



Tough Choices for Migrant Workers

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Last December the Toronto Star reported that about 70 migrant workers were evicted from their apartments and fired from their jobs. The workers, mostly women from Guatemala, had been hired by a mushroom factory in Ontario as part of an expansion strategy. Only a few months into their contract, the company was forced to downsize and the workers were laid off.

As temporary foreign workers brought into Canada specifically for “low-skilled” jobs, these workers are left with few choices.

They can of course return home.

However, many will have borrowed money from family and friends to pay fees and visas the federal government’s temporary program requires. Without Canadian wages – even the low wages likely offered by the mushroom factory – they will likely find it difficult to repay these loans. And entry into Canada, even under the restrictive conditions of the temporary foreign worker program, is viewed by many as their “ticket” to economic prosperity.

People look to Canada for good ideas and good lessons. How ironic then, that today Canada seems to be borrowing from failed lessons of the European “guest worker” programs, which have created significant intergeneration and social cohesion problems that Europe still does not know a way out of.

They can stay in Canada legally – as long as they don’t work. Like most other temporary workers they have their employers’ name on their work permit. So they can’t work for anyone else. They might be able to find a new employer – as long as the new employer can justify that there are no Canadians or permanent residents available to fill this job. A challenge in today’s recession! Even if it were possible, the workers would likely have to wait months for the paperwork to be sorted out. Because of their status in Canada, they wouldn’t be eligible to access publically funded services – no settlement services and no language training as would be offered to permanent residents making their home in Canada.

The final option – to work in Canada without legal status – is the option many are likely to choose. They will most likely find a “cash job” even it pays much less than the prevailing wage rate. But they would constantly be living under threat of deportation. How long they choose to stay “underground” is anyone’s guess. But during this time, they will be vulnerable to unsafe and exploitative working conditions.

The number of temporary workers living in Canada has been on the rise, more than doubling in the last decade. By December 2007, there were 74,000 low-skilled workers living in Canada. These workers fill jobs in our hotels, in the service industry, on farms etc. Unlike temporary workers who are recruited to fill the demand for high-skilled work in industries such as health care or information technology, they will not be given an option to apply for permanent residency in Canada. And by the way, once their jobs expire, they are expected to go home, although there are no exit controls to ensure that they do.

While it might be difficult to find workers to fill certain kinds of jobs, we need to ensure that our labour market needs are met in a way that is responsive to both the employer and the worker. This means trying, testing and evaluating new approaches. For example, we could experiment with an expansion of family class eligibility to include siblings and children over 18 years of age as permanent residents to fill such jobs. In case of an economic downturn, they would have a stronger network of family and community support to fall back on. And they would be guaranteed the rights and services as permanent residents.

However, a program which brings in individuals who have few rights as temporary residents, who have limited or no access to services and who are not able to advocate for themselves is not the Canadian way.

Canada has been a world leader in immigration and multiculturalism policies for many years. People look to Canada for good ideas and good lessons. How ironic then, that today Canada seems to be borrowing from failed lessons of the European “guest worker” programs, which have created significant intergeneration and social cohesion problems that Europe still does not know a way out of.

Do we seriously want to go down this road?

Here is one Canadian who thinks not.

What do you think? Write and let me know at info@maytree.com.