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Nortel workers bring fight for benefits to Parliament Hill



Nortel employee Arlene Borenstein, who is currently on long-term disability, is fighting for the federal government to pass legislation to help Nortel workers. She took her story to Parliament Hill, Monday, April 12, 2010.

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Disabled Nortel workers are making a plea to the federal government to pass legislation that would allow them to keep their benefits.

"It is absolutely time to give those of us already suffering with our chronic and debilitating illnesses relief from the stress and worry from our employer's insolvency," said Ottawa resident Arlene Borenstein, one of three workers who took their stories to Parliament Hill on Monday.

The workers say they're becoming worn down by the lack of political action on the issue, and it's affecting their health.

"Bankruptcy is not a place for the disabled who are already hurt and cannot get another job," said Borenstein.

Nortel employees will lose their benefits at the end of the year, according to a deal approved by a Toronto judge two weeks ago.

However, many long-term disabled workers are against the deal.

Instead, many of those workers want politicians to back a Liberal Senate bill that would ensure any changes to the Bankruptcy Act will also protect Nortel employees. The bill has already received a second reading.

For those who are dependent on expensive medication, the bill could help keep them afloat financially.

"I was a normal middle-class guy and now I face the reality of poverty," said Peter Burns, who has been on long-term disability for five years.

Burns' pain medication costs \$36,000 per year -- money he says he doesn't have.

The Nortel employees say they're not only fighting for themselves, but they're also fighting for other Canadians who could one day find themselves in a similar situation.

"There are 1.2 million people out there in Canada who potentially could find themselves in this situation, and we want to make sure they are aware that they could be in the same position as us," said Burns.

The NDP is pushing for a similar bill in the House of Commons, which would give pensioners priority over other creditors in bankruptcy situations. It could be another month before that bill reaches its first discussions.

The disabled workers face a deadline for any changes made by the federal government. The deadline coincides with Nortel wrapping up its affairs, which the company has indicated will likely happen by the end of the year.

With a report from CTV Ottawa's Paul Brent