

EI reform could break families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

I once worked with a woman in Toronto who drove an hour and a half to work every morning, after dropping her son off at daycare. That's not an unusual commute time for Toronto, but she also had to work through her lunch break each day in order to be able to leave in time to pick up her son before the daycare closed.

She was already paying extra so she could drop him off early and pick him up late.

Fortunately, the job paid well enough, with suitable benefits and acceptable flexibility in her hours, that this wasn't really a hardship for her.

I think we all know that's not the case with most jobs in rural Canada, most unskilled labour jobs and the majority of minimum wage jobs.

However, those are the kind of jobs and workers who will be most affected by the touted EI reforms in Harper's omnibus budget bill.

The reforms set out different classes of claimants and are meant to get people off the seasonal and repetitive EI and fill jobs that are left vacant or filled with temporary foreign workers.

By sending claimants job ads, and lowering the criteria by which they can refuse work, the government thinks it can magically transform our EI system and our very economy.

But anyone who has been unemployed in a small community can tell you that there simply is no work. Most people would rather have a job. We all know that EI runs out, whereas a job, if not a temporary one, provides more financial stability, better credit and a richer social life.

Yet, federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty was wrong in saying that there's no such thing as a bad job.

Every family faces circumstances that make some jobs even less desirable than being unemployed. Take the family with a single vehicle that serves to get both parents to work, a younger child to daycare, and older children to after school activities or care. If one parent suddenly has to commute for an hour in order to work, where does that leave the rest of the family?

Or take the family like ours once was. After losing my job while pregnant I took an evening and weekends job after the baby was born. This meant I could be home during the daytime and my husband could be home when I was working. At a minimum wage, shift-work job, paying for daycare would've meant that many weeks I would've spent more money on care than I earned. If I had lost that job and been forced to accept one that required me to work daytime hours, our family would have been worse off.

In a press release about the reform, Minister Diane Finley of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada declared "under our plan, Canadians will always benefit financially from accepting suitable employment."

How can this be the case? And how will suitable employment be measured? With job cuts to staff as well as the elimination of appeals boards, to whom will the mother of four suddenly finding herself having to pay daycare in order to work or face losing her EI benefits complain?

Of course these changes don't affect people on special leave, such as maternity or parental leave, as they are not supposed to be looking for work anyway. Or do they? Nowhere in the proposed changes to the act does it specify that the formula for declaring "frequent" or "occasional" users will not consider recent EI claims related to special benefits. So if you've recently taken maternity leave and returned to work to later be laid off, it's entirely possible that your maternity leave can be used against you. I'm not saying it will.

But I believe the opening is there.

The government touts these measures as an improvement to our economy, and a measure to fill vacant jobs for employers.

But the economy isn't going to improve just because you say so and jobs will not be taken just because they are vacant. Without the social structures in place to actually make it beneficial for people to work, they will decide to do what's best for their family, not the country's economy.

I'm not sure what world Flaherty and Finley live in, but it's not the same world as the majority of Canadians who struggle with trying to pay both the gas and the grocery bill or finding suitable and affordable care for their children.

Unfortunately, as Chantal Hebert points out in a recent column on the EI reform (EI Reforms come with Few Risks for Harper's Tories), the

majority of people who will be affected by these EI changes really don't live in the same world as the Conservatives.

"With only a few exceptions, the areas hardest hit by the proposed Conservative changes to the treatment of frequent employment insurance users sit squarely in opposition territory," she writes.

This means that the Conservatives don't have to worry about losing seats over this issue. Indeed, they may rely on extra seats as the 30 new seats that will come in are not going to cover those areas either.

The only way for this to reflect badly on them in terms of how they hold government, she proposes, is that "Harper's EI reform would have to come to be widely seen as just one element in a larger agenda designed to shrink Canada's social conscience rather than a distant problem in someone else's backyard."

It's easy to look at these changes and say that it's about time someone got the lazy, habitual users off of EI. But those are not the majority of users. The majority are mothers and fathers trying to support their families in a country where the government seems determined to make everything, from childcare to health care, harder to access ... and unaffordable.

When forced to make a choice that would mean sacrificing their family's well-being, many will chose children over country and wind up actually being a larger drain on the economy, through income support - where they can access daycare, transportation, housing and relocation subsidies - rather than drawing on the EI system, which reports surpluses every year.

If Harper's Conservatives really wanted to infuse the economy with more local workers and draw people away from relying on social income supports, then they could've made any other number of changes that would benefit families.

But that wasn't their interest here. Their intention with EI reform was to hold on to the people who already support them, the people who live in those same odd worlds they do where no one has ever had a bad job or found that an offered job would cost them more than they'd earn.

-reprinted from the Western Star

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