



Opinion / Editorial Opinion

## **Migrant workers deserve to be treated with fairness and equity**

Changes to the Temporary Foreign Workers Program robs workers of their rights and dignity.

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Mexican and Caribbean agricultural workers gather after Sunday mass at a local park near St. Michael's Church in Leamington. (May 27, 2012)

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**By:** Alfredo Barahona Published on Tue Jul 17 2012

The parking lot near St. Michael's Church in Leamington is full but not with cars — with bicycles — the only mode of transportation most temporary foreign workers can afford. Many have ridden 30 minutes, one-way, to attend mass and socialize with their fellow workers. Others have arrived on buses. It is the only chance they have to see each other all week.

This day is special. The workers have gathered to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Agricultural Migrant Workers Support Centre. But the celebration is overshadowed by concerns with changes to the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) that were announced by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) at the end of April — the changes were part of the recently passed federal budget.

How much do Canadians know about the lives of these men and women? Do they know, for example, that they leave behind loved ones and communities for months at a time to travel thousands of miles from their homes to earn a living by helping us to produce our food and to take care of our children, elderly and disabled?

The recently announced changes will allow employers to pay temporary foreign workers up to 15 per cent less than the average wage. This is unfair. As a former migrant worker said, "Migrant workers, the majority of whom are people of colour, already do not receive fair wages." In law and in principle, Canada does not support wage discrimination based on country of origin, race or

immigration status. Migrant workers argue that with this policy the Government of Canada is legitimizing and fostering inequality in the way employers treat them.

The changes to the TFWP will encourage the use of more temporary workers. Temporary workers have fewer rights, limited benefits and essentially no access to settlement services. In addition, visa conditions for temporary workers often make them dependent on their employers for such things as housing, health care and basic information about their rights.

The changes represent another step toward a two-tier society with citizens with rights on one tier and people with temporary or no status, who are admitted generally for their labour, on the other. In effect, Canada has created a guest worker program.

After mass, a worker sits under a tree, away from the crowd, and uses his cellphone to call home. As I walk by I hear him say, "It's me my love. How are you doing honey? How are the children? Yes I miss you too." His voice fades as I walk by but by the look on his face I can imagine the rest of the conversation.

Temporary workers and their families pay a high price to earn a living in Canada. A temporary work program separates families for long periods of time, which in many cases leads to family breakdown. The changes to the TFWP will make this situation worse.

Importing workers on temporary contracts does not reflect Canadian values of fairness and justice. Migrants and migrant workers are essential to meet the country's labour needs, but by offering opportunities for temporary migration only, Canada marginalizes these mostly racialized workers.

Rather than recognize the contributions of all workers to the Canadian economy and society, Canada is choosing to promote the use of "low-skilled" temporary migrants as a source of cheap and disposable labour.

Migrant workers pay taxes, and they contribute to social programs, including the Canada Pension Plan and employment insurance, that they may never use. Recent estimates indicate that TFWs and their employers contributed as much as \$303 million over 12 months in employment insurance premiums in 2008 alone.

Instead of focusing on filling long-term labour needs with temporary foreign workers who do not enjoy the same rights and protections as other workers, Canada should be nation-building and bringing in workers as permanent residents.

Canada must ratify the [International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families](#). To date, 44 countries have signed the convention, but not Canada. The convention is compatible with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and guarantees fundamental rights to all people in Canada, including migrants.

Canada also should sign on to the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention on Domestic Work. Adopted by the ILO in July 2011, it recognizes domestic work as "work," and bestows upon domestic workers the same rights and recognition as other workers, including the

enforcement of minimum wage, regular working hours and holidays, the provision of health and other benefits, and the right to organize and form unions.

KAIROS is concerned with how the TFWP will impact negatively on the dignity and human rights of workers and their families. Rooted in the theological principle of welcoming the stranger, faith communities believe that all workers, including migrant workers, deserve to be treated with fairness and equity.

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