

BULLETIN

Changes to EI pose concerns for HSA members

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Workers hoping to collect maternity benefits face a threat from recent changes to Employment Insurance - formerly, Unemployment Insurance. The changes might also adversely affect members applying for SUB benefits under the HEABC collective agreement, although a union committee is working to increase eligibility for SUB benefits.

EI has made significant and far-reaching changes to calculating benefits eligibility. Under the old system, workers had to log so many hours or earn so much in total wages. The new system is more complex, and it disqualifies more people.

For example, EI has abolished the income threshold. To qualify for regular EI benefits, you must have worked 910 hours in the past 52 weeks. To receive maternity benefits, the figure is 700 hours.

To meet that requirement you must work at least 13.4 hours per week. HSA members work 7.2 hours per day. Anyone working less than 37 per cent of a full-time equivalent fails to meet the mark. Take off some sick days during that time, and even those working 40 per cent of an FTE are disqualified.

This might hit hard working mothers who have collected maternity benefits and go on maternity leave again within a year of the child's birth. They would not qualify.

"Under the old system, our members always met the income threshold," notes HSA Labour Relations Officer, Sheila Vataiki. "With the new regulations, income no longer applies and even members working long hours can be disqualified."

EI defines a work week as 35 hours. If someone works more than that number in a week by, for example, putting in overtime, EI does not count the extra hours in assessing total hours for eligibility. But if a worker works less than 35 in a week, EI will dock the total number of hours accordingly.

Organized labour is appealing that regulation through a test case in Quebec.

Regarding regular benefits, anyone working less than half a week within the past year would also be ineligible.

Regressive changes over the years to EI and UI before that have disqualified more and more jobless workers and those on medical leave. Only some 55 percent of Canada's jobless now collect EI benefits.

"That means many of our members are effectively paying an EI *tax* rather than a premium," Vataiki remarks.

"They will never be eligible for benefits." Some 27 per cent of HSAs 8,700 women members work part-time.

There are some aspects of this issue which have been identified for bargaining, and will be brought forward at the negotiating table.

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