

NEWS OTTAWA & REGION

Crusader for Nortel disabled dies 3

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One of the leaders of a group of disabled former Nortel employees has died.

Peter Burns was 53 years old and the father of three daughters when he died Saturday.

Burns fought not only to protect himself and his Nortel colleagues from financial ruin, but to help others working for companies with similar employer-sponsored disability insurance.

As Nortel was in the midst of its death throes, an agreement between the company and a court-appointed representative for the employees was signed that effectively ensured that the company's disabled workers would lose almost all of their long-term disability benefits along with health, life, dental and pension benefits. The deal also made it impossible for pensioners and disabled workers to sue the company, trustees and company directors for compensation of the drastically under-funded trust account.

Burns and others battled to have two private member bills that would have rejigged the country's bankruptcy laws passed, but they were both defeated. In each case, the three opposition parties supported the bills, but the Conservatives voted en masse against them.

By bringing long-term disability claimants to preferred-status creditors, they would have been able to collect most of their benefits up to age 65.

A longtime friend and former Nortel colleague said he had no doubt that stress helped quicken Burns' death.

"I think the ordeal caused him enormous stress," Mark Christopher said. "He was very afraid that he wouldn't have enough money and that he would become destitute."

Christopher himself was laid off with no severance while losing 31% of his pension.

"Peter didn't understand how the politicians could live with themselves," he said.

Burns wrote an e-mail to this reporter last November apologizing for bitter words he had previously written about Conservative senators. He was frustrated and afraid.

"I was disturbed when I wrote to you yesterday - all I could think about are those people who will die if something isn't done. This is like begging for life, from the gallows. It is sick. I feel persecuted today and I don't know if should I feel that way. Persecution is for characters in books or the movies - not for an ordinary nerd like me. However, I do want to show respect for our senators overall - if we can't believe in the power of the Senate and the prime minister then we can't believe in Canada."

Burns had battled cancer and was suffering from a spinal cord injury. His funeral will be on Friday.