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Migrant Workers Under Harper

"Guests," servants and criminals

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ON JUNE 23, 2008, eighty Mexican citizens (including women and children) were refused admission to Canada and were deported after being placed in detention centres for two days. Each of the men and women paid a fee of over \$4,500 before leaving Mexico for the promise of a work visa to work in agriculture in British Columbia. A Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) spokeswoman, Faith St. John, commented: "It's not unusual to refuse admission to someone, but it is unusual for a group in such large numbers to come on one flight."

Such an "unusual" incident showed only the tip of the iceberg of an immigration system that has steadily eroded under the Conservative federal government, to the point where it is difficult to make a distinction between immigration and market-driven economic policies. Indeed, profit seems to be the real determining factor dictating recent changes to the Canadian immigration system. Purported "Canadian" values of compassion and humanity have become irrelevant, even for public relations purposes. Conservatives are not shy in teaching us the hard lesson about who the real "bosses" are and who "deserves" to be exploited, under which circumstances, and under which immigration category: "guests," "temporary/seasonal," or "low-skilled" workers.

The "unusual" case of the 80 Mexicans who were deported was never reported or addressed by Canadian or Mexican government authorities.

There was a vague reference to unscrupulous labour brokers who had promised lucrative work in agriculture in B.C.: labour brokers whose activities were made possible by the current immigration and labour regimes implemented by the Harper government. These schemes are creating a new breed of “*coyotes*” promising opportunity in Canada.

During the last two years, we have seen the federal government’s commitment to “efficiency,” which has both created and massively expanded guest worker programs. The federal government has simplified the application processes for employers seeking to import labour to compensate for alleged labour shortages. Nandita Sharma, an activist academic, warns that “shortages do not always refer to a *quantitative* or actual lack of workers, but to the shortage of a particular *kind* of work force, that is, cheap, politically repressed, and so on.”¹ Through guest-worker programs such as the CSWAP, and more recently the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP), employers are granted the power to secure a captive, cheap, flexible labour force that better meets the bottom line.

As a result, we have witnessed the arrival of thousands of indentured workers to work in agriculture and in many other sectors such as construction. Workers are recruited either through their own government officials or through private labour brokers. In either case, labour brokers or consular officials from sending countries do not seem to be responsible for or care about workers’ labour or living conditions. Otherwise we would expect them to provide workers with basic information about their rights and social entitlements, such as health care or workers’ compensation. As a migrant farm worker said, “These consular officials only care about the employer. If he is happy, everything is well. If we phone the Consulate, they don’t ever bother returning our calls. We simply don’t count.”

The Canadian government, on the other hand, has not allocated any funding to service this growing population. There are currently no government services, programs or orientation for temporary migrants, rendering them all the more vulnerable and marginalized.

Even before the Harper government came to office, guest worker programs allowed employers to choose the sex, nationality, and race of their workforce. Through the new Temporary Foreign Worker Program,

employers have been granted further unrestrained power over their labour force. In effect, employers are functioning like *de facto* immigration officials in their own right, who can dictate the terms of life and work in Canada. Through these guest worker programs, employers have more of a say in “who gets in” and “who gets out.” Those who “get out” are usually the ones who have not complied with employer demands or who simply have fallen out of favour with employers for trivial reasons. Many such dismissals have no legal grounding, but cannot be contested since losing work means being repatriated immediately and/or losing the legal right to work for another employer.

The practice of assigning migrant workers to only one designated employer goes beyond the usual labour contract by enabling a type of labour servitude. Workers have to abide by and acquiesce to objectionable and often detrimental conditions of life and work in Canada. It is ludicrous that, after more than 40 years of the SAWP and pressure among advocacy organizations to amend its most deficient facets, the Harper government responds by creating new guest worker programs with much worse terms of labour mobility and human rights.

The reality is that, during the two years the Harper Conservative government has been in power, the immigration system has been privatized, for all intents and purposes, according to purely economic criteria dictated by corporate greed. While permanent immigration has been discouraged, a “temporary-forever” migration policy has been aggressively expanded under the umbrella of free trade agreements such as NAFTA. The tragic part is that this trend is likely to continue under more pro-corporate agreements like the new Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) agreement between Mexico, Canada, and the United States.

Deep Integration: The case of Three Amigos and who they leave out

It is not new for the Canadian government to leave the most affected and most vulnerable out of important decision-making processes that have a deep impact on their lives. However, the current scenario in which Ministers and Prime Ministers meet “secretly” to discuss the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) goes even further. The SPP

is even more undemocratic than NAFTA and has effects that go beyond the three North American countries.

Considering how NAFTA has affected the agricultural population in all three countries, we can predict the SPP will have further negative impacts on rural communities throughout North America, and particularly on Mexican migrant workers. Mexico, for example, has already suffered massive losses, culturally and economically, due to the collapse of its staple corn production.

The Three Amigos, with their ever-changing faces, now with the disguises of Stephen Harper, George Bush and Felipe Calderón, decide our collective fate. With pressing issues like border security and business competitiveness, it isn't surprising that the loss of land, home, family, community, identity, and security of hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrant workers a year is not in the hearts and minds of those discussing how to make an even bigger buck.

Harper has continued and excelled at Canada's role of contributing to the displacement of peoples by taking a lead in promoting the weakening and dismantling of public services and institutions in all three countries, yet also at keeping a tight control on who comes into and especially who stays in this country. The flow of cheap migrant labour is as important as the flow of products, to ensure business competitiveness.

Under the rule of Felipe Calderón, desperate "out-migration" has continued steadily, aided and abetted by the privatization of land and resources, state-instigated and state-sanctioned violence, increasing poverty, insecurity, lack of decent and secure work, and displacement that compels Mexicans to leave home in order to support their families.

Calderón, like Harper in Canada, continues in the footsteps of his predecessors, but with more overt signs of a military police state, aided by the recent U.S. Congress's approval of a Mexican-style version of Plan Colombia, the Merida Initiative, a war against drugs, which is an unashamedly brutal counter-insurgency assault on the social movements struggling for what are legitimately the Mexican people's rights: to dignity, land, and the basic necessities of life.

Because it is necessary for Mexicans to seek alternatives to the desperate situation in their country, they are ripe for super-exploita-

tion through guest worker programs such as the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program (SAWP).

Commodified peoples, disposable workers

Survival is becoming more difficult for working Mexicans living in the cities and the countryside. The price of basic staples like corn rise steadily, and the work that is available is often precarious and meagerly paid. As a result, Mexicans continue to look North for a way out of poverty. The intensification of security measures along the U.S.-Mexico border has not deterred border crossings, but has called for more resourcefulness among those seeking to leave. Nowadays, *coyotes* are not necessary and frankly too out of reach for many Mexicans who cannot afford to pay one to go to the United States. Many try their luck and risk their lives by attempting to cross the Rio Grande on their own. Some look further North.

Some see Canada as an alternative and more tangible possibility than the United States. Certainly, the economic integration of Canada and Mexico is becoming more discernible in rural communities such as Cuijingo, Guadalupe Zaragoza, and Atotonilco, where almost every house has someone working in Canada as a temporary worker, mostly in the SAWP. Their numbers and the importance of Canadian wages make Canada seem like a haven. Often the hardships faced by migrants in Canada are not communicated back to families in order to protect those left behind.

Not surprisingly, Canada is generally viewed in Mexico as a benevolent country that respects human rights more than the United States does. Those who cannot participate in the SAWP seek other ways to migrate to Canada to work and to possibly stay. Upon arrival, however, they come to know the Canada of the Harper government. Now, as soon as a plane lands from Mexico, border patrol officials are immediately lined up as passengers exit the plane in order to separate those who can from those who cannot enter. Many Mexicans finding themselves in dubious labour schemes realize that, through the Mexican consulate, their rights as Mexicans do not carry any weight. Even in moments of crisis, they have no leverage. They experience the shock of their lives

when they learn that Canada, for them, is not much different from the United States.

Through these guest worker programs, poverty is being re-packaged and imported from the Third World into the First World, together with a slew of social and environmental consequences. NAFTA has meant the further “*maquiladorization*” of Mexico, including Mexicans, for the profit margins of U.S. and Canadian capital. Mexican families and communities find themselves paying the harshest price for economic restructuring in Canada and the United States. Impoverished peasants and workers have little bargaining power to demand better conditions and wages. When a full day of farm work in Mexico renders about \$6, it is easy to be swayed by guest worker programs and the trek up North. Certainly, Canadian dollar earnings go a long way in Mexico, but it is precisely the non-economic issues that are often forgotten in the evaluation of these labour migration schemes.

In economic terms as well, these guest worker programs create dangerous dependencies on remittances. They undermine local labour market productivity and economic self-sufficiency. In a time of global food crises, farms in Mexico are idle due to lack of workers and infrastructure, and environmental degradation. Nowadays, children of migrants do not have the same ties to the land as their parents. They are provided for by remittances, and, when they reach a certain age, many see migration or leaving as a career choice.

The impact of separation between children and parents is immeasurable. Women who stay behind must contend with overwork and multiple roles in the family and in their communities. While their work facilitates the migration of others who provide their labour power in important sectors of the Canadian and U.S. economies, they themselves are made completely invisible.

Most importantly, through guest worker programs, certain people become commodified and disposable. Migrants are accepted into Canada as workers, not as citizens or human beings tied to families and communities. Once they fall ill or are unable to produce according to employer expectations, they are discarded. In Mexico, there are hundreds of forgotten families and untold stories of how migration to Canada has tragically changed the lives of people forever.

In the film *Migrants: Those Who Come from Within*, Alicia tells her own story of how her husband in the SAWP was discarded by Canada after being accidentally dosed with pesticides and chemicals. He was prevented by his employer from taking showers or missing work in order to seek medical attention. He was never the same and died a month later in Mexico, leaving Alicia and her son alone without any financial support.²

These stories repeat themselves across rural communities and cities in Mexico. These are among the liabilities of such labour *de-facto* immigration schemes that are conveniently hidden from the Canadian public. In an interdependent world and within increasingly regional economic integration, Canadian government policies affect millions of people, not only within our borders, but also in communities like Cuijingo, Guadalupe Zaragoza, and Atotonilco. Through Harper's immigration policies and new migrant labour schemes, Canada has regressed to a time reminiscent of the most blatant racist gatekeeping.

The incident of the 80 Mexican workers who were jailed and then deported from the Vancouver International airport is a concrete example of how the Harper government's policies have caused the commodification as well as the criminalization of migrant workers. At first, they are turned into units of labour to be bought and sold and exploited by *coyotes* who seek to profit from free trade in workers. Then the workers run the further risk of the immigration system turning them into criminals, either when they try to enter to work in the country, or when they speak out against substandard working and living conditions. In both cases the results are similar: they are simply deported because, after all, they are seen as nothing more than "capital on two legs." This is what is really "unusual" and truly outrageous about the way Stephen Harper treats "guests" in Canada.