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Do Canadians know how increasing numbers of temporary foreign workers is changing immigration?

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During the fall of 2011 the Conservative government announced and implemented a number of dramatic changes to the Canadian immigration system, including attempts to speed-up the processing of immigration applications, placing a greater focus on attracting economic immigrants, opening new categories of immigration for foreign students, and creating a new "super-visa" for immigrants' parents and grandparents. Pundits and critics have filled much newsprint weighing-in on these changes. However, few have commented on the rapid increases in the number of temporary foreign workers coming to the country. This has meant that the issue has largely been out of the public eye.

Most Canadians are unaware that the number of temporary foreign workers is increasing rapidly. These are people who migrate to Canada for work on a temporary visa and who, unlike other immigrants and refugees, do not have the rights of permanent residents or citizens. Statistics on temporary foreign workers vary widely depending on how they are compiled. This is because of the broad range of workers that fall under the category ranging from university professors or other professionals with specialized expertise hired from abroad, to athletes and performing artists, to low-wage service workers. In all cases, temporary workers are admitted on the condition that their employment does not impede that of Canadian citizens and permanent residents.

As confusing as the statistics can be, according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada's 2010 *Facts and Figures*, in 1986 120,074 temporary foreign workers were in the country, by the year 2000 this increased to 177,781 and by 2010 the number increased to 432,682. That is a **140 percent** increase during the 2000s alone. Of those counted in 2010 about a quarter of temporary foreign workers, 116,166, were classified as "initial" entrants, presumably coming to the country for the first time. To put that number into perspective, according to the same source, this is equivalent to over 40 percent of the 280,681 immigrants Canada admitted in the same year but these migrants will not receive permanent residence status or citizenship.

According to Immigrant and Settlement and Integration Services, based in Halifax, the number of foreign workers entering Nova Scotia has **almost doubled** in the last five years, from 1,495 to 2,795. This appears to be a growing trend.

When most Canadians think of temporary foreign workers they likely think of field-workers in Canada's agricultural belt or care-givers, two traditional areas of employment for these migrants. A 2007 Parliamentary report by Sandra Elgersma, however, shows that this is far from the

case. In fact "elemental workers and labourers" accounted for just over two percent of temporary foreign workers. By contrast about one quarter were "intermediate and clerical workers," another quarter were "professionals," and about a fifth did not state their skill level. This means that temporary foreign workers are employed in a wide cross-section of the Canadian labour market.

As the Canadian population ages and its birth rate remains low, the country faces a future tsunami in labour shortages. The temporary foreign worker program is increasingly seen as a quick means to avoid such problems. As many supporters of increasing the number of these migrants note, many migrants do not want to immigrate to Canada, they simply want to earn money and return to their homelands –something temporary visas promote. Those concerned over Canada invoking a "brain drain" of talent away from the developing world, moreover, can also look to this program as a means to avoid creating such problems. Workers learn skills in Canada, send remittances back to their homelands, and then return themselves.

Supporters of increasing the number of temporary foreign workers also point out that immigrants have historically faced a

devaluing of their human capital, often working in jobs that do not take advantage of their skills and credentials. It is a problem that has been documented by a number of scholars and policy makers.

Because most temporary foreign worker visas are contingent on an employer showing need for workers through an application of Labour Market Opinion (LMO) and offering them employment, such devaluing should not occur, and this form of migration should more seamlessly integrate migrants into the economy.

The Conservative government is also quick to note that temporary foreign workers wanting to stay in the country long-term also have the option to apply for permanent residence and later citizenship if they take advantage of the new "Canadian experience" categories of immigration at the end of their visas. Whether this is common or not remains largely un-scrutinized.

Despite all of these possible benefits, the temporary foreign worker program also presents a number of problems. For example, the 2007 Parliamentary report on the topic shows that the United States is the top source country for male temporary foreign workers and the Philippines is the leading source country

of women. This illustrates potential gender and racial components to how temporary foreign workers are admitted and what jobs they work. The report goes on to note that language is often a barrier for temporary foreign workers, which can impede interaction with local populations and create obstacles in work places. It also notes that tension is seen with respect to temporary foreign workers experiencing racism and harassment. More systematic analysis on this front is much needed.

The same report also warns that temporary workers may contribute to an overall lowering of wages and act as a disincentive to seek productivity gains through the development of new technologies. The concern is not far-fetched. A story run by the CBC last December reported on a Tim Horton's franchise owner in Red Lake contemplating hiring temporary workers because wages were an issue. In fact, he is not alone. The TDL group which owns "Timmies" has actively used third party overseas recruiters, such as the Mercan group, to attract foreign workers, mostly women, to work in their restaurants. Essentially this is an outsourcing and marketization of Canada's immigration system by placing immigration decisions in the hands of third party corporations and businesses rather than the state.

The cost of allowing companies to recruit temporary foreign workers is high, both with respect to the potential of exploiting workers in the service sector and in terms of creating a foreign underclass of workers – a problem that has sparked tension in many European countries and the US but has largely been absent in Canada.

Concerns over exploitation in Nova Scotia were raised in the initial consultation phase of amendments to the Labour Standards Code and can be readily inferred by the proposed regulations outlined in the province of Nova Scotia's recent *Discussion Paper on Regulations for Recruiters and Employers of Foreign Workers*. These include provisions to prohibit employers from "eliminating or reducing a foreign worker's wages, benefits and other terms or conditions of employment" and prohibit the practice of retaining foreign workers' passports or work permits. Clearly these are practices that have been used in the past and need to be stopped.

When it comes to asking what Canadians think about increasing the number of temporary foreign workers a national poll commissioned by the Trudeau Foundation and Dalhousie University and conducted by Environics in the fall of 2011 found that opinion is split. 35 percent of Canadians

"disapproved" of "accepting an increasing number of foreign temporary workers," another 30 percent has "no particular opinion," and only 33 percent supported it. Given the lack of consensus on the issue and rapid growth in the number of temporary foreign migrants coming to Canada it is important for this issue to enter the realm of public debate before Canada wakes-up to a quiet revolution in its immigration system.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations:

The government of Nova Scotia should be applauded for taking initial steps to protect temporary foreign workers, however, more needs to be done.

First and foremost more open public debate and accessible information is needed on this increasing form of migration. The category remains very broad and complicated and it is unclear how many of these migrants make the transition to other forms of permanent immigration.

Second, it is important for a clearer national policy to be implemented with respect to temporary foreign workers, one that monitors employers of temporary foreign workers and that reports on how the program is being used across different provinces.

Third, it is important for the provinces and federal government to consider the costs of legitimizing immigration recruiters by implementing licenses and regulations for the practice. What does the outsourcing of immigration mean in terms of long-term social and political impacts in Canada?

Last, if the country is going to move toward using immigration recruiters, it is important for it to develop oversight of their work. Currently it is unclear what sanctions are implemented for violation of provincial and federal regulations and it is unclear what governing body enforces codes of conduct in the emerging immigration industry. Extreme forms of marketization, with unchecked regulation, led to a prolonged economic recession in the 2000s, why would we expect a similar model to be different for immigration?

For Further Reading on Temporary Foreign Workers:

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