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March 23, 2016

In waterloo region there are currently approx. 17,400 unemployed while only around 4,800 are receiving EI benefits. That's only 27% of unemployed people receiving benefits here in waterloo region. Along with the rest of the country we need to see a change to EI that will benefit all those entitled to their benefits not currently receiving them.

Across the country access to Employment Insurance is at an all time low. Only 37% of the 1.3 million unemployed workers in Canada are receiving EI.

Compared to just a year ago, Canada has lost 20,000 full-time jobs in manufacturing and 25,000 full-time jobs in mining, oil, and gas. In the retail sector, Canada has lost 63,000 full time and 27,000 part-time jobs over the same period. Meanwhile, more than half of all the job gains over the past year have been concentrated in the 55+ age group, a clear signal of stagnation for both young and core age workers.

The provincial construction industry has had a mixed year, with employment losses in five of the past eight months. In addition, after a strong showing in August, both residential and non-residential building permits fell notably in September, led by lower construction intentions primarily for multi-family dwellings.

Women have particularly fallen through the cracks in the system when it comes to EI.

Good examples of this:

- EI assumes an average work week of 35 hours when the reality for women is more like 30.
- 40% of women hold precarious or part-time “non-standard” jobs, or are self-employed.
- Just 1 in 3 of unemployed women qualify for EI benefits.
- Not qualifying for EI means no access to paid maternity, parental, compassionate or sick leave.

Even when women do qualify for EI, lower wages and unstable work patterns result in lower benefits. Only one third of the total amount of regular EI benefits goes to women, even though women now make up half the workforce.

Recent changes by the Harper government have made it even harder for unemployed women, especially those in high unemployment regions like the North, Quebec, and rural Atlantic Canada who lost access to an extra five weeks of benefits. Unemployed Canadians are now forced to accept jobs outside their field with lower wages and long commutes – difficult for women with family responsibilities. Changes to the rules for what you can earn while receiving benefits have shut out anyone working for low wages or for less than two days a week.

Unions lobby the federal government for changes to the EI system to make it fair for everyone. The EI system should reflect the realities of working lives and people who pay into the plan should be able to access it.

Changes should include:

- Reduce the number of qualifying hours (for regular benefits) to 360 hours, no matter who workers are or where they live and work in Canada.
- Measure a “week” as 30 hours instead of 35 when calculating benefit levels and duration, to reflect the average Canadian work week.
- Increase the benefits period to 50 weeks.
- Increase benefits to at least 60% of earnings being replaced calculated on a worker’s best 12 weeks.

Currently, only 3.7% of regular EI recipients receive training support, even while unemployment is high and sectors of the Canadian economy are short of skilled workers. Canada needs targeted programs to help women and workers from other equity-seeking groups to overcome barriers to employment, gain valuable on-the-job experience, and/or to acquire training in high-demand occupations and sectors.

Because work-life balance continues to present a significant challenge for women, Canada must improve compassionate caregiving benefits and parental leave for the other parent, as well as sickness benefits for workers with disabilities or illnesses lasting longer than 15 weeks.

Submitted on behalf of the Waterloo Regional Labour Council by:

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