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Disabled Nortel workers say they won't be protected

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OTTAWA - Disabled Nortel workers who will see their benefits cut off at the end of the year are hoping to take their fight to a human rights tribunal.

A Feb. 8 agreement between the failing telecommunications company, the disabled workers and pensioners extended benefit payments to Dec. 31 rather than the end of March, as originally proposed.

However, employees with disabilities argue they won't be protected beyond that point and also must give up their right to sue the company as part of the agreement.

As well, news that Nortel is requesting permission from Canadian and U.S.

courts to pay \$92 million in retention bonuses to executives selling off the final pieces of the company has tempers flaring.

¹I think it's disgusting,² said disabled employee Peter Burns of the deal.

³It's disgusting the way bankruptcy courts treat the weakest people. Take those bonuses times two and every disabled employee would be taken care of, but better to give that money to the people who don't need it.² While many employees still plan to fight the deal in bankruptcy court, Burns said there's another avenue they're exploring.

⁴We have been speaking with a human rights consultant who thinks there have been human rights violations,² he said. ⁵He's put together a couple of case studies that show without a stretch that we can appear and argue our case before a human rights tribunal.² To do so, Burns said they're trying to organize a legal defence fund, but are in the very early days of doing so. ⁶We'll need money to fight this and we still don't know how much it will cost,² he said.

Employee Josee Marin called the deal ⁷a pact with the devil² and said every disabled worker must fight to oppose it. Marin said she doesn't believe Susan Kennedy (a Nortel worker on long-term disability who represented the employees) knew what she was signing. ⁸I'm 41 years old and with (the

diseases) I have I won't make it to 65, but how am I supposed to make it even that far with nothing? How many years can I survive? They're going to see me die with nothing.² Nortel filed for bankruptcy protection in January 2009. Since then, most of the company has been sold off.

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