Turning to the topic at hand, the story of seasonal workers in our business mirrors the very nature of Canadian ski areas. Our ski areas are labour- and capital-intensive businesses. Ski areas, by their very nature, are also very seasonal, with a winter operating period that ranges from 14 to 23 weeks, or approximately 100 to 150 days, depending on the region of the country.

Severe weather events and climate change are impacting the operating days negatively, with later starts and earlier finishing dates becoming ever more apparent. As part of that, though, we also have to recognize that the greater potential for violent weather changes has increased the possibility of more than a handful of weather-related closures happening in the ski season.

Ski areas are very interested in investing in climate mitigation strategies. Many will have heard of snow-making or snow farming. Other opportunities exist for ski areas to winterize their businesses. Areas are also interested in expanding into summer operations and other seasons with sport offerings such as mountain biking, sightseeing, conferences and many other unique tourism experiences. These summer operations are still confined to a relatively short period of eight to 12 weeks at most ski areas. Fewer than 12 ski areas across the country have viable four-season business models.

The impact on the seasonal employee mirrors the circumstances of our businesses. Bear in mind, please, that 85% of our workforce is seasonal in nature. These employees cover all levels of employment, from lower-skilled, frontline jobs in hospitality and our guest services applications to higher-skilled persons such as grooming operators, lift mechanics and snow-makers, to mention just a few.

The short and potentially weather-affected winter season can make it difficult for seasonal employees to access EI benefits. For example, here in Collingwood, Ontario, where I am located today, the required number of hours to gain access to benefits is 700 working hours. With a short operating season of around 100 to 105 days, there is a slim margin of approximately 80 hours that the employee has to work with to ensure access to benefits.

A late start to the season or an early closure can mean all the difference for a winter season employee, not to mention the closures that are brought on by increasingly volatile weather. It is not unusual here in Ontario to lose more than five operating days per year due to rain, wind, lightning and, believe it or not, excess snowfall.

Summer operations, as we all begin to move to them, can add to an employee's 52-week total of working hours. However, the season is very short, particularly in western Canada, where the snow-pack hampers the start of summer operations for mountain biking and sightseeing, etc. While a ski area attempts to move key staff into summer roles, the overall size of the summer workforce is currently less than 60% of the winter workforce, which exacerbates the need and the change we go through.

• (1115)

For employees of ski areas without summer businesses, the length of time between the finish of one winter season and the start of the next can be a significant challenge, especially in rural environments in Canada. We believe extending the maximum weeks of employment insurance benefits would ease the social burden on the small rural communities in which ski areas operate.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to future questions.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Thibodeau, the floor is yours for five minutes.

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** Hello.

It is my pleasure to be here with you today.

My name is Fernand Thibodeau and I am the spokesperson for SWHS, Seasonal Workers Help and Support. This organization helps workers in seasonal industries, on a volunteer basis. I am here to discuss the situation of seasonal industry workers, who are central to the economy of our regions and who live in regions that depend on these industries.

Seasonal industries have always played an important role in the Canadian economy. They are crucially important in some regions of the country and they provide a large proportion of the available jobs.

Unfortunately, because of this dependence on seasonal industry in growing numbers of regions, it is not possible to survive on a combination of seasonal work and the support provided by employment insurance. Even if the workers take all the work available in the high season, they will not be able to get through the dead season. In a good year, a seasonal industry worker will work for 12 to 14 weeks, which amounts to 525 hours. Even in the regions where the unemployment rate is above 16%, workers will qualify for only 33 weeks of benefits, leaving them with no income for five weeks.

In view of the present unemployment rate, the pilot project is no longer meeting people's needs and is not going to put an end to the employment insurance black hole. The problem arises from the fact that during the dead season, there are not a lot of jobs available. The lack of economic diversification thus makes us dependent on help from the employment insurance program. The problem of the employment insurance black hole—the weeks with no income—leads to further devitalization of our regions. People are tired of constantly living in a precarious situation, and young people are moving away. It amounts to deportation by stealth.

The pilot project launched by the government that offers five additional weeks of benefits was welcome help, but it is not enough. As I have shown, even in a region with the maximum unemployment rate, the employment insurance black hole persists. It has always existed, but for many of us, the situation has worsened in the last few years. This is a result of the fact that some of our communities are in employment insurance economic regions where the unemployment rate is lower and does not reflect the real situation in our local economies.

For example, in my region, the employment insurance economic region of Restigouche-Albert, our small communities depend on seasonal industry. They have been combined with the communities on the outskirts of Moncton, and this brings the unemployment rate down. Another problem lies in the fact that in some of our communities, the unemployment rate is going down, not because there are more jobs, but because, as a result of the aging of the population, there are fewer job seekers for the same number of available jobs.

This is why we think the pilot project should be improved. Because our government is not inclined to reform employment insurance, we have made recommendations to the minister for this to be done, but unfortunately, they have not been accepted. This is what we are recommending.

First, the number of weeks of supplementary benefits should be raised to 15 weeks in the designated regions. Those supplementary weeks would be subject to the maximum number of weeks of benefits that is currently set, which is 45 weeks.

In addition, access to the pilot project should be facilitated by changing the eligibility criteria established for workers to get seasonal worker status. At present, the rules are complicated and arbitrary. They mean that genuine seasonal industry workers are not eligible. We propose that employers state whether or not a layoff is temporary on the record of employment.

As well, we recommend that the map of the employment insurance economic regions be redrawn to better reflect labour market conditions. The map has not really changed in over 26 years and it needs updating. I will take this opportunity to congratulate the commissioner, who has worked hard on this. His work came to an unfortunate halt with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another possible avenue is to change the parameters of the employment insurance program by setting the threshold for qualifying at 420 hours' work, offering 35 weeks of benefits, and using the 12 best weeks to establish the level of benefits. A formula like that would be simpler and fairer.

For people who are worried about the potential for these kinds of provisions to be abused, I would point out two things. First, at its maximum, employment insurance benefits do not even provide the equivalent of the minimum wage, which itself is not enough to rise above the low-income thresholds set by the government.

• (1120)

Second, according to the Employment Insurance Monitoring and Assessment Report, jobless workers use only 20 of the 35 weeks allowed, on average. This means that the large majority of Canadians use the program responsibly.

In conclusion, I would like you to take away two points from my testimony. We need help to revitalize our regions outside the cities. Employment insurance will not solve all the problems, but it plays an essential role. It needs to be adapted so that it provides better support for the workers in our seasonal industries and those who live outside urban areas.

Thank you for your attention.

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

[English]

Monsieur Thibodeau and Mr. Pinchbeck, the chair is an avid alpine skier. I think I've skied on most of those hills.

With that, we will begin the first line of questioning with Mrs. Gray.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today.

My first questions are for Paul Pinchbeck from the Canadian Ski Council.

Mr. Pinchbeck, a few years ago, the Canadian Ski Council reported that up to 30% of job vacancies at ski resorts across the country could remain empty by the time ski season hit. Around the same time, in my region of British Columbia, Big White Ski Resort, which I'll say has "champagne powder", as they say, said that of the 600 to 700 staff traditionally hired they had confirmed only 250 employees for the upcoming season.

Now, as we look forward to the 2024-25 season, are Canadian ski resorts still facing an issue of job vacancies?

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** MP Gray, first off, absolutely, the powder is champagne powder in Big White. I live in the Okanagan half the time, and it's in winter that I'm there.

The answer to your question is that we are feeling much more confident. I don't want to sidetrack us, but we have been able to work with members of the team at International Experience Canada and its visa, often known as the "working holiday visa", to really bring energy back into the program. The number of individuals from Australia, New Zealand and parts of Europe who are visiting our country and working at ski areas has climbed remarkably.

We also have been working very hard at making sure that we are reaching out to our communities in order to have Canadians employed in key positions.

We are feeling much better. We expect the shortfall to still be there, but we're now talking about between 5% and 10% of our workforce still unfound, if you will, by the time we open the season. It's a much better situation.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** That's great. Thank you very much.

Tourism HR Canada's labour force survey in 2023 found that Canada's tourism sector still had not recovered to prepandemic levels and that the Canadian tourism labour force actually "declined by 4.0%" as compared to prepandemic levels in 2019.

Can you outline some of the challenges that tourism businesses like ski resorts are facing in returning to prepandemic levels through Canadian employment, based on the business you're seeing? Could you speak to that?

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** Certainly.

The challenge with many ski areas across Canada is that we exist in largely rural communities. In the smaller population centres around us, there is much more pressure on housing and on the opportunity to live and work within a community.

While we are still growing back in terms of skier visits—we're about one million skier visits internationally short of where we were prepandemic—the ski areas are also feeling the pinch of the housing crisis and of the lack of employee housing that tends to keep our citizens away.

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

We know that with the cost of living crisis many families are barely affording basic necessities, with the cost of housing doubling and a record number of people going to food banks. Costs keep increasing and taxes keep increasing and having that disposable income to enjoy recreational and family activities really is more difficult.

Are you seeing the cost of living crisis as something that might deter people from being able to come and enjoy a day or more of skiing?

• (1125)

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** I think the answer to that is yes. As the cost of living has grown, Canada's ski areas are finding that public sentiment towards skiing is still strong, but that definitely there will be a fixed number of ski days, as we call them, in everyone's wallet.

What I'm finding now is that ski areas across the country that have enjoyed a postpandemic boom in participation, with people wanting to be outside in some very beautiful places, are now turning to business solutions: products and services that meet a price point that allows individuals to access snow sports. My own organization does many of those, but each ski area will have targeted promotions to make sure that snow sports participation continues to be as affordable as it can be.

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

We know that, regarding unemployment rates, one of the largest groups of unemployed individuals is our youth.

I'm wondering if you can speak about that, and who many of your employees are. What are the challenges in attracting youth to work at different ski resorts?

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** Our workforce is very young. Of course, we also have a good segment of that workforce who are active retirees. We court them as well.

For the young individual, it really comes down to the strong seasonality of our business. Here in Collingwood—I suspect Big White would echo this thought—we are close to major centres that have a large number of competing employers. One can work at any business in Collingwood. We have all the big box stores and things like that, with the same number of hours as a ski area. The challenge we have is the ongoing seasonality of our business. A young person will have  $x$  number of hours one week and then perhaps fewer hours the next, whereas they have a much more fixed schedule at the local Canadian Tire. Oftentimes, those become the employers of choice.

We continue to work on that. Blue Mountain, in my backyard here in Collingwood, has started to offer year-round benefits protection to individuals who work on a seasonal basis. They now call them—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Pinchbeck and Mrs. Gray.

Mr. Kusmierczyk, go ahead for six minutes.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's very good to be back here at the HUMA committee, which has a reputation on the Hill of being a very workmanlike, consequential and well-run committee. I'm very delighted to be back here at HUMA.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** You're using your time, by the way.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Can we get a vote on that? Yes, I'd like to put forward a motion.

Madame Sirois, there are 350,000 seasonal workers across Canada. We see concentrations in Quebec and in the Atlantic provinces, but they're everywhere and they are absolutely vital. I want to pick up on something you said and something we heard in the extensive round table discussions and consultations we had in 2021 and 2022. What we heard is that jobs may be seasonal, but workers are not.

I want you to speak a little about the vital work seasonal workers do. Also, please speak about the variations and differences we see among regions in Canada and industries. Furthermore, perhaps shed some light on how you think EI should be tailored to reflect some of those variations, both regional and sector-specific.

[Translation]

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Thank you for the question.

I am going to tell you about seasonal industry as I know it where I live. I can tell you a bit about it because I was a seasonal worker for 30 years, in a nursery in Forestville. In fact, on the ground, a lot of women seasonal workers live in a state of anxiety because there are too many variations in the requirements for employment insurance and they do not always reflect the situation in our region.

Some people, at least people who are able to, have to hold more than one seasonal job. Even by doing that, however, we are not able to make ends meet at the end of the month with employment insurance. Where I live, on the upper north shore, you have to work 700 hours before you qualify for 14 weeks of benefits. In our region, the businesses are only seasonal. In a village like Tadoussac, some seasonal industry workers are employed during the summer but are unable to find another job during the winter because not many are available in the region.

Where I live, there are about 1,800 jobless workers during the summer, but that number climbs to 5,800 or 6,000 during the winter. Those figures give you an idea of the importance of seasonal industry in our region. That is the case everywhere on the north shore. One of the difficulties we face is that the villages are not close to one another and we have no public transit. So people live in a “black hole” for a period that may be as long as 18 weeks.

What we would like is for all of the employment insurance economic regions to be eliminated once and for all, because they do not in any way reflect the situation in our regions. As my friend Mr. Thibodeau said earlier, we are calling for a universal threshold of 420 hours' work, or twelve 15-hour weeks, and a 70% benefit rate applied to the 12 best weeks.

I don't know whether you can imagine the situation, but with the cost of living today, people are receiving only 55% of their pay, sometimes less. On the upper north shore, benefits are calculated based on the 22 best weeks, but when people can only put together 18 or 19, that brings their benefits down.

It is unacceptable for seasonal jobs, whether in a peat bog or a nursery, or in the tourism industry or the fishery, not to be recognized as real work. These are not summer jobs for students. They are real jobs and they are important. These workers have to be protected over the winter. Where I live, right now, people are leaving the region because they are not able to survive on a seasonal job. So they go and work somewhere else. The rate of decline in our population is the highest in Quebec, and that is certainly somewhat connected with employment insurance.

I would like to point out that seasonal businesses are important for Canada as a whole. Attacking and impoverishing these workers jeopardizes a number of businesses in the region when they are unfortunately unable to hire year-round. Mr. Pinchbeck talked to us earlier about ski resorts. Where I live, there is no fishing in winter, no peat is collected in winter, and there are fewer tourists during that season than in summer. For those reasons, we need an employment insurance system that reflects the reality of life outside the cities. So we are calling for the outright elimination of employment insurance economic regions.

• (1130)

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

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Thank you.

[English]

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

[Translation]

The floor is yours for six minutes, Ms. Chabot.

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

My sincere thanks to Ms. Sirois, Mr. Thibodeau and Mr. Pinchbeck. I believe your testimony offers an important illustration, I would even say major illustration, of an economic reality that is underestimated or ignored: the reality of seasonal industry as a whole in our towns and outside our urban areas, more or less everywhere in Canada. This study is also important to me.

Ms. Sirois, I want to recognize the dedication you have shown over all these years, both to the work you have done in the field and for your defence and advocacy for the rights of unemployed workers today. In your testimony, you were about to tell us about solutions. I think you have called repeatedly for solutions, to no avail.

What would be concrete solutions that would ensure that consideration be given to seasonal industry workers?

• (1135)

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Thank you for your question, Ms. Chabot.

I want to congratulate you too on the work you do for us seasonal industry workers in Parliament. Thank you.

The solutions are simple. We want the bar for qualifying for employment insurance to be 420 hours for seasonal industries. The difference between 420 hours and the 700 hours currently required is much too big for a region like ours. Where we live, we are at the maximum, but the bar is set at 700 hours. We want it to be lowered to 420 hours, or twelve 15-hour weeks.

We are also requesting a benefit rate of 70% over the 12 best weeks of work, 35 weeks of benefits payable, and an additional 15 weeks of protection for jobless workers who hold seasonal employment for as long as the 35-week minimum has not been set.

Reducing the hours of work required is the only way to eliminate the black hole and give seasonal industry workers access to employment insurance.

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

And a sincere welcome to you too, Mr. Thibodeau, especially since you say you work as a volunteer.

I don't know what percentage seasonal work represents in your region, but we can see it's a major economic fact. You also mentioned the black hole. I would note that, in 2018, the federal government—correct me if I'm wrong—introduced a five-week pilot project in 13 pilot regions for seasonal industry workers across Canada. It then committed to improving those pilot projects and making them permanent, but all that it's done year after year is extend the five-week period.

Would you please explain to us how that no longer meets the needs of seasonal industry workers?

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** Thank you very much, Ms. Chabot.

I'm proud to be here with you today. As you said, volunteer work is a lot of work. I must say I do support a lot of people.



The seasonal industry is the core of the New Brunswick economy, especially on the Acadian Peninsula and in rural regions. Working in the seasonal industry means you can't pick blueberries, strawberries or raspberries in winter. It also means you can't go to ice cream parlours or seasonal restaurants in winter.

In 2018, when we got organized and went to work with Ms. Sirois and all the other committees, a lot was happening at home in Caraquet. A lot of frustrated people were protesting. That's what brought on the five-week pilot project, which was a good fit for the needs at the time.

Today, with the unemployment rate in the great economic region of Restigouche-Albert, the five-week pilot project no longer reflects the needs of the people, who need a lot more weeks of employment insurance benefits. The present situation really doesn't reflect the economy of workers in the seasonal industry in New Brunswick, especially those on the Acadian Peninsula and in the rural regions of the Restigouche-Albert region.

You should know that a \$5 million study was conducted on the subject. We worked hard with all the major players for an employment insurance reform, which still hasn't been adopted. Ms. Chabot, you often rose in the House to speak on our behalf and to request that reform, which had been promised, but that was a promise not kept.

However, the government has all the necessary tools to introduce the reform but no will to do so. I remember a meeting that the minister attended. He didn't want to state the reasons to the provincial Conservative government at that time, but I think that was misplaced pride. In the meantime, our people have been left to suffer. You mustn't forget the misery our people are experiencing.

Consequently, the pilot project no longer meets the needs of seasonal industry workers, who need more weeks of benefits. As my colleague Line Sirois and I have said, we need 15 weeks added to the pilot project. We also need recognition and increased protection for seasonal workers. We're talking about 420 hours of work to qualify, 15 weeks added to the pilot project and 35 weeks of benefits.

You need to know that we have a tourism industry in our region—

• (1140)

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

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** Thank you.

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

[English]

Ms. Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

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

I'm going to ask Mr. Thibodeau to continue on. I see that Mr. Thibodeau was here almost four years ago with similar information for this committee.

I want to ask if you could also expand on the connection between seasonal work and climate change. We know that the EI needs

modernization and needs reform. How do we also incorporate the fact that, for seasonal workers, the timing of that season might be changing or has changed?

[Translation]

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** The environment can definitely play a role. There are places in New Brunswick, for example, where river water levels are rising. These things can be difficult.

However, seasonal work has been there and will always be. It's a need.

I'd like to continue what I was saying earlier because I was cut off. I was talking about the seasonal tourism industry. In the tourism industry where we live, workers have held the same jobs for years. This year, however, they were five hours short of qualifying for EI, but they couldn't get those hours from their employers. It's ridiculous. Where are those people going to go to get work? They work hard. They even work three or four jobs trying to get the necessary total number of work hours to qualify for EI, but they can't get there. It's hard.

Yes, the environment can be a factor. The peat bogs will always be here. The blueberries, raspberries and strawberries will always be here. The fishing will still be here too because I don't think the sea, the fish, the lobster or the crab will dry up. There will always be water, so fishermen will always fish.

Seasonal industry workers need to be recognized and respected, regardless of what the environment's doing. Thank you.

[English]

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

I'll ask witness Pinchbeck as well about that idea of climate change and how the seasons might have changed. If the government is going to open up EI and modernize, what do they need to think about in terms of the changing seasons or the timing of that?

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** It's an excellent question. What we have seen and will continue to see in Canada's winter sports industry is twofold. There will be a continual decline of what we call our total number of ski days. I mentioned in my presentation 100 to 150, which will go down over the next number of years. We will also see more weather-interrupted events.

I think the answer to this question is very similar to what my fellow presenters are advocating for. We need to look at, in our case, rural ski areas as a different subset of what their regions might be. Again, when we go out to Invermere, British Columbia, where Panorama Mountain Resort is located, that's very similar to Blue Mountain in that it's 700 hours to qualify for EI benefits and a relatively short week. When Panorama loses a few days or a few weeks of season because of weather events.... They're a heavy snow-making ski area. They have invested significantly in protecting their business, but it still happens. Those employees are left—

• (1145)

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** I'm sorry to cut you off. I don't have much time.

I don't think there's anywhere in B.C. that qualifies for the government exemptions of additional weeks of employment insurance. Are you aware of any?

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** I am not aware of any.

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

I still have two minutes, so I'll ask witness Sirois a question.

I'm sure you're as frustrated as potentially some of the other witnesses on this call are. I'm sure you've been talking about this for probably more than a decade. I wonder if you could share your thoughts on how the seasons have changed, how seasonal work has changed and how climate change is and might be affecting the workers you represent.

[Translation]

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Thank you for your question.

It's significant where we live. There are increasing numbers of forest fires on the north shore as a result of climate change. When huge fires break out, forest access is shut down and no one's allowed to work. As a result, workers accumulate fewer hours and, in some instances, can't even qualify for EI. People here have been affected by climate change and forest fires for two years now. Forest workers call us because they don't have access to their regular jobs. Seasonal workers who plant trees, prepare the forest and cut down trees can't qualify for EI. Those who can qualify still experience the black hole in winter. It's harder with climate change.

[English]

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Just to follow up on that, we recently had witnesses here talking about affordable housing and mass timber. I'm wondering if you think there is an opportunity to revitalize the industry around wood and resource extraction, I guess, of wood in Canada.

**The Chair:** You may give a short answer, Madame Sirois.

[Translation]

**Ms. Line Sirois:** We hope we can get the lumber industry back on track one day because its situation is increasingly difficult. Ten years ago, businesses like Kruger were all over the region, but now they've shut down. If we could restart—

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

[English]

Mr. Thibodeau, you have your hand up.

[Translation]

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** I just wanted to mention that peat here—

[English]

**The Chair:** No. Thank you, Mr. Thibodeau. You can do that if you're questioned again.

We'll go to Mr. Aitchison for five minutes.

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses here.

It's interesting. I looked through a breakdown of industries in which seasonal work is very common. I come from an area called Parry Sound—Muskoka, which is, I think, reasonably well known as an area with a lot of recreation, seasonal-type work and people in building. There's a lot of forestry and construction, as well as accommodation and food services. It's all very common in my area. In my previous life before getting here, I talked to a lot of folks in the resort industry about the challenges they face. This is clearly a big part of it.

I guess this is for everybody, but I'll start with Paul in Collingwood, since he probably knows the area pretty well, too.

The housing crisis has been an issue in these industries in my community. I'm assuming it is in yours as well. Affordability, generally speaking, is part of the issue here. The housing challenge is exacerbating the situation we're here to talk about today.

Would you say that's a fair statement? Could you comment on that?

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** It is absolutely a fair statement. Although Canadian ski areas continue to invest in employee housing, it does not meet the needs of individuals who wish to come in and build lives in these communities. I think you're very perceptive to understand that this impacts our ability to continue to have great employees.

The suggestions that we would have, very similar to my colleagues.... Lowering the minimum hours for qualification and extending the number of weeks would ease the opportunity for people entering communities to work in seasonal positions. It might be the spouse of someone who has a full-time job. It makes living in a community, raising children and attaining what we might call the Canadian dream much easier.

• (1150)

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Okay. Thanks for that.

[Translation]

Ms. Sirois, does your region have a housing crisis too?

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Yes, absolutely. Outdoor workers in our region are shuttled in by air, and many businesses buy housing to accommodate them. Consequently, it's harder for people who would like to come and live here to access adequate housing since many houses have become seasonal: many workers come here in summer but return to their homes in winter.

It's also very hard for people to pay for housing in winter when employment insurance benefits amount to only 55% of their wages. The cost of living is now enormous, which is why we want the benefit rate to be increased to at least 70%.

Even though we have an enormous province and live on a coast 1,400 kilometres long, the problem is the same everywhere: There's a shortage of housing, including social and affordable housing. Newly built housing is intended for workers who come here in summer and leave in winter. It's quite a disturbing situation for the region's economy.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Thank you, Ms. Sirois.

Mr. Thibodeau, I'd like to ask you the same question.

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** There's a housing crisis in New Brunswick.

Many foreign workers come here to meet the labour demand of seasonal industries because our population is rapidly aging. In addition, rents are appalling and, in some instances, so high that people who have housing have difficulty paying for it, especially when employment insurance benefits amount to 55% of their income.

The new provincial government has committed to building new housing for these people, and I'm proud of that, but I'd also like to see rents that are commensurate with their incomes. It's important for people to have good housing to live and work in. As in Ms. Sirois' region, we also have foreign workers who are leaving because they can't live here. So it's important that housing prices be low so these people can live properly and—

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

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** Thank you.

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

[English]

We'll now go to Mr. Van Bynen for five minutes.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is interesting research that we're doing. Some of the information we've received from the Library of Parliament, would that routinely be part of the reports that come out, or do we have to introduce the information relative to the provinces, etc., that have different levels of unemployment? How do we introduce that into evidence, or does that routinely become part of the evidence?

**The Chair:** During drafting instructions, you could request that the information provided to the committee on this particular issue from the Library of Parliament would be—

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Okay. Thank you.

**The Chair:** —especially if you reference it in your comments.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Good. Thank you.

I think that's very informative information, and if we're going to review the unemployment insurance process, then I think that information would be very helpful in developing new strategies, if necessary.

I'm hearing that regulations and the criteria in the existing regime are harsh, and that prompts some additional reviews. I'm also hearing that we're focusing on seasonal workers as opposed to seasonal industries, so that might be a perspective that we need to give some consideration to, if there are going to be any further studies going forward.

I'll ask my questions to each of the panellists, if you could just be brief.

To what extent does the black hole disproportionately impact specific groups of seasonal workers?

I'll start with Ms. Sirois.

• (1155)

[Translation]

**Ms. Line Sirois:** Yes, the impact of the employment insurance black hole in our region is harder on women who work in the seasonal industry. They can't leave their region and go to work in the major centres because they generally have children and aging parents to care for, and the percentage of women who are in that situation is quite disturbing. Women in the labour force are getting poorer.

[English]

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Pinchbeck.

**Mr. Paul Pinchbeck:** Thank you.

I'd like to echo Madame Sirois' comments. In our ski areas, we find that women employees are often in the most seasonal of jobs, again, because of the family responsibilities they both endure and enjoy at times.

I'd also like to point out that, because Canada's ski areas exist in a largely rural environment, this is one of the key factors in attracting some of our newest citizens to rural communities; it's the availability of jobs. We're a very popular opportunity for jobs, but we are also looked upon as highly seasonal and, therefore, not stable at all.

Thank you.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Mr. Thibodeau.

[Translation]

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** For us in New Brunswick as well, the employment insurance black hole affects many women who work in fish processing plants and other seasonal jobs. However, we also have men who work in the peat, fishing and other industries. Given the EI rate that we have in our large regions, the black hole makes it increasingly difficult for these people to get reasonable EI benefits.

It's true that women are in a special situation because they also have to take care of the home, their children and so on. Consequently, the black hole hits them even harder than it hits men. However, many fishermen and other men work in the seasonal industry and also have to—

[English]

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** I have five minutes. You have my apologies for cutting you off.

It's interesting that no one mentioned any specific age groups. I'm wondering if there are any specific age groups. If you could, please say yes and identify the specific age groups.

I'll go back to Ms. Sirois.

[Translation]

**Ms. Line Sirois:** We're now seeing that young people don't have as much access to the measures that the federal government introduces to assist seasonal industry workers. To be eligible for five additional weeks of benefits, they must have worked in the industry for at least three years and have filed three EI claims.

In addition, it's much harder for the aging population to qualify for employment insurance because the work is physically demanding and people have to work—

[English]

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** At this time I'd like to have an answer from the other two witnesses as well, please.

**The Chair:** You're out of time.

Mr. Thibodeau, you have the floor.

[Translation]

**Mr. Fernand Thibodeau:** Yes, there are a lot of people where I live who are nearing retirement and are a little older. We also have a lot of young people who are illiterate or who had learning disorders at school. Seasonal work was the best option for them. Some even left school to help their parents. A family with two children can specialize in a single area. It also varies with age where we live.

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

[English]

We'll have to end with that as we've now concluded our first hour. Again, I want to thank the witnesses for appearing this morning and providing testimony to the panel. You are free to go.

We will suspend for a few minutes while we transition to the panellists for the last hour. We'll suspend for no more than three minutes.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1200)

**The Chair:** We will resume the second hour of witness testimony on this study by welcoming two witnesses who are appearing in person in the room. We have Ms. Janet Krayden, agricultural workforce expert, Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association, and Ms. Angella MacEwen, senior economist, national services, Canadian Union of Public Employees.

You have five minutes for your opening statement, and I will advise you when your five minutes are up.

We'll begin with Ms. Krayden for five minutes, please.

**Ms. Janet Krayden (Agricultural Workforce Expert, Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association):** Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the great Canadian mushroom industry.

The agriculture sector creates about 570,000 jobs in Canada—one in 34 jobs—generating \$150 billion and 70% of Canada's GDP. That's not small potatoes. About half of the workforce is employed in permanent occupations, and half are employed seasonally due to Canada's winters and growing season. Agriculture is facing a chronic and increasing labour shortage. The most recent statistics from the Canadian Agricultural HR Council identifies over 28,000 jobs that went unfilled in Canada's agriculture sector, costing the sector \$3.5 billion in lost revenues.

Canada has a strong and adaptable high-tech mushroom sector within the ag sector that contributes over \$1 billion to the Canadian economy. Mushrooms double in size every day. Canada grows over 150,000 tonnes of mushrooms annually. If you buy a fresh mushroom in a Canadian grocery store, it comes from one of our local Canadian mushroom farms. All of our workers are essential, and we are proud of them. Mushroom farms are big job creators in Canada, offering competitive wages.

Seventy per cent of employees on our farms are Canadian. We are constantly recruiting for local workers and use the temporary foreign worker program as a last resort for our high-demand, entry-level positions, such as the harvesting labour occupation. We are the largest sector employer for the temporary foreign worker program's agricultural stream, employing over 2,400 workers when Canadians do not apply. Mushroom farms pay good wages for a variety of jobs, including harvesting, human resources and growers. Our harvesting labourers make above minimum wage, as they are paid piece-rate. Some workers can make up to \$29 an hour.

Canadian Mushroom Growers' Association members worked together on a mushroom fair labour and ethical recruitment program that supports employer best practices. One of the things our farms do is have our HR teams make sure workers are signed up for the correct programs, such as employment insurance. Sir, our agricultural stream workers are eligible to use employment insurance, the same as all Canadians. They use it when they are sick or injured. During COVID, they originally used EI. As they were often isolated, they used CERB following all public health regulations. In cases of short-term disability, some farms have short-term disability insurance plus EI coverage.

Another situation among our agricultural stream workers in the temporary foreign worker program is the use of EI for maternity leave when female agricultural stream workers get pregnant. They qualify for the standard 600 hours within a year, just like Canadians in the domestic workforce. They receive 55% of their income. Under EI rules, they get one year of maternity leave for up to a year and a half. At the end of the maternity standard leave allocation, workers return to work.

This is where we are having problems with the temporary foreign worker program: housing issues. We need housing options for workers beyond employer-paid housing, which is communal. Workers are paying \$30 per week for housing, even though they're making above the prevailing wage or higher. We find that there are very stringent rules in the program for farm employers and workers. This is the only option they are allowing right now. We're not finding a lot of options being developed within the agriculture and seafood programs we're working on.

For our workers who are pregnant or who have children.... The babies cry and other workers, understandably, complain. We need flexibility for workers with families. We've been discussing this with the temporary foreign worker program directorate, but we are being ignored. The majority of mushroom farms offer excellent-quality, apartment-style housing, with only one to two workers per bedroom. We have a video that I think has been distributed to everyone. It will also be available within the submission.

• (1205)

Immigration Canada is encouraging families to come to Canada. If they apply to the agri-food pilot, their families can come to Canada with open work permits. We strongly support the agri-food immigration pilot, and we also strongly support the open work permits for spouses, but we need other options for housing. This is what we continue to explain.

**The Chair:** Ms. Krayden, your five minutes have gone over.

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** Okay. I'll just finish up.

Our farmers are forced to keep housing empty, this kind of quality housing, when workers choose to live on their own, and it costs a billion dollars a year, so we've made very good recommendations with proper worker protections that we continue to advocate for and that I'm willing to answer questions about.

**The Chair:** Time has gone well over now.

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** You can address any other point when you're questioned.

Ms. MacEwen, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Ms. Angella MacEwen (Senior Economist, National Services, Canadian Union of Public Employees):** Thank you.

Good morning. I'm here on behalf of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. It's Canada's largest union with over 700,000 members. We deliver quality services in communities across Canada in a broad cross-section of the economy: health care, education, municipalities, libraries, universities, colleges, child care, public utilities and airlines. This is something that we're following.

Some regions of Canada have a disproportionate number of jobs that are seasonal in nature, and I just want to point out how we sometimes talk about it. It is a reflection of the economic reality of those regions and not of the workers. They are not seasonal workers; they are seasonal industries.

Employment insurance being available to workers in these seasonal industries provides a macroeconomic stabilizing effect for the regions and buffers the ups and downs of those industries.

One factor here is that the duration of EI benefits depends on the number of hours that a worker has worked but also the unemployment rate in their EI region. Over time, over the past few years, the unemployment rate in Canada has trended down, and this has meant the appearance of what is called a black hole in some of these seasonal regions, where unemployment insurance is no longer enough to fill the gap in seasonal employment. EI has offered some pilot projects starting in 2018 that offer extra weeks, but that's a band-aid solution and is not working.

Since the extra weeks pilot was introduced in 2018, the unemployment rate in the 12 targeted regions in eastern Canada dropped by nearly 3%, so it's even harder now to qualify for employment insurance, and when you do, you get far fewer weeks of entitlement. Compared to the rest of Canada, where the unemployment rate has only dropped 1%, this is really hitting these seasonal regions.

Every percentage point drop in the regional unemployment rate means two fewer weeks of EI benefits for an unemployed worker. Since 2018, we now need an extra six weeks to make up that gap. A lower unemployment rate in these regions doesn't necessarily mean that it's easier to get a job. It just means there are fewer people there looking for a job. There's a falling labour force participation rate, an aging population and lots of other reasons that this is happening.

The increased number of temporary migrant workers is starting to get to the size where it's kind of distorting this signal of the unemployment rate. Before workers come to Canada to work, they're not counted as unemployed workers; they're not counted in that labour supply. Unemployment is meant to be an indication of the supply of available workers, but those workers aren't counted. It could mean up to a percentage point or two in the difference in the unemployment rate if we did count those workers.

Another factor is the design of the EI economic regions. Some of the sub-regions most affected are lumped in with other areas that have a completely different economic profile—for example, the New Brunswick peninsula, southern Nova Scotia and parts of Quebec. Advocates in these regions have been asking for a review of EI boundaries for some time to address this fact.

We have some recommendations.

Increase the number of extra weeks in the pilot project from five to 15.

Introduce a new reason for separation in the record of employment called seasonal layoff, which streamlines the administration of these claims and makes the process fair to workers.

Another thing we could do is allow workers to try jobs and not be penalized for doing so. Currently, if a worker takes a risk on a job that is uncertain and it doesn't work out, and they quit or are fired, they lose their access to EI benefits. They're now no longer eligible, so workers might decide not to take a risk on a job because they don't know whether or not that's going to mean losing benefits.

Then, finally, review the EI boundaries to make sure that they're representative of the economic realities in the region.

Thank you.

• (1210)

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

We'll begin the first round with Mr. Aitchison for six minutes.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses here this afternoon as well.

I mentioned earlier that in Parry Sound—Muskoka, where I'm from, we have a large seasonal workforce. They're resort staff and that kind of thing and cooks who prepare amazing meals in the summer, but they worry about how they're going to feed their own families, so I definitely have questions for you.

I want to thank you again for being here. Our time is limited, though.

I also want to do something else. I want to give verbal notice of a motion, if I could, Mr. Chair, to my colleagues around the table. I'll read it now, if that's okay.

It reads:

Given that, in order to save Canadians up to \$50,000, reduce mortgage payments by \$2,200 every year on a typical home, and build 30,000 more homes every year;

The committee report to the House its recommendation to remove the federal GST on new homes sold for under 1 million dollars.

That's the motion. It's very simple. I don't think there's anything alarming in that.

We know the housing crisis is getting worse. Rents, mortgages and the price of the average home have all doubled in the last nine years. Back in October 2015, it only took about 39% of median, pre-tax household income to cover home ownership costs. Now it takes over 60%. Government charges—we've said this over and over—account for more than 30% of the cost of a home. Of course, the GST is the biggest share of that.

This committee has heard overwhelmingly from those in the industry, including some of the witnesses we heard from earlier, that housing costs are a huge part of the affordability crisis in this country. The Conservatives have proposed this bold solution to remove the GST on new homes under a million dollars. I think it's time we propose that to the House.

I just wanted to put that on verbal notice, if I might, Mr. Chair.

Is everyone good with that?

• (1215)

**The Chair:** It's on notice. It will come back at a future date, Mr. Aitchison.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** That's great. Thank you.

How much time do I have left now?

**The Chair:** You have about four minutes. It's a little less, but it's roughly four minutes.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Okay. Thank you very much.

I thought Irek was going to cause problems there and slow me down, but he didn't. He was close, but he didn't.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** I was about to.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Okay. Thanks very much.

I'll start with Ms. Krayden, if I might.

In many rural and remote parts of Canada, agriculture represents the first job many young Canadians will ever have. We know that youth unemployment in Canada continues to rise and young Canadians struggle to find their first jobs, even in an agricultural region like the Okanagan, as an example.

What are some of the cost challenges that agricultural businesses are facing that might limit their ability to hire and train young Canadians?

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** We find that for Canadian domestic jobs and youth, we have a better chance of recruiting them for more internship-type programs and what people would call the higher-skilled jobs. What we're finding is that, for what we would say are the entry-level, harvesting labourer positions, what's generally happening—and this has been documented through surveys—is that people will apply, occasionally including young people as well, and then a lot of the time, they leave after a day. That's very common.

We find there's a better connection for more of an internship-type program. On a lot of farms, you have a lot of grower positions, which include a lot of science, HR positions and interim and farm manager positions. There's a better connection there. If ESDC worked with the industry on that, I think you would have a much better chance of recruiting and retaining youth.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** You mentioned science positions and the growing. A lot of training is obviously involved in that.

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** Exactly.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Can you speak to the cost of that training? That must be a significant input cost of hiring young people.

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** We haven't actually tracked that, but we know we do a lot of on-the-job training on the farms. Every farm is a little different and every sector is different, and it takes tremendous time and cost. Basically, none of that is being tracked or recognized a lot of the time within the departments because the on-the-job training that goes on at the farm is really not recognized, for example, by the immigration department. We are finding this very difficult because it's an unrecognized area. The time and the cost are also not being tracked by the departments, unfortunately.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Can you speak to the impact of high inflation and interest over the last couple of years? What kind of impact has that had on your industry?

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** Yes. We find that costs across the board for all of what they call their inputs and expenses to run a farm have gone up maybe 30% or more—on things like fertilizer, for example.

The carbon tax is not helping. We've been hopeful that the private member's bill on the carbon tax would go through and include the heating of buildings. We're not included for any exemptions, unfortunately, even though we heat the buildings for the mushroom farms. They are getting charged an extraordinary amount of carbon tax. It's just one more expense on top of the increasing inflation the farmers are absorbing.

• (1220)

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Thank you. You got me excited when you mentioned the carbon tax. I was going to continue on, but I'm out of time. Maybe there will be another chance.

**The Chair:** Your time is over, Mr. Aitchison, but you'll have a second round.

Mr. Kusmierczyk, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you very much to both of you for your excellent testimony this afternoon.

Workers in Canada are paying less in EI premiums today than they were paying under the Conservative government. It's significant. The EI premium rate has gone down from \$1.88 to about \$1.64 this year. It's significantly less. At the same time, the EI program has been strengthened over that time too. You can look at, for example, extended sickness benefits going from 15 weeks to 26 weeks. We talked about the seasonal program adding an additional five weeks to help out with the income gap for seasonal workers, and adoptive parents having extended EI benefits. Under this Liberal government, EI is better managed and stronger, and workers are paying less in terms of EI premiums.

Ms. MacEwen, as EI is strengthened in a phased approach, what should be the next step? What should be the next issue that we address in terms of prioritizing how we can continue to strengthen EI?

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** I have a list.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Can you help us prioritize? What would you say is the next big one?

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** We have a list of 10 things to prioritize. One of them would actually be returning premiums to the higher rate so that we can invest in the things we need. The training for LMDAs, the labour market development agreements, was cut in the last budget. This is a time when we're going through lots of transitions in the labour market. There's climate change. There's AI and a whole bunch of transitions in the labour market. In terms of actually reinvesting in training, Canada invests less money than most of our OECD counterparts in training. I think moving back into that space is really important.

Obviously, there are the changes for seasonal workers. As well, women who get pregnant before or after they've been laid off often don't have enough benefits to cover. We've worked on recommending some changes to allow that.

ESDC did a whole bunch of consultations. There were some really strong recommendations. Improving the involvement of the EI Commission and having more worker voices and business voices in what happens I think is really important.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Ms. MacEwen, I do appreciate the priorities. They're excellent priorities and extremely helpful. What should be the first priority, the first order of business, in terms of how we can strengthen EI? From the list of 10, which one would you say is the next one we ought to focus on?

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** Increase premiums and invest in training.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Okay.

I'm glad you mentioned training, because no government has invested more in worker training than this government. We transfer \$3 billion every year to the provinces. We've doubled the union training and innovation program. We've created and rolled out a sectoral workforce development program as well that is industry-led. Every year we commit over a billion dollars to support apprentices. We are making investments in training and skills.

Specifically for seasonal workers, what flexibility could we build into the EI program to allow seasonal workers to be able to get the training and upskilling they need to be able to perhaps take a more predictable job or to take a job that allows them to see themselves through that income gap in between their seasonal work? What flexibility in EI programs could we build?

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** That's a great question.

Actually, with regard to the level of investment, if we adjust it for inflation, it should be double what it is now to be comparable with what it was 15 years ago. It needs to be flexible so that workers can train while they're still employed—maybe do some part-time stuff. I actually was on EI in 1997, and I did training through the EI program. I continued to get EI benefits while I was doing my course, so we could have something like that.

Also, not all sectors have apprenticeships. For example, with regard to child care and health care, a lot of those entry-level jobs aren't officially apprenticeships. Building trades workers can get EI while they're doing their training, but child care workers and health care workers who are in those entry-level jobs can't get EI while they're doing their training. We should look at making that work because we have shortages in those industries now.

• (1225)

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Ms. MacEwen, thank you very much. I could literally talk to you all day on on this subject.

How much time do I have? I have minute. This is fantastic. That's great. It's a bonus. I didn't realize that.

In terms of flexibility with regard to the EI program specifically as it relates to seasonal workers, working while on claim is an important and oftentimes underutilized part of the EI system. It allows workers to find an additional job and earn some additional income while they still receive their EI benefits.

Can you talk a little bit, Ms. MacEwen, about working while on claim and how we can again build flexibility into the EI program through working while on claim?

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** Yes, I love the working while on claim program. I actually did that while I was on EI as well. I think that, back then in 1997, it was \$100 per week that I could earn, and I think that it's still close to that, so increasing the amount that you can earn....

Also, having some flexibility around being able to keep that money instead of clawing the first dollar back—there were some changes that were made around that—will be helpful because the

goal here is that, if you work while you're on claim, you're more likely to get a good labour market match. You're more likely to go back faster. If we're not clawing that money back but letting people keep it in their pockets, they're going to be more successful.

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

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you for your testimony, ladies.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the actual situation of workers in the seasonal industry in various regions in Canada, in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces, and to show that seasonal work has various impacts. Between two periods of employment, these workers have neither an income nor a job, a situation that leaves them in tough living conditions. Most groups are seeking an end to the employment insurance black hole, as I believe the Canadian Union of Public Employees is as well.

The training you mentioned can play a role in this regard, but the idea isn't to devitalize the regions or to train workers for other jobs. The idea is for the quality of those jobs and workers to contribute to their regional economies.

As you said, Ms. MacEwen, employment insurance must have a stabilizing effect in order to enhance and increase the value of that work. It is important for employers to be able to rely on skilled workers who come back year after year. However, the black hole encourages people to leave those jobs and to fill others.

If there were to be any measures in the employment insurance program designed to solve this problem and eliminate the black hole, what do you think they should be?

[English]

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** Yes, you're right. Being able to have EI for those workers means that those trained workers stay in the region and come back to that employer year after year. As she mentioned, there's a lot of on-the-job training that you can't get elsewhere. Those employers have already invested that time in those workers, and they don't want to have to lose them next year. If you have the longer benefit period, if you have the appropriate EI region that reflects the economic reality, and if you allow workers to try another job and not be penalized for that....



This year we had an unusual crisis in fishing where there just weren't as many hours. A lot of workers didn't even get the hours that they needed. We need to recognize when there are unusual economic circumstances and come in with something that helps those workers who now aren't qualifying. The alternative is that they leave the region, and the region loses those skilled workers. We don't necessarily want to train them out of that job. Those jobs, as you heard, provide a huge amount of GDP to the economy. We rely on those jobs being there.

• (1230)

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I would add that the economy in our regions is doing better.

Your speech was very interesting, and I think it would make a contribution to the committee's efforts if we could have a copy of it.

You said we need to redraw the borders because the economic regions under the program no longer reflect the actual situation, and you're right. We also had commissioners submit documents on this subject two or three years ago, but those reports were shelved. Why is it a priority to redefine those economic regions in the short term?

[English]

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** Yes. There were a number of trial measures that we used during the pandemic, and there's been research done. The department has done research on the impact of those measures.

A lower, pan-Canadian entrance requirement of.... What we recommended was 360 hours, but they did 420. That lower entrance requirement helps precarious workers—and workers in seasonal industries are those precarious workers—by having that lower entrance requirement that doesn't vary based on the unemployment rate, because, as we know, that's less and less reflective of what matters. There's also adjusting the unemployment rate and the number of weeks, so that's recognizing that the unemployment rate has changed and adjusting that.

Then, I think, it's looking at having a floor of some kind. We know that, in all of those temporary benefits, there were other administrative things that make it simpler and faster to process EI. Those, I think, are good as well. They're a little niche, but there was a whole bunch of measures that we used during COVID that had a big benefit and didn't cost a huge amount of money.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Ms. Krayden, you mentioned 2,400 jobs, if I understood you correctly. I believe that some are occupied by temporary foreign workers, but how many permanent employees are there? How many weeks of work does mushroom-growing represent?

[English]

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** A lot of the farms explained that, without the temporary foreign workers program, they wouldn't be able to survive and that we need them to fill the job vacancies.

Yes, we have 2,400 temporary foreign worker program agricultural stream workers with the temporary foreign worker program. Seventy per cent are Canadian, so we.... We are a small sector. We

have a lot of employees. We don't have loads of farms, but we have about 9,000 to 10,000 workers overall across Canada, and we fill the job vacancies with the proven labour market impact assessments—

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** How many weeks of work per year does that represent for an industry worker? Do people work year round?

[English]

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** Yes. They work on the LMIA actually more full time. They take a two-week vacation within mushrooms. For the soft work program, the seasonal program, it's different.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

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

I really appreciate the witnesses here today.

I note that there have been a number of references to disadvantages and discrimination against women in EI and at work, so I know that the witnesses will understand the importance of the motion I'm about to move.

On February 5, 2024, the CEO of Air Canada, Michael Rousseau, told this committee "I don't think it's appropriate for me to comment on that", when I questioned him on what he thinks of all the unpaid work that flight attendants do. Then, in October, in response to my question to Minister MacKinnon on flight attendants' unpaid work, he said, "Flight attendants have a collective agreement that sets out their hours and their wages, and it is not my place to comment on it."

The minister and the CEO of Air Canada sounded strangely similar in their answers, and that makes sense, as Air Canada has lobbied the government 189 times in the past three years. I'm sure the Liberal minister is well aware that Canada's biggest airlines are all benefiting from the practice of not paying flight attendants when they are at work. It is time he stands up for them and closes the loophole in the labour code that allows this exploitation.

Everyone on this committee can agree that unpaid work is unacceptable. Every hour worked should be an hour paid in full. As a committee, we can stand in solidarity against unpaid work and stand up for marginalized workers like flight attendants, who are disproportionately women. When people in powerful positions punch down on marginalized workers, it is us as legislators who can stop it. As Canada's flight attendants get ready to go into a very busy travel season, after decades of exploitation, they should not have to work without protection.

As I said, the government needs to close loopholes in the labour code, and we cannot go back to the Conservative era when the then transport minister Lisa Raitt threatened to legislate flight attendants back to work. Flight attendants never had a fair deal because they were women. The workforce has modernized since then, but it is still disproportionately women, and the Liberal government is leaving them with no protection against ongoing exploitation.

I know that the Conservatives are trying to continue to exploit flight attendants again for political purposes by fast-tracking a bill that favours airlines over their workers and allowing this exploitation to continue. Again, as I say, we can't go back to the antiquated thinking around unpaid work. It's time to modernize.

As such, Mr. Chair, I will be moving the motion I put on notice earlier this week, which reads:

That, given that:

Flight attendants in Canada, the majority of whom are women, work for an average of 35 hours for free every month because airlines don't pay attendants for duties like assisting passengers with boarding, pre-flight safety checks, deplaning, and other delays. Resulting in flight attendants spending nearly a full work-week every month working for free, even though they are in uniform and taking responsibility for the safety and well-being of their passengers.

Canada's biggest airlines make millions of dollars each year on the backs of unpaid labour. Air Canada made \$2.3 billion in profits last year, and its CEO's compensation was \$12.4 million.

Every hour worked should be an hour paid, and if a flight attendant is at work, in uniform, performing work duties—they should be getting paid.

In the opinion of the Committee, the government support flight attendants by amending the Canadian Labour Code to ensure that all time spent carrying out pre-flight and post-flight duties, completing mandatory training, and otherwise spent at the workplace at the disposal of the employer, including during a flight delay regardless of if the delay was in the employer's control, is paid at a rate no less than the employee's regular rate of wages for their work and that the committee report this to the House.

Mr. Chair, in the light of climate change, which we had discussions about earlier, this is even more pressing for flight attendants in this country.

Thank you.

• (1235)

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

Ms. Zarrillo has moved a motion, which was her prerogative to do. It was in order.

Is there any discussion?

Mrs. Falk.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair.

We would like to propose an amendment to this motion, given that the main parts of this motion are identical to a Conservative member of Parliament's private member's bill that has been tabled in the House, so I would make the assumption that Ms. Zarrillo would support this amendment.

After "In the opinion of the committee, the government", the amendment would add "must pass Bill C-409...to" before "support flight attendants". This is just a simple amendment basically in line with what she's saying, and it's supporting the private member's bill to make sure that there is equity for flight attendants.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We now have an amendment on the floor. We'll proceed to a discussion on the amendment.

I have Madame Chabot, Mr. Fragiskatos and Mr. Coteau on the amendment.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I want to say two things.

First, I want to request that we adjourn debate to allow our guests to continue their testimony.

• (1240)

[English]

**The Chair:** Are you moving a motion to suspend debate, Madame Chabot?

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Yes, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** We're voting on adjourning discussion on the amendment to the motion by Mrs. Falk. The vote is on the motion by Ms. Chabot to adjourn discussion on the amendment, which would adjourn discussion on the motion.

We're having a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

**The Chair:** The discussion is adjourned. We will return to the witnesses.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Was that an adjournment on the amendment? Can I get some clarification of the Standing Order that says that the whole debate is adjourned?

**The Chair:** Madam Clerk, could you please respond to Ms. Zarrillo?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Ariane Calvert):** Ms. Chabot moved the dilatory motion to adjourn debate on the discussion of the motion. The discussion was on the amendment moved by Ms. Falk, so the dilatory motion would still adjourn debate on the discussion of the motion as a whole.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** What is the standing order number?

**The Chair:** We'll provide that to you.

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

**The Chair:** In the meantime, we're returning to the witnesses.

I have Mr. Aitchison as the next questioner.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** That's exciting. Thank you.

We were just getting warmed up, Ms. Krayden, and I'm excited to get back on this again.

We were talking about the heinous impact of the carbon tax on your industry. If we can get back to that, can you help the committee understand the magnitude of the cost of the carbon tax to the cost of operating your industry?

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** It's the same for mushroom farms as it is for greenhouses, chicken barns and all livestock barns. We have to heat the barns in the winter, because of Canada's cold weather. We get no exemptions for the cost of all the gas that we use to heat the barns. The carbon tax is increasing at its regular times, and it's very expensive. Our farmers have submitted invoices showing the cost of the carbon tax.

I am going to be sending a submission based on my comments, and other additional information we didn't get to, on the issues we're having with work permits and housing, but I can also include the costs, because we have figured them out. They're astronomical, and they're getting larger and larger. It's adding to the inflationary costs. It is also not just the gas for the farm. There's an added cost within the supply chain. We know it's adding to the price of food, because the price goes up for the trucker, the farm where the fertilizer is coming from and all of the inputs on which there's a carbon tax.

It is very much cumulative, and the farmers are feeling it. They have to absorb all these costs.

• (1245)

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** It may not be a common thing, but what's the most common fuel used in heating the greenhouses? Is it—

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I want to ask you what the relevance is to this discussion on seasonal workers and EI.

**The Chair:** The motion is broad. It's on workers in the seasonal industry and the employment insurance program.

I will allow you to continue, Mr. Aitchison.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I thought it was sufficient enough that the witness, who is volunteering her time to be here, brought the issue up—

**The Chair:** I will remind the member and the witness that this is on the seasonal economy and the workers in it.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I think the witness did point out the seasonal nature of Canada with seasonal work, and that the cost of operating seasonally is impacted as well.

I'll go back to my point before I was so rudely interrupted. I want to get back to the types of fuels that are used.

Is propane probably the most common fuel that's used?

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** A lot of time it's natural gas.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Okay.

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** Some farms have converted from propane to natural gas.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** That's obviously a massive impact, this carbon tax, but I'm wondering about another tax.

I talk a lot about housing because that's my portfolio. It's really a passion of mine. There's the impact of these costs on investment in housing. The government also made some changes recently to the capital gains inclusion rate making it a bigger bit of a tax grab.

Has that had an impact on your industry as well?

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** Yes, it has across the board in all of agriculture, including mushroom farms. I know the Canadian Federation of Agriculture provided some good information on that for their budget submission or something like that. The mushroom farms will be passed on within the family, like all other farms, so it is definitely having an impact.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** For my Liberal friends who are concerned about relevance, I'm assuming that the bigger the costs and the bigger the impacts of these huge tax grabs, the fewer seasonal employees you can afford to hire.

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** That is true.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Someone doesn't believe that, I guess, but that's okay.

Is there also an issue related to all of these extra charges, fees and taxes? Is debt becoming an issue for your industry? Are members, farms, incurring more and more debt?

**Ms. Janet Krayden:** I don't have the statistics on that, but it would make sense, because they are price-takers, not price-makers. It's the grocery stores that set the price for the mushrooms, for example. They have to absorb all of the inflationary costs that have been increasing in the last few years.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Aitchison. I gave you additional time because of the point of order.

We will go to Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes.

[Translation]

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

We've been tasked with preparing a study that represents a very important issue for this committee, particularly for Ms. Chabot. Consequently, I am going to yield my speaking time to her.

**The Chair:** Ms. Chabot, go ahead.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Mr. Fragiskatos, you are correct in saying that this is an important study both for me and for all workers in the seasonal industry in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada. With the passage of time, these workers now find themselves in situations that can no longer be remedied under the employment insurance regime because it no longer reflects the true nature of the work that they do in our economic regions.

We have begun this study in order to determine the actual situation of these workers. Perhaps we should explain what the employment insurance black hole is because it seems to be a myth for some. We hear people say that all these workers have to do is work between two periods of employment. But if it were as simple as that, they would do so. However, that isn't the actual nature of seasonal work. The prime characteristic of this industry is that it will not become permanent overnight. If you go into the inns in Tadoussac or elsewhere, you'll find that they shut down for winter in those regions.

Consequently, many seasonal workers find themselves without a future if the employment insurance regime isn't robust enough to enable them to survive between two periods of employment. This is the topic of our study. It should interest everyone, and I hope that's what you think as well. Thank you for yielding your time so I can ask other questions.

Ms. MacEwen, in the first hour, with witnesses representing these workers, we discussed the 2018 pilot project in which five additional weeks of benefits were provided in 13 economic regions. We have learned that, while it met certain needs at the time, it is no longer adequate in 2024. How then, in specific terms, can we improve the program? We're looking for solutions that the government could put in place.

We definitely can't do it by lowering the contribution rate. That's a false debate. The whole question of funding the regime is an entirely different issue.

What do you think of the idea of substantially increasing the number of weeks of EI benefits or permanently correcting the EI eligibility criteria, such as the single criterion of 420 hours of work, which does not take the regional unemployment rate into account?

• (1250)

[English]

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** Exactly.

Make EI more accessible. Over time, fewer and fewer workers are able to access EI. For flight attendants, if they're not getting paid, then those aren't insurable hours for EI, and that's going to affect their EI eligibility.

Have that lower entrance requirement, have a floor and improve the training within. There are transitions happening, and training is appropriate for some people, for example, digital literacy for workers over the age of 45. CUPE has a lot of workers who, since the pandemic, when stuff became more digitalized, are really struggling. Improving our digital literacy training increases productivity, so that's really important and something that we're looking at right now.

Improve the voice of workers and employers. During consultations with ESDC, there were a number of measures that employers and workers agreed on that haven't been implemented yet.

This all requires money, so increase the premium. It's at an all-time low right now, and the return that we get on that investment is very high. We want the biggest bang for our buck. One place to put it is in training and in getting people access to the program. If it's a great program but nobody can get it, then it doesn't really matter.

This matters, again, for climate change, because climate change is going to affect those seasonal industries, and they're going to change. There are going to be transitions, so having that support in place is really important.

I also want to make a note on the capital gains tax. Capital gains comes into effect when you sell an asset, so it wouldn't affect your ongoing operation costs.

[Translation]

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

That should interest all the parties because the employment insurance regime is a federal program that was designed to be a social safety net that would protect workers who found themselves in the worst imaginable situation: being without a job.

However, for workers in the seasonal industry, there's an annual period during which they lose their employment due to the prime characteristic of the industry, as a result of which those people are left to their own devices.

Ladies, do you agree with me that the employment insurance regime should be improved to correct unfair aspects since it no longer meets needs?

[English]

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** I've worked on EI for the past 12 years. I'm a firm believer that EI is supposed to be a social insurance system. It has benefits for the individual, but its primary purpose is for the economy as a whole. It helps us through transitions faster. It helps us cut off recessions. I was talking to my daughter about this last night. She's 16 and had just taken her civics class. She got it right away.

If that first layer of people who get laid off have some income supports and have some access to training, then you stop the transmission. If they don't get that support, they stop spending money. Then other businesses suffer and go out of business. People aren't spending money in those businesses. It supports seasonal industries and it supports seasonal regions with a lot of seasonal work. It's a really important part of a functioning economy, and it hasn't really matched up with our economy for a long time now. We're due for a real overhaul.

There are some things we can do to improve it in the immediate term, but we do want to rethink and make sure that it's not outdated. Not everybody works nine to five, Monday to Friday, in full-time and long-term career jobs. Our economy has changed. Our workforce has changed. If we want to have a productive economy that can make it through these transitions, EI is a really critical part of that.

• (1255)

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

Ms. Zarrillo, you have two and a half minutes to conclude.

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

Again, thank you so much to the witnesses for being here today. You can see how difficult it is to get women's issues on the table, especially as it relates to labour. I appreciate all the testimony we've had today.

Witness MacEwen, you mentioned getting pregnant after being laid off. I'm actually dealing with that right now in Port Moody—Coquitlam. A Rogers worker who was laid off and then got pregnant has no access to EI by 20 hours—20 hours—and the government has refused twice. My staff has asked twice. I'm now writing a letter on that, because it's just so unfair.

Witness MacEwen, you've also written about the intersection between labour and climate change and seasonal workers. You're quoted as saying the following in relation to flight attendants:

The pay starts when the plane backs away from the terminal.... So if there are delays where they're sitting at the terminal because of these extreme weather events, flight attendants are working. They're having to help get people water for much longer periods of time and they're not getting paid.

What do you think about the fact that they're not able to pay in the intersection with climate change now? We're getting into a very busy travel season.

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** Absolutely. I didn't know that before I started working at CUPE. We represent some of those workers, which is how I learned about it. Then I was sitting on a runway in Winnipeg for three hours because of a lightning storm. These flight attendants were dealing with very legitimately frustrated people.

It's not only that they're doing their job; they're doing a very difficult job for an indeterminate amount of time. They don't know when they'll start getting paid. It's very frustrating. It has other implications. As I mentioned, for those hours that they're working but are not paying into EI and not paying into a pension, they're not getting credit for benefits. It really makes it very precarious, especially for younger women coming in, who may be trying to get parental leave and to get those benefits.

I was very surprised that the labour code was still that way and that it hasn't been changed.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** In relation to that, the Minister of Labour has said that it's not their job to protect workers in the labour code. What is your interpretation of what the labour code is for in federally regulated industries?

**Ms. Angella MacEwen:** My interpretation of the labour code is that it's to protect workers.

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

We're at one o'clock. That concludes the second hour.

I want to thank the witnesses for attending.

The committee will meet again on Tuesday, November 5. Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

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

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