

Minna fights for EI reforms

Ontario has been hit particularly hard in the current economic recession. With its heavy reliance on manufacturing, Ontario has lost the bulk of the over 300,000 job losses since last October. It does not help that Finance Minister Jim Flaherty told the international community that Ontario was the last place to invest in Canada. The crisis in the North American auto industry is only making matters worse. This industry represents 1 in 7 jobs in Canada and the possibility of a complete collapse would be devastating to the Canadian economy.

Canada is experiencing the worst quarter of job losses since Statistics Canada started tracking this data in 1976.

In March, Canada's unemployment rate hit a stark 8 per cent – the highest it has been in seven years.

The Harper government's economic mismanagement is costing Canadians their jobs at a rate that continues to outpace the United States this year on a per capita basis.



The Conservative government has done nothing to ease the pressure on those who have lost their jobs. Their only policy was to extend Employment Insurance benefits by a mere 5 weeks. This does nothing to help those 150,000 who do not qualify because of unfair qualifying hours varying from region to region with some as low as 420 hours and some as high as 700 hours.

In some cases 910 hours are required to qualify for EI. This does nothing to help those who are forced out of their homes because of the nearly two month delay in receiving any sort of payment.

Canadians deserve a fair system of employment insurance – one that will provide direct stimulus into the economy immediately in the hardest hit regions of the country. This can be done right away – the government has no reason to wait. Canadians with mortgages and bills to pay are looking for help from this Conservative government – help that the government is refusing to provide.

The Conservative government let \$2 billion of infrastructure money lapse in the last fiscal year, meaning that it will no longer be used for infrastructure projects. The government then asked for an additional \$3 billion to get infrastructure projects going right away. That money is still sitting in Ottawa over 2 months later. Only a handful of projects have been announced. The infrastructure fund is mired in red tape and not making it into our communities.

The number of qualifying hours must be reduced in Toronto from its current 595 hours to something much more realistic. Permanent-full time jobs are less prominent now with more and more people working part-time hours and contract work. This makes it much harder to accumulate 700 hours to qualify for EI. Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has called on the government to implement a temporary, standard 360 qualifying hours across the country and eliminate the 58 regions with different qualifying criteria. It is not fair, and there is no reason why one person should qualify for EI over another if they lost their jobs at the same time, but in different regions of the country.

Only 40% of those who contribute to EI qualify for the benefits. Every individual who contributes should be eligible for EI when they need it the most. Secondly, the 2 week waiting period to apply for EI must be eliminated in this current economic environment.

Though some media sources are indicating that we may be in economic recovery now, economists are not predicting a recovery until at least the middle of 2010 and by then every person now on EI will have exhausted their EI. Even if a recovery happens sooner, jobs will not rebound immediately. The government must ensure through these tough times that those who have lost their jobs will have access to training and skills development to prepare them for a new job.

Through EI reform and proper investments in skills training Canadians can come out better equipped to deal with this recession stronger than ever. Unfortunately this government has chosen a band-aid approach to fixing this problem rather than progressive, long-term solutions.