

Nortel disabled employees seek political help

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'Passing Bill S-216 will make us whole and spare us from further pain and suffering from the financial abuse we are exposed to,' says Arlene Borenstein. (CBC)

Nortel employees on long-term disability are pleading for support from all federal political parties for a Senate bill they say will spare them from further suffering and "financial abuse."

Arlene Borenstein, a Nortel employee on disability, urged politicians Monday to set aside their political differences and support a bill brought forward by Senator Art Eggleton in March to amend the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act. The bill, which had its second reading on March 30, would bring employees on long-term disability to the top of the list of creditors to be paid if a company goes bankrupt.

Their payments would then be far more likely to continue until age 65, when they would be eligible for retirement benefits.

Speaking on behalf of herself and around 400 others at a news conference on Parliament Hill Monday, Borenstein alleged the amount of money needed in Nortel's case is less than two per cent of the cash that will be available to be disbursed to various creditors when the company is finally dissolved.

She added that the bill would benefit all Canadian employees who might become disabled, and whose employer may subsequently become insolvent.

Under Nortel's most recent agreement with employees, pensioners and former employees, long-term disability benefits will only continue until the end of the year. In addition, the agreement approved by the Ontario Superior Court on March 31 specifies that the employees give up their right to sue for more money.

"While our lawyers tell us we have a legal basis to appeal the March 31 settlement, I have to say we're getting sicker and sicker by the day as we get dragged through these complex court procedures," Borenstein said.

"Passing Bill S-216 will make us whole and spare us from further pain and suffering from the financial abuse we are exposed to."

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty was in Winnipeg Monday for roundtable discussions on Canada's retirement income system. It was a part of consultations across the country announced on March 24 that include public town hall meetings and online consultations.

Nortel, once a successful telecommunications technology company, filed for bankruptcy protection in January 2009.

Since then, most of the company has been sold off as it prepares to wind down operations.