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

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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey





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

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• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)):** Good afternoon, everyone. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 10 of the House of Commons 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, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room, and remotely using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the room of the committee.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation, and in light of the recommendations from health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on November 19, 2021, to remain healthy you all know the protocol.

As the chair I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting, and I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few of the rules. Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for the meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure it is restored before resuming proceedings. The "raise hand" feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room, keeping in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. Those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as usual by the proceedings and verification officer. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute. All comments should be addressed through the chair. With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain that. As we are in a set format, we already have that list.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 31, 2022, the committee will proceed to a briefing on the ministerial mandate letters.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks followed by questions.

Appearing will be the Hon. Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Labour; Sandra Hassan, deputy minister, labour and associate deputy minister; Andrew Brown, assistant deputy minister, policy, dispute resolution and international affairs; Gary Robertson, assistant deputy minister, labour program, compliance, operations and program development directorate.

Minister O'Regan, you now have the floor for your opening comments.

[Translation]

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Labour):** Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are joining you from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, on the traditional territory of the Beothuk people.

Thank you for inviting me to join you today to discuss my mandate letter commitments and some of the important progress that's been made so far by our government.

First and foremost, I'm proud to say that we have made incredible strides over the last few months to ensure workplaces are fair, safe, and healthy.

For example, this past December, Bill C-3 received royal assent. This important piece of legislation will provide a minimum of ten days of paid sick leave per year for employees working in the federally regulated private sector. This is huge.

Paid sick leave will protect workers and their families, protect their jobs, and protect their workplaces. This is an important step in the ongoing fight against COVID-19 and a necessary addition to the social safety net that organized labour and the NDP have long been advocating for.

These changes to the Canada Labour Code are significant, and we recognize that workplaces need time to prepare.

That's why we're engaging with federally regulated employers to work with them on the implementation of these changes in advance of their coming into force. We're also ensuring they have time to implement payroll changes and work with unions to adjust collective agreements as needed.

I'm also meeting with my counterparts at the provincial and territorial level to seek their views on developing an action plan to provide paid sick leave across the country, while respecting their jurisdiction and the unique needs of small business owners. This will be one of the topics for discussion when we meet later this month.

Now, we will build on all of this work, while supporting the fight against COVID-19 and its variants. We will continue to build a strong middle class and work toward a better future where everyone has a real and fair chance at success.

Mental health is an important concern for Canadians and has become an even more prominent issue as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

As part of my mandate, we plan on amending the Canada Labour Code to include mental health as a specific element of occupational health and safety, and require federally regulated employers to take preventative steps to address workplace stress and injury.

The biggest battleground for mental health right now is the workplace. The line between work and home has become blurred by the pandemic, and boundaries are more important than ever.

With this in mind, we are also getting ready to move forward on my mandate commitment to develop a right-to-disconnect policy. Such a policy would help support better work-life balance and help do away with the informal expectation that so many workers face to remain connected—without compensation—well beyond normal working hours.

The Final Report of the Right to Disconnect Advisory Committee, which was published just last week, will help guide our next steps.

In addition, we will continue to advance the state of equity, diversity and inclusion in federally regulated workplaces. The Employment Equity Act Review Task Force has resumed its work, which is expected to conclude this summer.

I've also committed myself to doing everything I can to protect workers from violence and harassment.

● (1540)

To that end, I am continuing to work with my provincial and territorial counterparts to ratify the International Labour Organization's Convention 190, which will help eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work.

I would also like to mention that I will be working collaboratively with some of my colleagues to eradicate forced labour from the supply chains of Canadian businesses. Through the development of legislation, we will continue to advance concrete action to ensure that companies operating abroad do not contribute to human rights abuses.

The list I've covered today isn't exhaustive—work is ongoing on many other fronts to deliver on other important mandate commitments, such as continuing to advance implementation of the Pay Equity Act and working with my colleague, the Minister of Natural Resources, to maintain momentum on a just transition to a low carbon economy that leaves no one behind.

The progress being made on these and other key initiatives will help build strong, healthy workforces that are productive, innovative, and resilient.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to what I—with the support of many—have been and will continue working on to make our workplaces better for everyone.

I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

● (1545)

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

For the first round, we will go to Mr. Aitchison.

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

Thank you for having me. It's a treat to be here. I don't often get to come to this committee.

To the Minister, hello and welcome. It's good to see you, too. I don't know why I'm welcoming you. I'm not really part of the committee, but anyhow, thank you for your comments.

Minister, you did speak about a number of great things. I'm wondering if we could focus for a few minutes, though, particularly on skilled trades.

As you know, there's a desperate shortage of skilled tradespeople in this country, about 200,000 currently. For your provincial counterparts, particularly in Ontario—I know you'll be meeting with them soon to talk more about paid sick leave—I'm wondering if you might be working with them to help them in their work to eliminate the stigma about skilled trades. Oftentimes we talk about the importance of a university degree. We think that the way forward to help our provincial counterparts is to encourage more young people to consider the skilled trades, because there's a desperate shortage.

If you could quickly comment on that, I have a couple of more questions about that whole area.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Thank you.

I couldn't agree with you more. I think it was the day after or two days after I was sworn in, Mr. Aitchison, that I went to the Trades NL—which I was meant to speak at—annual general meeting of skilled trades unions here in Newfoundland and Labrador. It just so happened that I had the opportunity there to speak to them as the Minister of Labour. It was a treat.

I think the Canadian economy is showing a lot of signs of a strong recovery, but it's the boom in construction that's led to shortage in skilled workers, so we have to get a few things right. We're committed to doubling the union training and innovation program to \$50 million a year. That's to support [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] training opportunities and partnerships in the Red Seal trades right across Canada. We're also working with unions to target more participation from women, indigenous peoples, newcomers, persons with disabilities and Black and racialized Canadians.

I've always said about inclusion that, if you don't include everybody, then you're excluding the best. I think you have a point about making sure that we broaden people's horizons about the need for skilled trades and the pride and dignity that comes from doing such good work.

We're moving forward on that, and we have our plan to establish a new apprenticeship service that will connect 55,000 first-year apprentices in Red Seal trades with opportunities in small and medium-sized businesses particularly.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** That's excellent.

Sticking with the skilled trades, I know that one of the other items—one of the specific items in your mandate letter—is to work with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance to introduce a labour mobility tax credit where workers in the skilled trades and construction trades specifically can expense eligible travel expenses for relocation costs.

I'm not sure if you're familiar or not with MP Chris Lewis's private member's bill that he's just come up with that would allow tradespeople to claim travel expenses for work about 120 kilometres away from their residence. It's a bit more than what is in your mandate letter.

I'm wondering if you think there may be an opportunity for you and me to collaborate again like we did on Bill C-3 to see if we can't maybe make that a little bit better.

• (1550)

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Absolutely. I'm more than happy to.

I'm very happy with the work we were able to do together, Mr. Aitchison. I think all members of all parties. Obviously, we passed C-3 unanimously. That is not something that happens every day in this country, that's for sure. That's because I was more than happy and willing to work with you on ways we could improve the lives of workers in this country and also increase the number of workers in this country, particularly in places where we need them.

I am more than open to doing that. I look forward to it, actually.

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

One other issue I wanted to raise with you and give you an opportunity to speak to committee about is one that we have chatted about.

The department recently amended rules surrounding longshore workers requiring eight hours of rest as opposed to the pre-existing six hours. This has been an ongoing issue for some time and you're apprised of it. I know there are some concerns with longshore

workers. I've been chatting with folks in Halifax and all across the Maritimes.

I'll just give you an opportunity to speak to us a bit about where things are at there.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I have, too, on both coasts. It's an issue here in the Port of St. John's for me as well.

To give a bit of background, this was all predicated on Canadian workers deserving more predictable schedules and fair rest and break periods between shifts. We spent three years working with federally regulated industries to put this new hours of work provision in place in the Canada Labour Code to better support Canadian workers.

In 2019, we amended the CLC to create new minimum rest and break periods for employees in, obviously, federally regulated industries. We had a lot of consultations and we had a lot of sector-appropriate amendments, particularly on docks, to allow some flexibility. The new standards are moving ahead.

Each sector is unique. I think the implementation of these changes is a significant undertaking for each one of these workplaces. We continue to work closely with employers to provide support and to monitor the impacts of these changes moving forward. The changes, I think, will ultimately create a better work-life balance and improve health and safety.

We are quite cognizant of the fact that—especially when we're talking about ports, for instance—this does not affect our supply chain nor does it gum up the works. We have to allow for that flexibility. We think that we have found that, but I've dealt with MPs on my side about this as well.

This isn't new to any of these workers, workplaces or employers. This is, like I said, coming down the pipeline. I think I'm the fourth Minister of Labour to be dealing with this.

It's coming into place now. We have to be respectful. We have to make sure it's implemented properly. I've said this at this committee before and I'll say it again: I am not a “government knows best” kind of guy nor am I particularly a one-size-fits-all kind of guy. I grew up in Labrador. I used to think that St. John's, the provincial capital, was the long arm of the law...let alone Ottawa.

We have done our best to make sure that these particular situations are mitigated in their particular workplaces to allow for that flexibility.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Thanks.

**The Chair:** Now we go to Mr. Van Bynen for six minutes.

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

Minister, thank you for coming today to discuss your mandate letter and to give us an understanding of your goals, your priorities and how you will work to achieve them.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ):** Mr. Chair, the interpreter informs us that it is impossible for him to interpret due to the poor quality of the microphone used by the speaker.

[English]

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

Mr. Van Bynen, can you check if it's the right microphone?

• (1555)

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Does this microphone work better?

I will continue.

The pandemic has taken a significant toll on workers. Whether it be working at home, spending long hours at screens, stocking shelves at grocery stores, or, for health care professionals, working overtime to care for patients, workers are experiencing burnout and higher levels of stress and anxiety.

Minister, could you please explain why amendments to the Canada Labour Code should be made to include mental health as a specific element for occupational health and safety? As you're doing that, could you relate that to your initiative to initiate the right to disconnect?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Mr. Van Bynen, I could talk all day on mental health. I have to admit it's a particular joy and a privilege for me to be able to further mental health initiatives in my current portfolio.

Half a million Canadians miss work every week due to mental illness. This pandemic has taken a particular toll on people, I think, and, I would argue, particularly now. I think omicron and Christmas were a deadly combination for a lot of people and a lot of Canadians. Workers are people with complex lives. They have complex needs.

There are two ways in which I, as Minister of Labour, want to try to close this gap for workers. Number one is by making mental health a component of workplace health and safety, as you said. Number two is by initiating the right to disconnect.

Mental health is health. We need to consider it as such. Injuries associated with it need to be covered by occupational health and safety requirements as much as physical injuries do, because mental health is physical health as well.

By our not addressing this, the Canadian economy is losing an estimated \$6 billion per year in productivity. An estimated one in three workplace disability claims in Canada is related to mental illness.

I think it was just last month that the CAMH released a report surveying Canadians about their mental health during the pandem-

ic. The survey found a decline in mental health amongst Canadians, obviously, due to anxiety, to loneliness, and to changes in the way they were able to access care and mental health services. Some 30% reported increased alcohol consumption. Forty per cent reported increased cannabis use. Five per cent were seriously considering suicide.

One of the things we think we can do is to look at the right to disconnect. What does it mean to be at work? Why has that changed so drastically? How many times in the last two years has your home, your kitchen table or your couch been a workplace?

As Canadians right now in this pandemic, we're continuing to work remotely from home, but that line between work and home has become very blurred, and the ability and sometimes the expectation to be constantly connected can really rub people's nerves raw, as we say in Newfoundland, and people's nerves are already rubbed raw.

We in politics know this better than most, given the 24-hour news cycle and the 24-hour Twitterverse. Last week our advisory committee, which is made up of unions, federally regulated employers and NGOs, released a report on the right to disconnect. They conducted a consultation, and they are making a series of recommendations to us and ensuring that perspectives from every angle are considered. We can't afford to be myopic on any part of this.

What is clear is that establishing a positive work-life balance is an important goal for both employers and workers. It's overdue, and we're moving on it now.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Thank you, Minister.

Minister, in your opinion will including mental health as an element of occupational health and safety be a step forward in destigmatizing mental health in the workplace?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** It will most definitely, for all the reasons I just cited, instead of mental health being that thing over there that you deal with maybe once a year when you talk about talking. That's not in any way to take away from that campaign; I was a Bell Let's Talk ambassador for many years. But that's just to say that conversations about mental health have to be something that permeate not just our lives but also our institutions and the way we look after one another and the way our health care services look after people. That will go a long way to taking away some of the stigma.

One of the things I always said as a Bell Let's Talk ambassador was that we're drawing people into the light, and it is an incredible thing to have them come out and talk about what they are going through. I know this myself through what I went through. But to have them in the light and then to not have the supports and services there for them when they are exposed and open would be criminal.

We have to get better. It's a massive undertaking and it will take time, but there are huge leaps we can take, and I think the importance of including it in occupational health and safety has to do with more than just the substance of it; it's also the symbolic nature of it. It's incredibly important.

• (1600)

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

I'd like to have the benefit of your experience on this next matter, as well.

We have an ambitious plan to fight climate change, and get to net zero. While this is exciting and reassuring for many, others fear that tackling climate change could have a direct impact on their livelihood, especially those working in the energy sector.

In your past role as the minister of natural resources, what did you hear from energy workers, and will this inform the work on your mandate letter in the commitment to move forward with legislation, and an action plan to achieve a just transition?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** To talk about the anxiety that energy workers and oil and gas workers in this country feel is very real. They are my constituents. This is an oil and gas producing province, Canada's third. I know the anxieties that they're feeling, that fuelled me as minister of natural resources. The Prime Minister specifically asked me to be involved in just transition.

I'm not a big fan of the phrase, but in my role as Minister of Labour, I have a great deal of passion and excitement, because we need energy workers at their best. They're the ones who are going to build up renewables and reduce emissions. They're the only ones who know how to do it, but I want to lessen their anxiety. I want them to know how badly we need them to do the massive things we need to do in this country.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen, and thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

Minister, thank you for being with us today to talk about the many issues addressed in your mandate letter.

I don't know if you will agree with me, but there is one thing we agree on: the Canada Labour Code needs some love. It needs to be modernized to adjust to the issues that affect the world of work today. There are many challenges. Integrating the mental health component into occupational health and safety seems to me to be a must. This is increasingly documented. It is not only the pandemic that has exacerbated the situation. Psychological trauma at work is a reality. We need to move forward fairly quickly.

My question is simple. When will the 10 days of paid sick leave be implemented?

I know you are having discussions with the provinces, but that is not what this is about. Bill C-3 was passed to implement 10 days of paid sick leave for all federally regulated employees. Many employees are wondering when they will be entitled to these 10 days, and rightly so. It would be nice if legislation was, in fact, implemented in the short term.

When can we expect this to be done for federally regulated employees?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Firstly, it will begin on February 25, when I'll sit down with my provincial and territorial colleagues to talk about a national action plan. I don't need to tell you, of course, that in terms of 10 days sick leave nationally, 95% of workers in the jurisdictions that they're in are provincial and territorial.... On the issue of the federal question, the consultations will begin next month. I expect they will last weeks, not months, and then we will be able to draft regulations for which we will have another consultation process, and it will proceed accordingly.

We're going as fast as we can, but it is incredibly important that we get it done right. We need to allow the time for employers to update their systems, which is important. We need to adjust collective agreements. These things do take time, and I guess what we're trying to do is balance, as we always do, making sure we get it done right, and get it done as expediently as we possibly can.

It was in that spirit, I acknowledge, that we voted on this unanimously in the House, because it is pressing. It is making sure that we get it done right, with urgency, and with the certainty that it's what workers and employers are looking for.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

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

I'll move on to another question.

It is mentioned in your mandate letter that we need to move forward with legislation to prevent the hiring of replacement workers, thus scabs, in the event of a lockout.

It is 2022 and this demand has been brought to the government's attention for a very long time. The Bloc Québécois has tabled bills and this demand has always been one of the priorities of the major workers' unions. It is a matter of balance of power. The right to strike and the right to lock out are protected by fundamental rights. In return, these rights must not be undermined by the use of scabs in labour disputes.

Do you have a timeline in your mandate letter? Can we expect a proper bill or amendment to the Canada Labour Code to strengthen it and ban the use of scabs?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

The Canada Labour Code, as you know, has a provision that prevents the use of replacement workers. We were elected on the commitment to restore fair and balanced labour relations in Canada. We've delivered on that commitment.

We have respect and faith in the collective bargaining process. Ninety-seven per cent of all collective bargaining disputes under the Labour Code that were referred to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service were resolved without a work stoppage. The best deals are certainly done at the table.

We respect and we have faith in the collective bargaining process. The Canada Labour Code, as I said, has that provision to prevent the use of replacement workers where their presence is in the workplace and it's intended to undermine a union's representational capacity. We firmly believe in the critical relationship between government, employer and workers. Right now, that's where things stand.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, Minister, but the current provisions of the Canada Labour Code do not provide sufficient protection, hence your mandate to move the issue forward.

So we hope that the government will come in and strengthen the legislation so that the provisions in this regard are clear. Since 1977, we have had such provisions in Quebec.

My last question will be short. It concerns federally regulated workplaces, such as Canada Post, Crown corporations, transportation companies, as well as federal employees, covered by the mandatory vaccination policy.

To your knowledge, how many workers have been affected in their employment relationship by this policy and are on leave without pay or have been terminated?

[English]

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Madame Chabot, I don't have a number on how many there are precisely. I have my team with me, so I have no problem asking them. I could begin with my deputy.

Deputy Hassan, do you have that number readily available?

[Translation]

**Ms. Sandra Hassan (Deputy Minister, Labour and Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, De-**

**partment of Employment and Social Development):** Ms. Chabot, thank you for your question.

We don't have that specific answer. We have data on the measures that were applicable to federal public servants. So we can follow up on that, but we don't have the data on Crown corporations and separate agencies.

This is an estimate in terms of federal public servants, but we don't have a specific number.

[English]

**The Chair:** Merci, Madame Chabot.

Now we will go to Madame Zarrillo for six minutes.

• (1610)

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I want to start by saying that my comments are coming from a space of being a woman who has worked for over 40 years in the workforce in Canada in five provinces. My network over those years has obviously been a lot of women. It's important for me to share with you that my perspective is coming from that space.

I'm disappointed today to hear that the consultation for the bill for 10 days of paid sick leave for federal workers was not done before that bill came.... I remind the minister that the NDP amendments were adopted to improve workers' accessibility, and it's still not accessible to workers.

The government has chosen to delay this. I just want to understand on a gender lens. You say that we're months away.... Will there also be disaggregated data and some analysis of the demographics of the workers who have been most affected by this?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I think most definitely; I will ensure that. We definitely need to know that data and we definitely need to have that data, but you know, as I said in my answer previously, I think it's incredibly important that we get the balance right. We've got to make sure that we get it right and do it right. There are collective agreements that need to be adjusted, as I said, and employers who need to adjust their systems as well. Those things do need to be done, and it's very important that we do it right.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Minister, thank you for that. I would just say that there are hundreds of thousands of workers who have been disproportionately affected by having family caring that they need to do, kids who are sick who really need the support—



**Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.):** I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to leave. The fire alarm is going off. I apologize for interrupting you.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Yes, I just wanted to share that: there are hundreds of thousands of workers.

Could I just get a bit of extra time there, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** Yes. Continue.

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

There are hundreds of thousands of workers who are relying on this 10 days of paid sick leave.

I also wanted to talk about another gender equity issue. I'm sure you know that there's a history of unpaid labour in this country and that the underpinnings of where we are in a developed economy rest greatly on the backs of unpaid labour and gender discrimination. It's been a very slow journey to equity and we aren't there yet: in pay equity, in access to affordable child care and in an end to discriminatory access to paid work.

Today, I wanted to talk about one small piece of the mandate letter: to take the lead on the efforts to provide free menstrual products in federally regulated workplaces. I wanted to speak to that small part of it just to ask about this. We know that at work people need to use the toilet during the workday and toilet paper is supplied as a necessary supply for a biological function. As part of the occupational health and safety regulations, there are lines about providing toilet paper, but only one line that speaks to disposal of menstrual products and nothing in regard to providing menstrual products in the workplace. Menstrual products are no different from others for biological functions that happen at work.

For my ask—I think the Conservative member asked you earlier to work with him—I'd like to ask if you would be open to working with me, the FCM and other gender advocates to update the occupational health and safety regulations, to modernize them and to point out how important it is to have access to menstrual products for women in the workplace.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Agreed: Menstrual products are essential to the health of half of all Canadians. It's not treated as a basic need, and I think it's time for that to change. We asked for feedback from women on a potential proposal to amend regulations under the Canada Labour Code, which would require federally regulated employers to provide free menstrual products in the workplace. The results of those consultations were published online in what's called a "what we heard" report. Feedback through the consultation I think provided a fairly wide range of perspectives, and I think it will help to create a dialogue on this issue. I am committed to working with all stakeholders on this, including you. I will take you up on that.

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

Can I just add this? I did see that and I did read it. Was there consultation when they decided to offer toilet paper in toilets? In occupational health and safety, do you think that there was consultation with people to decide whether or not toilet paper was going to be added?

• (1615)

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I can honestly say that I don't know.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** I guess I'm just going to share that there—

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I think I get your point.

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

I also wanted to just follow up on the note that Madame Chabot brought out in relation to those people who have lost their work in federally regulated businesses because they're unvaccinated. Will there be a gender-based analysis on that data as well? Disaggregated data is so important for gender equity, and I just want to understand if that will also have a GBA on it.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Definitely.

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

Thank you, Minister.

**The Chair:** Have you concluded, Madame Zarrillo?

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

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now we'll go to the second round, which is a five-minute round, and we'll begin with Mr. Benzen.

Mr. Benzen, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Mr. Bob Benzen (Calgary Heritage, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I want to thank you, Minister, for your passion when you spoke earlier about mental health. I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about the cost. Have you thought about the cost? Mental health is something that I think could be quite expensive in terms of how we deal with it.

First of all, have you thought about the cost in that sense and who's going to bear that cost? Is this a cost that's going to be picked up by the taxpayer or by the government? Will it be put onto the businesses? Or is there going to be some combination of that?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Thanks, Mr. Benzen.

First of all, we could get into the cost of mental health. As I said, the number of workers who don't show up every day and the estimated one in three workplace disability claims in Canada that are related to mental health—I think it's \$6 billion per year in productivity—are hard to quantify. Somebody, as you said, still has to pay the bill. I would imagine it will be a combination of governments and of businesses. I think that unions, themselves, will also provide great services to many of their members. It will definitely be a combination.

**Mr. Bob Benzen:** We have people like a chief financial officer and a chief strategy officer. You can imagine some day we're going to have a chief mental health officer.

Do you imagine this kind of thing going into businesses more, where there's this sense that maybe we could save money by having these things in place? There's more awareness of it. We're more on top of it. We see the problems arise before they become really big. Is that the goal you're trying to achieve here?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Absolutely. It's interesting. We're in an incredibly exciting and promising time when it comes to mental health. I've seen it. I've benefited from it myself. Within the past 15 to 20 years, we've seen a remarkable change. I look at younger generations—I'm sure many of you do, too—and how open they are about this. The language is just part of their vernacular. The future looks very bright.

What do we do about the here and now? When you mentioned something like a mental health officer, on the one hand, I'd say that, yes, it sounds like a great idea. In another sense, I think it should permeate everything. Do you know what I mean? It shouldn't just be relegated. I know that's not what you were implying at all, but it should be something that we all consider, that employers and employees at every level have a greater understanding and appreciation of so that people don't feel isolated, which, as you can imagine, just adds to it.

**Mr. Bob Benzen:** I was trying to find some more details on these things you are going to try to put into the Labour Code to bring your goal forward. I was just going in that direction.

I would quickly like to go on to digital platforms. Could you describe who these digital platform workers are? Then, also, what changes do you want to make to protect their jobs?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** This gets back to gig economy workers. It's something that, I think, a lot of other countries much like ours are also dealing with as well.

We've made changes to the Canada Labour Code to prevent employers from misclassifying their employees as independent contractors by shifting the burden to the employer. We've been focused a lot on education and awareness. We're working with stakeholders to address this. Any employer who knowingly misclassifies an employee in order to avoid their obligations is breaking the Canada Labour Code and will face consequences.

In the meantime, I know this is work that Minister Qualtrough has been taking charge of. I'm working with her on that.

I think it begins with how you make sure you have labour protections for people who are, name it, frankly in things that a lot of us use and that are very convenient, whether it be Uber, Instacart or whatever. Some of these, particularly Instacart and DoorDash, became very popular during the pandemic as people were inside.

How do you make sure that the people who are involved in that work, good people who are doing it to make some money and to have a wage...? How do you make sure that labour protections are there for them? How do you make sure the benefits are there for them, EI and such? This is something that, like I said, a lot of other countries in the world are grappling with and dealing with. It is a

huge, changing part of our economy. It's growing because it's so convenient. It makes so much sense; so many of us have one of these, but how do you make sure people are protected? That's where we're arriving right now.

• (1620)

**Mr. Bob Benzen:** Have you been consulting Uber and DoorDash and talking to these people?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Yes, we have.

**Mr. Bob Benzen:** What kind of feedback are you getting from them in terms of making these changes?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I'll see if my deputy or one of my ADMs can speak to it, if they've had more first-hand experience. I've had first-hand experience but only as a customer. I have been asking them prying questions.

Go ahead, Sandra.

**Ms. Sandra Hassan:** I'll turn to Andrew Brown on this one to talk about the work that is being done with our colleagues at ESDC.

Go ahead, Andrew.

**Mr. Andrew Brown (Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Dispute Resolution and International Affairs, Department of Employment and Social Development):** Sure, just to mention a couple of things with respect to gig workers and digital platform workers, as you just heard there, I think there is a desire to ensure that as the work proceeds there's thought both to labour protection as well as to other kinds of social protections that need be available to these workers.

In terms of the consultations that were undertaken last year, I heard that there were a number of different things that may be important. One is access to those other supports. To be more specific, are there abilities for workers to unionize in these environments? Are there otherwise opportunities for them to have more of a collective voice, and are there other sorts of labour standards such as minimum wage and so forth that would be applicable to this set of workers?

It's a new group. Currently, of course, those who are not classified as employees aren't covered, so it's really trying to figure out how to further extend labour protections or adapt labour protections to this group of workers.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Benzen. Your time has concluded.

Mr. Sheehan, you have the floor.

**Mr. Terry Sheehan (Sault Ste. Marie, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the minister for appearing before us. We appreciate all the work you have expeditiously undertaken.

I ask this as a husband and as a father of a daughter going to school, and I was proudly serving on the pay equity committee previous to this. What I'd like to hear from you is what has our government done to make workplaces safer and more equitable for women and what your plans are on reducing further barriers and inequities for women in the workforce.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Thank you very much, Terry.

Women obviously make up half of Canada's workforce and many were frontline workers through this pandemic, but the reality remains that they face a lot of challenges in the workforce, socially, financially, physically. How do you reduce barriers for women in the workforce? How do you create a more equal and equitable space?

Child care is huge and \$10-a-day child care, affordable, high-quality child care, has the potential to add, Minister Freeland says, 243,000 workers to the Canadian workforce. Every dollar invested in early childhood education can generate up to \$3 in economic return. That is very real, and that's why it's such a big priority for the government.

Through Bill C-3 we amended the Canada Labour Code to provide five new paid leave days for federally regulated employees who experience a miscarriage or a stillbirth. That was work this House did together.

Under the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Employment Equity Act, employees are protected against discrimination and termination on the basis of pregnancy.

We are strengthening provisions to better support working women. Especially, I think of those who need to be reassigned during pregnancy or while breastfeeding. We're tackling [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] As I just mentioned earlier, in 2015 the House passed legislation to remove the federal tax on menstrual products and our government now is leading the efforts to provide free menstrual products in federally regulated workplaces.

On pay equity, we will continue to advance the implementation of the Pay Equity Act right across federally regulated workplaces. That's very important work.

• (1625)

**Mr. Terry Sheehan:** Excellent. Let's keep on Bill C-3 then.

Mr. Chair, you'll be interested in this. Prince Edward Island has one day of paid sick leave, Quebec has two, recently British Columbia legislated five days each year for both full- and part-time employees. This was an important piece of your mandate, and congratulations to everyone, including yourself, on getting this passed unanimously in December. This would provide federally regulated private sectors with ten paid days of sick leave.

Minister, could you please explain again why it was so critical to move swiftly on Bill C-3 and what you are going to do to get sick leave implemented? You touched on it a bit. If you could just drill down on that, it would be great.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** We have to get stakeholders together, which we are doing. As I said, we're convening that next month. It's complicated. It's a bit tangly, as we say here, dealing with collective agreements and dealing with operational systems that employers have.

They know it's coming. We all know it's coming. It passed unanimously.

Look, I think it passed unanimously because everybody in the House....

It's not the first time that a piece of legislation that I think makes a lot of common sense was split up amongst the parties for various other reasons. I don't know whether we got lightning in a bottle with this or not, but I am very grateful to my colleagues from all sides of the House. I think Mr. Aitchison and I dealt with it, and the NDP, the Bloc and all parties. We understood instinctively that this was incredibly important.

The reason we arrived on 10 days particularly was because we knew, after two years of COVID, that for a lot of people, if they were quarantining, it was generally for two weeks. We want to make sure that people are covered.

You know, we didn't know what omicron was a few months ago, and it has changed our lives. It ruined our Christmases, for the most part. I got it. We don't know what might come next.

I'll say this, and I don't say it flippantly, because it's a very real thing: We have weather and seasons on our side. We're still in the middle of the worst part of the year, but we're getting through it—the long dark days of winter, particularly the months of December, January and February. In this country, it is when we spend the most time inside. I think that's why omicron really hit hard, because you can't leave your house. These are the hardest months.

As the days get longer, the weather gets better and more people spend time outside, and the virus, in whatever form it seems to take, abates. We know that now because we've been living with it for two years.

It does not take away from the urgency. Do not get me wrong. It just gives us a bit of breathing room to make sure that when we implement this, we do it right, we do it properly, we get it done correctly.

**Mr. Terry Sheehan:** As a follow-up, you mentioned working with the provinces and territories on developing a national plan on paid sick leave.

Can you talk more about the role of the provinces and territories in regard to providing paid sick leave?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** It's 95%, so I have to talk to them. I have to have them on board.

I've had very good conversations, I believe with all my ministers now, my ministerial colleagues in provinces and territories. We will meet on February 25 with the idea of coming up with a national action plan on 10 days of paid sick leave right across the country.

We think it's essential to the social safety net of the country. I also think it's essential to the health and welfare of the entire country that people no longer have to choose between taking a day off because they feel sick, potentially with something, and having to pay the rent or pay the mortgage or pay for groceries. We don't want people doing that. We all agreed on that. That's why it passed unanimously in the House of Commons.

**Mr. Terry Sheehan:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We're just about at the end, but in order to be fair, if it's agreeable, I'm going to go Madame Chabot for one question, and then to Madame Zarrillo for one question, to conclude this first hour.

• (1630)

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Sure.

**The Chair:** Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I agree, Mr. Chair.

Minister, we have talked about safety at work and mental health. You yourself talked about pregnant and nursing women. In Quebec, occupational health and safety laws give pregnant or nursing women the right to preventive withdrawal in the event of danger in the workplace. However, there are federally regulated workers in Quebec who do not have the same conditions.

Is it part of your vision that federally regulated workers in Quebec receive fair treatment and be given these same rights?

[*English*]

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Madame Chabot, maybe you could just clarify particularly which benefits you're speaking of that, as you say, are currently in Quebec but do not apply to federally regulated workers in Quebec. Which benefits are you speaking of particularly?

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I am talking about the right to preventive withdrawal of the pregnant or breastfeeding worker.

[*English*]

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I will ask one of the members of my team.

Sandra or Andrew, perhaps you could speak to it. Maybe you could help Madame Chabot with the answer to that question.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sandra Hassan:** Do you want me to answer your question?

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** You could also send your response to the committee in writing, as I only have two minutes and wanted to ask a second question.

**Ms. Sandra Hassan:** I'll respond quickly.

The Canada Labour Code has provisions for preventive withdrawal. You are right, however, that Quebec has different provisions that provide for, among other things, leave or guaranteed pay during such withdrawal. This is the difference between the federal and Quebec regimes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Is there any work that could be done to ensure that federally regulated workers in Quebec have at least the same right?

**Ms. Sandra Hassan:** We are currently reviewing these provisions.

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

Mr. Chair, there is a lot of feedback and I wouldn't want it to affect my speaking time.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Just a moment, we're trying to fix that.

We're fine now.

[*Translation*]

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

Minister, with respect to Bill C-3, there is something I understand less well. The 10 days of sick leave were adopted so that federally regulated workers would be entitled to them. I understand that, if you wanted to apply this across Canada, given the exclusive jurisdiction of the provinces in labour matters, it would not be possible.

So I don't understand why you couldn't change the Canada Labour Code to guarantee those 10 days of sick leave, at least for federally regulated employees, as you did with labour standards. You raised the minimum wage to \$15 an hour on December 29, and that applies regardless of the minimum wage rates in other provinces. So an amendment to the Canada Labour Code to provide 10 days of sick leave would at least include federally regulated workers.

You could then continue your consultations in the provinces.

• (1635)

[*English*]

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

Minister, could you or your staff provide a written answer to that question? We went over quite a bit of time.

We'll now turn to Ms. Zarrillo, for your final question.

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

I want to thank the Minister for his commitment to mental health.

I'm concerned about the construction industry. I'm sure you know that in British Columbia, the average age of death for men has actually declined over the years. We're talking about opioid overdoses. We know that it over-indexes in the construction industry.

With aggressive housing targets, and what we know will be federally funded infrastructure coming forward, I'm wondering if there is an opportunity.... As part of your mandate letter you talk about amendments to the Labour Code as they relate to mental health, workplace stress and injury.

Could we consider or is there an opportunity to consider tradespeople to work on federally funded housing and federally funded infrastructure projects?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** It's something I would certainly have to take a look at. Yes, I couldn't agree more. This is an issue of addiction, and that is a very serious thing, something that I know, as well. Yes, let's take a look at it. I'm not deeply familiar with the problem, but I am familiar with the broader problem of addiction. I am deeply troubled by the statistic you just mentioned. It's new to me. Yes, I appreciate drawing the matter to my attention. It's very important, and I appreciate it.

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

That concludes our time for the first hour of the committee.

Thank you, Minister.

Thank you to members of your ministry for attending and providing testimony to the committee members today.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** We'll suspend for a few minutes while we transition to the next hour.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1645)

**The Chair:** We're now out of our suspension and will formally adjourn.

So that we're clear, Minister, the issue was not you. You were coming through clearly, but the interpreters could not hear you clearly enough to do interpretation. This was cleared before, but at the last minute it didn't work.

Minister, sorry. Thank you for being available. Thank you for offering to make yourself available to come back to the committee when we can schedule it.

**Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC):** Thank you so much, Minister.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion):** My pleasure. We'll do this again some other time.

**The Chair:** Mr. Kusmierczyk, the parliamentary secretary, is now off the hook for the time being, Minister.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Thank you all. Take care.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, staff members. We'll do this again.

With that, thank you, committee members. We'll adjourn for the day.





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