

August 27, 2021 - No. 75

**Condemn Governments Which Do Not Treat
Unemployed Workers with Dignity and Respect**

A Livelihood for All Unemployed Workers!

- Pierre Chénier -



Interviews

- **Line Sirois, Coordinator of Unemployment Action Movement, Côte-Nord**
- **France Simard, Coordinator of the Unemployment Action Movement, Lac Saint-Jean**

**Condemn Governments Which Do Not Treat
Unemployed Workers with Dignity and Respect**

A Livelihood for All Unemployed Workers!

- Pierre Chénier -

For the period of the federal election, workers, organizations in defence of the unemployed and unions in Quebec, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island are stepping up the fight for a pro-social reform of the Employment Insurance (EI) regime. They formed a coalition to organize actions during the federal election and after in defence of the rights of the unemployed.

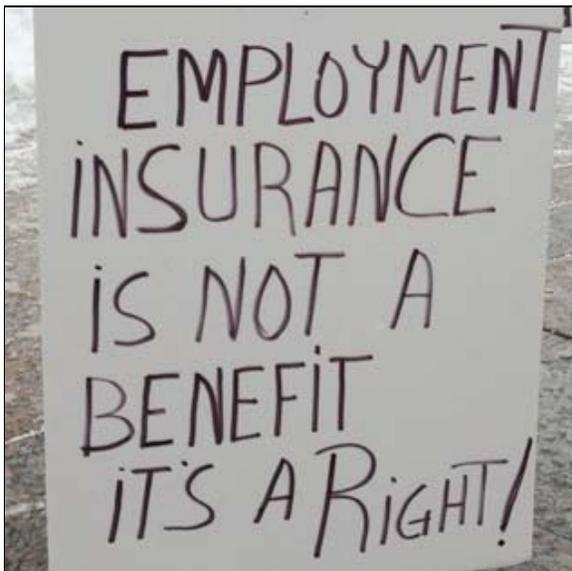
Among other things, the pandemic has laid bare the effects of more than three decades of the anti-social offensive carried out by neo-liberal governments which has wrecked the prior already inadequate Employment Insurance regime. Over these years, successive governments have

integrated the fund with general revenues where they are made available for pay-the-rich schemes. They have lowered the amount of benefits received and reduced the eligibility of workers for EI benefits to such an extent that today only about 40 per cent of the unemployed can access EI. It has deliberately been made extremely difficult, if not impossible, for part-time, precarious, seasonal, so called self-employed, migrant workers, and many others to access EI. At the same time, the amount paid and the duration of benefits have been reduced through all kinds of schemes, making the benefits insufficient to enable workers on EI to live a life in dignity. Fending for oneself has become the norm of EI under the anti-social offensive, negating people's rights and harming them deeply.

The COVID-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the destruction of EI and its inability to deal with the massive loss of jobs that occurred during the peak of the crisis in a manner that could sustain a proper standard of living for the unemployed. Of the emergency measures put in place, many were actually devised to sustain and increase the profits of private companies during the crisis. In regard to the EI regime, eligibility criteria were substantially relaxed, with the threshold of hours of work needed to be eligible lowered and the duration of the benefit period extended. The number of people receiving EI benefits increased.



Those special EI measures are coming to an end at the end of September. Public relations double-talk by government, media and spokespersons of the monopolies, according to which we must get back to "normal," is accompanied with warnings that keeping "generous social programs" in place will jeopardize "the post-pandemic recovery," create more "disincentives for recipients to go to work" and increase the "shortage of labour." It is cruelly anti-people. It is increasingly the anxiety felt by many who can exercise no control over their lives.



Workers reject this anti-worker and anti-social propaganda with utter contempt. Going back to "normal" and "business as usual" is a return to the nightmare of wrecked social programs and the inability of society to face crises such as the pandemic and jobs crisis which is the result of the restructuring of the economy and treatment of workers as disposable. Workers are defending the rights that belong to them as producers of the wealth of society on which they have a claim, and as human beings who are entitled to a dignified life.

Workers are gearing up to make sure the so-called post-pandemic recovery is not used to block a human-centred alternative that affirms the rights and dignity of all. They are fighting to open a path to a new direction for the economy and for all the affairs of society. Going back to "business as usual" is the last thing Canadians want and the last thing society can afford.

All Out To Defend the Rights and Dignity of All Unemployed Workers!

Interviews

Line Sirois, Coordinator of Unemployment Action Movement, Côte-Nord

Workers' Forum: What is the situation for seasonal workers now with regard to access to employment insurance?

Line Sirois: At the moment, seasonal workers are in a difficult situation. The government is changing the emergency measures which means that, starting at the end of September, to be eligible for EI [Employment Insurance] you have to have 420 hours of work. We are happy that everyone will be equal in terms of the hours required to be eligible. However, we will go back to the way it was before, that is to say that the number of weeks of benefits you receive depends on the unemployment rate in effect in each region. The North Shore is included in an EI region in which there are areas that do not have a seasonal industry, which means that the official



Representatives of five member groups of the interprovincial coalition at the EI office in Forestville, June 30, 2021.

unemployment rate in the region as a whole is much lower than the actual rate on the North Shore. In our EI region the unemployment rate is currently below six per cent. This means that a worker in the seasonal industry, as of the end of September, will receive between 14 and 19 weeks of benefits instead of the current 50 weeks. If the official unemployment rate on the North Shore is very low, it is not because employment has picked up and jobs have been created, but because of the aging of the population which creates artificially low unemployment rates. The labour force between 16 and 64 years old living on the North Shore keeps decreasing.

The emergency measure which established the requirement of 420 hours of work to qualify for 50 weeks of benefits was good for workers in the conditions of the pandemic. In fact, the pandemic is not behind us. The pandemic is still with us. International tourism is not here. The Europeans who usually come here as tourists are not here. We can already see that many businesses are going to have to close their doors.

People are wondering what to do, because the black hole will come back, the period when people are not entitled to employment insurance. It is very stressful. I get a lot of phone calls from people who don't know what will happen to them. That's really the problem for us. That's the point we want to hit.

WF: What are your demands in these conditions?

LS: What we are asking for is clear, and we are not just asking for this for seasonal workers. We want an end to the claim that we would have to deny benefits to one in order to give to another. We are asking for 420 hours and 35 weeks of benefits for everyone, that everyone be equal. We don't want to hear that such and such an unemployed person who claims benefits every year is profiting from the system. That is false.

We want everyone to be treated equally and to receive employment insurance whether they are seasonal workers, part-time workers or any other category of workers.

We are currently building a large interprovincial coalition of unemployed groups and unions in Eastern Canada. At the moment, the interprovincial coalition brings together groups of

unemployed workers from the Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean, the North Shore, the Lower St. Lawrence, Gaspésie, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, as well as numerous union representatives from the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) and the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ). We held a joint action on June 30, a simple action but one that got a lot of attention. Each committee, regardless of where they were, made a cake for Canada Day and distributed slices of cake in front of the Service Canada offices. They made it clear that no one was in the mood to celebrate and used the action to raise awareness of the current problems with employment insurance.

This is what we are going to work on during the election campaign, not just in Quebec but with others, to make our demands known. We want the government of Canada to reform employment insurance now. For us, the time for discussion and consultation is over, the time is for action. We will hold other mobilization actions in the coming period.

(Translated from the original french by Workers' Forum. Photos: Action-Chômage Côte-Nord)



France Simard, Coordinator of the Unemployment Action Movement, Lac Saint-Jean



Action in Saguenay, June 30, 2021

Workers' Forum: Has the launching of the federal election had an impact on your campaign for a just and universal employment insurance (EI) regime?

France Simard: The pandemic has shown how outdated the employment insurance regime is. There must be an in-depth reform of the system. We are participating in a campaign as a member of the MASSE, the Autonomous and Solidarity Movement of the Unemployed. Our demands are simple and clear, except that with the elections we have many questions. The federal government had set up a consultation in the summer, but we have been telling them for years that the system is not working. So why do a consultation instead of getting to work, sitting down together, working together on something concrete? They put a survey online. As for the rest, everything is stopped, everything is on the back burner in the context of the election. We have submitted briefs to the

minister and to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA). Will all this be shelved and will we have to start all over with a new government?

WF: What are the demands of the MASSE campaign?

FS: Our first demand is a single eligibility threshold of 350 hours or 13 weeks. We don't want those who work part-time not to be eligible for EI. We want to include everyone in the EI system. The second demand is a benefit rate of at least 70 per cent of insurable earnings, based on the best 12 weeks of work, instead of the pre-pandemic rate of 55 per cent of earnings based on a number of weeks that can vary between 14 and 22 to determine the best weeks. The third demand is a minimum floor of 35 weeks of benefits. We know that seasonal workers find themselves in a black hole that is getting bigger and more problematic. Seasonal industries exist everywhere in Canada and governments must finally address this particular situation. It is not the workers who are seasonal but the job that is seasonal. We need a floor of 35 weeks of minimum benefits for all. With this floor we would eliminate the black hole.

We are still asking for the abolition of total exclusions. If a worker voluntarily leaves his or her job or is fired, we want the system to protect them too. Total exclusion from EI benefits for these workers is an extreme measure, and that is what is happening now.

The fifth is access to regular unemployment insurance benefits in the event of job loss for those who have received maternity and parental benefits. Women who have just given birth and who lose their job while on maternity leave and receiving benefits under the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP), or immediately afterwards, are not entitled to EI. If they lose their job it is not their fault. This is discrimination against parents, mostly women but men as well because there are men who take parental leave.

It is high time to establish a just and universal employment insurance system. In my work, I pay a great deal of attention to the self-employed, or should I say the so-called self-employed. They face a lot of difficulties. On the one hand they are told that their job is insurable, based on a long questionnaire that looks at who decides their hours, what investment they have in the business, etc. Based on that, they have to pay into the system. Then, when they are out of work they are denied EI because they are self-employed. We have a lot of workers in this situation in the region.

We need to move forward and with the election coming up we are wondering if we are going to have to start all over again. We are stuck with an eternal beginning, with each change of government, or a new minister who does not know the file, etc.

We need a just and universal EI system that is there to help people, not harm them.

(Translated from the original french by Workers' Forum. Photos: Mouvement Action Chômage Lac-St-Jean)

(To access articles individually click on the black headline.)

PREVIOUS ISSUES | HOME

Website: www.cpcml.ca Email: office@cpcml.ca