

Nortel workers seek relief

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Kingston Liberal incumbent John Gerretsen came under fire this week from advocates for former employees of bankrupt Canadian tech giant Nortel.

The advocates want Gerretsen, as minister of consumer services, to help about 360 Nortel workers whose disability insurance disappeared when the company went bankrupt in early 2009.

They want Gerretsen to use the Consumer Protection Act to retrieve about \$75 million from Nortel's bankruptcy estate to pay for the disability insurance fund.

"These people are living below the poverty line," said Diane Urquhart, an independent financial analyst from Mississauga, who, with her husband Hugh, has been lobbying on behalf of the former Nortel workers.

"It is his decision to choose not to investigate, to not use this act."

The employees purchased additional disability insurance to top up the employer-sponsored benefit package. When the company went bankrupt, the money was removed from the fund and their disability benefits vanished.

"The disabled workers themselves couldn't come tonight. These people are critically ill," Hugh Urquhart said.

"They are former top-notch employees who have succumbed to Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis, cancer."

The Urquharts were in Kingston for Wednesday night's candidates debate, where they asked all of the hopefuls if they would support the former Nortel employees.

Their main target, however, was Gerretsen.

At Monday night's debate at Queen's University, a student asked the candidates about the insurance. Gerretsen said there was no money left in the Nortel estate.

On Wednesday, in response to the Urquharts' question, he said the Consumer Protection Act did not apply.

"You have to understand that every ministry provides legal advice to the minister, and the advice I got, specifically, is that this is not a matter under the Consumer Protection Act," he said.

"The Consumer Protection Act deals with issues that relate to individual buyers, but not in a collective situation like this."

The Urquharts disagree. They say government lawyers have provided no legal basis for the decision.

The Urquharts provided Gerretsen with a copy of a legal opinion from a Toronto law office that said because the Nortel employees purchased the insurance individually, they are covered by the act.

"There is absolutely no wording in the act that says if a good (is) sold in the workplace, then the act doesn't cover it," Diane Urquhart said.

The Urquharts said they and former employees have tried unsuccessfully since May to set up a meeting with Gerretsen.

Any effort to arrange a meeting with Gerretsen has been declined by ministry staff, they said.

Gerretsen said he was not aware of the Urquharts' attempts to meet with him. He also said he had not received any letters or telephone calls from former Nortel employee Carol Sampson of Nepean.

"The name doesn't mean anything to me," Gerretsen said.

Sampson found that odd.

"I'm a little surprised that Minister Gerretsen didn't know who I was," Sampson said Friday morning.

Sampson started working for Nortel in 1979. She said she still wears a ring she received from the company.

In June 1998, a spinal chord injury put her in the Ottawa Civic Hospital for a year. She hasn't been able to work since then, and after the company went bankrupt, her disability benefits ended.

"We've lost everything," said Sampson, 51, who said she now lives with her parents and survives on \$1,036 a month she gets from CPP.

"It's crazy. I paid for this insurance."

Sampson said that since May, she has e-mailed and called Gerretsen's office repeatedly requesting a meeting.

"He can't say he didn't see them. He can't say he doesn't know me," she said.

The responses she has received from the ministry were from Frank Denton, the assistant deputy minister of consumer services.

Denton's responses said the Consumer Protection Act did not apply to the Nortel employees complaint.

Sampson said fighting for the benefits has been frustrating.

"There's only 360 of us," she said. "You'd think we were asking for the moon."

eferguson@thewhig.com

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