

Back to [Nortel pensioners protest pay loss as 'corpse being cut up'](#)

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Mary Jane MacKinnon, recently turned 60 and the grandmother of two, spent 30 years as a customer service representative at Nortel Networks Corp. in Belleville, Ont.

She retired two years ago on a reduced pension to make sure her husband had a survivors benefit, she said, since he doesn't have a pension of his own.

Then in January 2009, along with thousands of other retired Nortel workers across Canada, she watched her former employer enter bankruptcy protection. She began to wonder about the future of her loved ones.

"I was counting on that pension to keep us going – and the kids. And now it's uncertain and the benefits are going to be gone as soon as they go into bankruptcy," she said on Wednesday as hundreds of people in her situation gathered around her at Queen's Park. "This will seriously impact our family."

Under grey skies and cold rain, with a brisk wind unfurling and snapping their Canadian Auto Workers flags, Nortel's retired, long-term disabled and former employees gathered at the legislature.

It was fitting weather for a similarly bleak task: demanding that the provincial government step in to secure their rights to full and protected pensions, severance pay and benefits during the veritable yard sale of Nortel's global assets after the company entered creditor protection earlier this year.

Wednesday also saw the announcement of Ciena Corp.'s opening bid for Nortel's Ethernet division, which employs 1,430 in Canada, and is likely to see a 15 per cent cut in its global workforce.

"The corpse is being cut up, dissected, and handed all around," said Eddie Halpin, 70, who stopped working for Nortel in London, Ont., in 1994. "They are taking the money and running."

Currently, under terms of the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act (CCAA), Nortel does not need to give notice of termination or severance pay, and people laid off in the current restructuring receive only 69 per cent of their earned pension assets. There are now more former Nortel employees receiving pensions in Ontario than are currently paying in.

Signs at Wednesday's rally called the CCAA "legalized theft."

"This is a national crisis," said Ken Lewenza, national president of the CAW, as a crowd of several hundred roared in support. "To think, now that workers are retired, that they may take a 30 per cent reduction in their pension, after 30, 35, 40 years of deferred wages – it should be unlawful in Canada."

In Quebec, Employment Minister Sam Hamad said he would attempt to give Quebec's Régie des rentes, which regulates pensions, the ability to manage the Nortel plan, should employees choose the option. But from Queen's Park or Ottawa, there has been no clear indication of whether the government will intervene.

"This is a difficult time for Nortel employees, retirees, and their families," Ontario Finance Minister Dwight Duncan told the *Star*. "Ministry officials have met with the pensioners to hear their concerns and recommendations."



Retirees rally at Queen's Park for full pension benefits on Oct. 7, 2009. There is no legal obligation for Nortel to give termination notice or severance pay.

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