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## EI Program robs workers, especially women

*Times have changed. Work has changed. The EI Program needs to change too.*

OTTAWA – Women who work to support their families and pay for unemployment insurance protection get robbed by the federal government. A new report released today shows that the EI Program, which was set up to administer unemployment insurance in 1996, pays insurance to just one third of working women who lose their jobs.

The report “Falling Unemployment Insurance Protection for Canada’s Unemployed” was prepared by the Canadian Labour Congress. It examines Canadians’ access to unemployment insurance based on gender, age, region and federal riding and estimates the financial impact of declining coverage. The report’s key findings were released at a joint news conference today by the Canadian Labour Congress and the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec, the FTQ – which together represent a majority of the country’s unions and their members.

“Times have changed. Work has changed. The EI Program needs to change too in order to be there when today’s working men and women need it to get them through to that next job,” says Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti.

In 2001, just 33% of unemployed women received insurance benefits, compared to a 44% rate of coverage for men. It’s a gender gap that’s getting wider every year, due in part to the rapid slide in the number of women able to access their insurance. In 1996, the year the EI Program took over the administration of unemployment insurance, the rate of coverage for women was 39%, compared to 45% for men.

The CLC’s research found that insurance coverage for unemployed Canadians has been cut in half since the early 1990s, when Ottawa began changing the rules and the hours of work required to qualify for benefits. Over the same period, the workforce underwent a change as more women sought jobs in sectors which rely heavily on part-time or seasonal work, such as the tourism and hospitality industry.

The largest gender gap and the largest number of women affected are in the 25 to 44 age group who are more likely to have young children. The biggest losers since 1996 have been women over age 45. Before the EI Program took over, there was virtually no difference in coverage. Today only 45% of these women are covered, compared to 58% of men the same age.

The FTQ's general secretary René Roy says Ottawa needs to be reminded of its responsibility to administer unemployment insurance on behalf of all Canadians.

"Right now, it looks as if the government has been operating this insurance program in its own interest rather than in the interest of the working people who pay for it. It is unacceptable to us and to the millions of workers we represent, to have rules that prevent the majority of people who pay for coverage from accessing their insurance. It is particularly offensive when these rules victimize women," said Roy, who also noticed that on a regional basis, Quebec has lost 3.5 billion dollars every year since 1996 with the current EI regimen.

Georgetti says the report proves labour's longtime grievance that the EI Program is out of step with the needs of a modern workforce which includes an increasing number of women and relies on a steady supply of skilled workers.

"The EI Program isn't working when, just last year, only 38% of people who found themselves unemployed had access to unemployment insurance. Working people pay for coverage off of every pay cheque and they expect this program to be there when they need it. That isn't the case right now, especially for women who work to support their families," says Georgetti.

Barb Byers, an Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress, says these new findings prove once and for all that the EI Program needs to change.

"Women deserve nothing less than equal access to unemployment insurance. The rules must change to accommodate the kind of work that's out there right now and to recognize that the realities of life for many working mothers make it damn hard to qualify for benefits. Let's make the EI Program work for everyone," she says.

To drive the need for change home, all three labour leaders say MPs can expect a visit from their local Labour Council in the coming months and should be prepared to publicly endorse labour's proposals for modernizing the EI Program. Those proposals include a basic 360 hours to qualify, a longer benefit period and benefits up to 18 months for workers over 45, a weekly benefit no lower than two-thirds of the best twelve weeks of earnings, and regular EI benefits for all hours of work lost while training.

"Falling Unemployment Insurance Protection for Canada's Unemployed" is available from the Canadian Labour Congress and on line at [www.unemployed.ca](http://www.unemployed.ca).

The FTQ represents over half a million unionized workers and is Quebec's largest labour federation.

The Canadian Labour Congress, the national voice of the labour movement, represents 2.5 million Canadian workers. The CLC brings together Canada's national and international unions along with the provincial and territorial federations of labour and 137 district labour councils. Web site: [www.clc-ctc.ca](http://www.clc-ctc.ca)

Contacts: Jean Wolff, 613-526-7431 and 613-798-6040  
[communications@clc-ctc.ca](mailto:communications@clc-ctc.ca)