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[English]



The Chair (Mrs. Sue Barnes (London West, Lib.)): Bienvenue. Welcome. Pursuant to Standing Order 83(1), we are continuing with pre-budget discussions.

I'd like to welcome the first panel of the afternoon. From the International Association of Fire Fighters, we have Jim Lee, the assistant to the general president of the Canadian office. Welcome, Jim, again.

From the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, there is Mark Goldblatt, senior consultant, and René Daoust, president. Welcome. Bienvenue.

And from the Canadian Association of University Teachers, we have James Turk, executive director, and David Robinson, associate executive director.

I know we're anticipating some vote calls later this afternoon, so if you will just start with your presentations and take no more than seven minutes...up to seven minutes, and then I will cut you off, but please feel free. I think these are the instructions the clerk gave you earlier.

We'll go in the order of the agenda and start with the International Association of Fire Fighters. Thank you.



Mr. Jim Lee (Assistant to the General President, Canadian Office, International Association of Fire Fighters): Thank you very much.

As was mentioned, my name is Jim Lee. I'm the assistant to the general president for Canadian operations of the International Association of Fire Fighters. I was a full-time firefighter in the city of Toronto for more than 30 years.

On behalf of our general president, Harold Schaitberger, and the 18,600 professional firefighters we represent in Canada, the International Association of Fire Fighters is appreciative of the opportunity to submit our views as part of the annual pre-budget consultation exercise of the Standing Committee on Finance.

I know you are all familiar with the two issues the IAFF brought forward in our submissions: the establishment of a national public safety officer compensation benefit, and federal funding for the IAFF's hazardous materials and weapons of mass destruction training programs. That being the case, I will not repeat the details contained in the written brief; instead, I will summarize our points on these issues.

The IAFF advocates the establishment of a national public safety officer compensation benefit for the family of a firefighter who is killed or permanently disabled in the line of duty. We propose that this benefit be a direct, one-time payment of \$250,000.

The issue of the compensation fund has been around for a long time. Frankly, we are growing weary of hearing the same arguments when we advocate our position here on the Hill. We're given vague jurisdictional arguments as a reason for not acting on this issue; specifically, the firefighters are municipal, not federal employees. Yet there is a permanent national memorial for fallen police officers not 500 metres from where we're sitting right now, and a national ceremony is held every year. Many of the names on this memorial are of municipal officers who gave their lives in the line of duty.

We're told that it may be too complicated to set up that kind of benefit at a national level here in Canada; yet the United States government has had such a benefit in place for its firefighters since 1976, which operates quite effectively.

We're told by our federal representatives that firefighters have the admiration and respect of the Canadian people, a situation that is more evident than ever in Kelowna, B.C., this past number of weeks.

A majority of the MPs even tell us during our annual lobby that they support the idea of this benefit. But year after year the issue fails to advance in the federal arena.

We're told that we can negotiate a survivor benefit at the bargaining table, but the truth is that less than 10% of our members have been able to do so, and in most cases it's a mere token amount.

We don't think it's a lot to ask the nation to recognize the sacrifice of a fallen firefighter and to take steps to ensure the financial security of a family who has lost a major source of income. We do think that the federal government has the authority to establish this fund. We respectfully urge this committee to make a positive recommendation so that this long overdue issue may advance at the national level.

Regarding our proposal for hazardous materials and weapons of mass destruction response training, we used to say that weeks and months were passing without this important protection in place. Now, alarmingly, we can say that years are passing without this training in place.

The IAFF's hazardous materials and terrorism response programs are just waiting to be taken advantage of by the Canadian government. They would be an extremely cost-effective way for the government to bolster current initiatives and to significantly enhance the number of Canadian first responders who have access to this important training. Remember, firefighters are the first line of defence in any emergency, including an attack or an incident of a chemical, biological, nuclear, or radiological nature.

We are the first ones on the scene, but if the firefighters are not specifically trained to respond safely and effectively to these dangers, the public is not adequately protected. That was the case in Guelph, Ontario, four months ago when a van carrying radioactive materials was involved in a traffic accident and overturned. Fortunately, the materials did not leak. But the city's firefighters still have not received specific training from anyone to deal with radioactive incidents.

As a starting point, we stress and encourage the funding of a single-site demonstration using our curriculum as a means of illustrating its merits. But again, annual funding of just \$500,000 would train thousands of first responders—not just professional firefighters but other responders too.

In closing, the two items we bring forward for the committee's consideration constitute modest budget allocations, especially considering the significant benefits they would bring to the Canadian public and to the nation's professional firefighters. We ask you to take advantage of this opportunity and to view these items favourably in your deliberations.

   (1545)

Again, I thank you for this opportunity, and I would be glad to answer any questions from the committee.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lee.

[...]

We will go to rounds of questioning now. I'll start with Mr. Solberg; you'll have up to seven minutes.

Mr. Monte Solberg (Medicine Hat, Canadian Alliance): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the presentations and I appreciate all of you taking the time to come here. I want to start with Mr. Lee.

First I want to express on behalf of my party that we appreciate the work firefighters do. In the last few years I think everyone has started to appreciate a lot more the work firefighters do,

especially after 9/11, but even in the course of their ordinary work, day to day, I think most of us pay a little more attention than we used to.

Certainly we're familiar with some of these issues. Many of us have been lobbied by firefighters, who've done a good job that way. My question is this. Obviously, you've had some discussions with people in government—I assume with National Defence—with respect to some of the training issues and that kind of thing. If you have had those discussions, could you elaborate on them and give us some sense of what the government's response is when you're asking for training and money and that kind of thing?



Mr. Jim Lee: The vast majority of the responses we're getting from members of Parliament are very positive with regard to the training. Where it seems to be falling down is when it gets into the bureaucratic process. There are training programs being put on by the federal government right now—by OCIPEP, by other organizations within the government—but the training is not getting to the firefighters on the street. That's our problem, and it was evident in the Guelph situation. That's why I brought it forward; it was the most recent example. It's going to a select group of higher-ranking people within the fire departments across Canada; it's not getting out to the firefighters, the guys who have to do the job.

We're saying our program would do that. We could train 1,600 firefighters each year. That's a “train the trainer” program, where those 1,600 would go out to train other firefighters. Everybody seems to be positive, but nobody's moving forward with the \$500,000 yet. That's why we're suggesting that maybe a one-site demonstration using our curriculum would get it moving in the right direction.



Mr. Monte Solberg: When it comes to national emergencies and that sort of thing, my understanding is—and you'll correct me, I'm sure, if I'm wrong—that the Department of National Defence takes the lead and works through fire departments and that sort of agency to address some of these problems.

The question I have—and maybe you're the wrong person to ask this of—is if we had the defence minister here today and said “Our understanding is you're responsible for ensuring these people are trained and ready to deal with issues”—such as dealing with radioactive materials—he would have to say that he is, but I guess at this point we're not adequately prepared. That's basically the message.



Mr. Jim Lee: The rank and file firefighters, the guys who actually have to do the job when called upon, are not adequately trained at this time. It's as simple as that.

[...]

Mr. Monte Solberg: All right.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): First off, I want to thank all three witnesses for their presentations.

I'll begin with the International Association of Fire Fighters. Your association is calling for the establishment of a national compensation benefit for firefighters. I believe you recommended a similar initiative in last year's submission, as you mentioned at the outset. I probably put the question to you, then, but I don't recall your answer, so I will ask it again. You argue that this is not a matter of jurisdiction, and we understand that full well. We're talking about very serious, human drama. However, in Quebec, the Commission de la santé et de la sécurité au travail provides compensation to workers in accordance with established guidelines, regardless of the sector in which they work.

How would this national compensation benefit fit in with the Quebec compensation system in the case of persons injured on the job or suffering from a work-related illness?

   (1605)

[English]



Mr. Jim Lee: In our presentation and the submissions we made to the committee, it wouldn't be harmonized at all. It would be up and above anything you would get from your provincial and municipal governments. This was something that would recognize the line-of-duty debt by the federal government, not something that would be taken away from.... If you have \$50,000 life insurance from your municipality, it would not be reduced by \$50,000. We think it's something that has to be recognized by the federal government, up and above anything else you would have got.

[Translation]



Mr. Pierre Paquette: Therefore, the benefit would be paid over and above any compensation awarded pursuant to Quebec's occupational safety and health legislation.

[English]



Mr. Jim Lee: That's correct.

[Translation]



Mr. Pierre Paquette: Fine then. Thank you.

[...]

Now we go to Mr. Murphy for seven minutes.



Mr. Shawn Murphy (Hillsborough, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you, presenters, for the presentations.

I need a little bit of elaboration, Mr. Lee, on the national compensation fund, if I may. I only want to follow up a little bit.

As you found out from your meetings, I think every member of Parliament, and probably every member of the provincial assembly, agrees that anyone who is killed or injured in the line of duty should be compensated financially. There are two different streams of benefit. There's the income continuation to the firefighter's family and there is, I guess, a lump sum spousal benefit. I take it you're only talking about the second one. Are you?



Mr. Jim Lee: Yes. We're talking about the lump sum.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: You're talking about the lump sum. Income continuation, I assume, would be for negotiating collective agreements that would be merged with all the provincial workers' compensation programs. There'd be a whole hodge-podge out there, but there would be reasonable income continuation, I assume.



Mr. Jim Lee: I can tell you that in my experience as a negotiator on behalf of firefighters across Canada, there are very few collective agreements that have salary continuation. In fact, we were the only one in the province of Ontario, the city of Toronto. It's gone now.

We have life insurance, but we did have a salary continuation. When the amalgamation happened, the salary continuation plan was no longer there.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: How would that work? Would it be a top-up from the existing workers' compensation?



Mr. Jim Lee: It would be a top-up.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: Okay. I don't want to bring up the word, but there is a jurisdictional issue here. Death is an easy thing to decipher, and you can tell me exactly what it would be.

When you get into the disabled... firefighting is a very demanding job. It's a very physical job. I assume that at any given moment there are a lot of disabled firefighters in this country. Do you have any idea of the number?



Mr. Jim Lee: I don't have any idea of the number of disabled firefighters. I can tell you that in the protocol they have in the United States there's a distinct pattern for the criteria they have to meet on the disabled aspect.

We're saying that we're prepared to sit down and talk to any minister who wants to take this on. We're prepared to sit down, talk, and come up with some type of protocol to look at the disability aspect of it.

You're quite right, death is death. It's pretty straightforward. On the disability, we're prepared to sit down and talk about it.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: I've practised law for 25 years and I've had hundreds of cases on the disabled. I don't recall any firefighters, but often it's a tough issue out there.

Is the number of firefighters in Canada 186,000 or something like that?



Mr. Jim Lee: It is 18,600, approximately.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: I would assume that given the nature of the work you probably have a certain percentage, quite a number, of disabled firefighters out there.



Mr. Jim Lee: There are definitions. When we look at long-term disability plans, it's probably what you're talking about.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: I'm talking about the long-term disability plans, yes.



Mr. Jim Lee: There are clear definitions on what a disability is and how long they would pay. They determine the disability. There's own occupation disability and then there's any occupation disability. I am well aware of that.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: I am well aware too. I don't think it is as clear as you say it is. It's very complex apparently.



Mr. Jim Lee: We'd be prepared to sit down and talk with one of the minister's people on that.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: Do you have any idea of what the costs would be? Can you give us an estimate?



Mr. Jim Lee: I can tell you that last year, from April of this year to April of last year, we had 11 firefighters across Canada who died in the line of duty.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: That's the easy part. On disability, do you have any idea?



Mr. Jim Lee: No.



Mr. Shawn Murphy: You have no idea.

  (1620)

[...]

The Chair: Honourable Maria Minna.



Ms. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you for coming today, all of you. I think I've met all of you before.

Mr. Lee, I wanted to clarify something with respect to the firefighters' national fund. I think our colleague from Quebec was talking about workers' compensation outside of Quebec.

Do the firefighters in Ontario fall under the Workers' Compensation Board? I'm trying to remember how that works.



Mr. Jim Lee: They fall under the Workers' Compensation Board.



Ms. Maria Minna: For major injuries or death, what is the compensation? In Ontario is it one lump sum or is it a payment to a spouse?



Mr. Jim Lee: It depends on the option of the surviving spouse. She can take a lump sum or she can take a monthly pension.



Ms. Maria Minna: It's an option.



Mr. Jim Lee: Yes.



Ms. Maria Minna: So the national fund would be above that then?



Mr. Jim Lee: Yes.



Ms. Maria Minna: Is there a percentage of salary? Have you looked at an amount?



Mr. Jim Lee: We're saying in our submission--



Ms. Maria Minna: Sorry, I haven't read it.



Mr. Jim Lee: --it's \$250,000.



Ms. Maria Minna: Lump sum?



Mr. Jim Lee: Yes.



Ms. Maria Minna: I wanted to be clear as to how the jurisdictional things would work out in the two areas.



Mr. Jim Lee: I've heard the argument on the jurisdiction--



Ms. Maria Minna: Tell us what the problem is.



Mr. Jim Lee: The firefighters in Kelowna who are in there fighting those fires right now are from all over Canada. And they're not there to protect the citizens of Kelowna; that's a national disaster there. They're there on behalf of Canada. The firefighters--



Ms. Maria Minna: What happens if they're injured there? I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm curious. What happens if an Ontario firefighter is injured in B.C.?



Mr. Jim Lee: They would get workers' compensation.



Ms. Maria Minna: Under the B.C. plan or the Ontario plan?



Mr. Jim Lee: Under the Ontario plan.



Ms. Maria Minna: I want to be sure.



Mr. Jim Lee: I was saying the firefighters are there because it's a natural disaster--



Ms. Maria Minna: No, I understand that.



Mr. Jim Lee: --and God forbid that we should lose any firefighters there. They wouldn't be recognized by the federal government in any way, shape, or form.

I was there. I went to Kelowna and saw what those guys had to face, and I'm saying we were very fortunate that we didn't lose a lot of firefighters there. When that fire came up the valley and up the canyon and got those houses, we had about 300 firefighters on that ridge who saved thousands and thousands of houses. We lost 248, but the potential was to lose thousands of houses in that city and they stopped it. And not one firefighter was hurt, thank God. We had twisted ankles and small burns, but nothing other than that.

   (1625)

Ms. Maria Minna: Thank you. I wanted to clear up some of those things.

[...]

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you, both of you.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chairperson.

I'd also like to thank all the presenters this afternoon. In my seven minutes I'm going to try to ask a question to each of the groups represented.

[...]

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: I want to say to Jim Lee that I join with my other colleagues in congratulating his association for their incredible contribution to so many difficult times Canadians have had to face recently.

We've already had some questions on the PSOC, so I'm going to ask about the hazardous training program. It seems to me that what you're recommending is a fairly cost-effective way for government to spend its allocated dollars in the interest of training first responders to deal with hazardous material and in the event of a bioterrorist threat.

I think you're asking for--and I think you've been at this for quite a while as well--a \$500,000 allocation to go to your association to be administered through your system to train first responders. The government has passed this from department to department to department and has not given a positive response today. Do I have the right analysis? It's obviously meeting a need we all agree to and it's the most cost-effective way to go.

   (1635)

Mr. Jim Lee: We believe it's extremely cost-effective. This is the way to get the training to the firefighters who are actually doing the work.

This program is in place in the United States. We can't bring it here to Canada because it's fully funded by the federal government in the United States. That's why we need the \$500,000 from the federal government here to be able to bring a tried and tested program to Canada.

We're saying that firefighters and other first responders--we're not specifically saying this should be firefighters, but also ambulance, police, hydro workers, you name them, anybody who

goes to an incident--should be trained to a certain level. Our curriculum, our trainers, will be able to do that.

This is not something we're going to make money from at \$500,000. We were prepared to come in and train the trainers. As I said, it's working in the United States right now. There's nothing that says it won't work here. We're saying let's give it a shot.

