

Advocates, unions fighting for migrant labourers' rights

Unite to prevent exploitation, improve conditions for Canada's rising number of temporary workers

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Last fall, in a dingy boardroom in Ottawa, a group of union leaders sat uncomfortably with migrant worker advocates to discuss Canada's growing use of temporary foreign workers to fill labour shortages.

Union reps in construction trades, food and service industries raised concerns over migrants' substandard credentials and displacement of union jobs, while advocates complained about Canada's protected labour market and employers who exploit foreign workers.

"There was definitely discomfort and tension in the room," recalled Karl Flecker, a national director of the Canadian Labour Congress, who was at the meeting. "It was a frank dialogue, but people were cautious of one another."

Despite their differences, they formed an alliance and have been meeting regularly to discuss labour rights, strategize political lobbying, share information on corporate abusers and unscrupulous recruiters and build bridges with migrant-sending countries – a counterforce, they say, against the globalization of cheap labour.

Increasingly, the union movement has been turning its attention to the plight of migrant labourers and temporary foreign workers as their numbers increase and, in many cases, their poor working conditions come to light.

While western countries often use immigration to address labour shortages and maintain population growth, more and more they're relying on temporary guest workers.

In Canada the number of foreign temporary workers has risen from 122,848 to 165,198 in the last two years, while the number of landed immigrants dropped from 262,240 to 236,758, in the same period.

"I don't believe that if these workers were given the same rights and wages as Canadian workers, our employers would be as interested in bringing them in," said labour studies professor Charlotte Yates of McMaster University.

"It is a cheap labour policy," she added. "There is a danger that if we increase the number of migrant workers, we increase the number of vulnerable workers. It is going to affect Canada's overall labour market, pushing down wages."

Although Canada has just launched the Canadian Experience Class to allow foreign workers and international students on temporary permits to apply for permanent status from within Canada, those in low-paying and unskilled jobs – often the most vulnerable due to their lack of English and education – are still excluded.

With federal and provincial governments eager to respond to employers' needs, but slow to protect foreign workers, critics like Yates say unions have a key role to play.

But some, like John Mortimer, president of Labour Watch, a union watchdog, said migrant workers must take responsibility as well and do their own research before taking a job abroad. Labour organizing may not be a solution, he added.

"Some union leaders ... believe any worker is better off unionized than not. They are a business. It's more revenue," he said. "They accept that the temporary foreign worker programs are a reality, so they move to represent them, even though they may ... think they are taking jobs from Canadians."

Still, unions have made progress in organizing Canada's migrant workers in spite of legal limitations placed on unionization and high turnovers among certain fields.

This summer, the United Food and Commercial Workers signed a contract that included 70 migrant workers with Winnipeg's Mayfair Farms. In May, the Canadian Steelworkers Union and Migrant Ontario, a grassroots advocacy group, launched the Independent Workers Association (Home Worker Section) to offer live-in caregivers discounted legal counselling, insurance and dental plans.

Last year, the Alberta Federation of Labour set up an advocate's office to collect data and assist temporary foreign workers with complaints against employers.

"The unions are basically doing what the governments should be doing," said Stan Raper of the food and commercial workers' union, which last year forced a Red Deer, Alta., hog plant in a collective agreement to fund workplace training and a community integration program for 240 migrant workers from the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Philippines and Ukraine.

The contract also made the employer sponsor 190 of the workers as landed immigrants through the Alberta Provincial Nominee program. Today, more than 75 have received their immigrant papers.

The B.C. government and Service Employees' Union is working with counterparts in 14 other countries to prepare foreign-trained health-care workers on Canadian working conditions, labour rights and basic settlement needs through multilingual education materials abroad.

"With globalization and transnational migration, you can only raise awareness and improve labour conditions by building bridges with workers in other countries," said Lorene Oikawa, the B.C. union's vice-president.

Despite the effort, Chris Ramsaroop of Justice for Migrant Workers said many foreign workers are still too afraid or too busy working to join the movement.

"It is very difficult to organize them because they are so isolated," said the community worker.

"We have a more racialized migrant workforce than ever. Canada's unions must develop more creative ways to ... include them in the labour movement."