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# FAST FACTS

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## Steeling the NDP's resolve: Migrant farm workers need access to public healthcare

**A**s spring unfolds in southern Manitoba, we will soon see more than migratory birds arriving. Over 400 Seasonal Agricultural Workers are about to arrive from Mexico to take up the back-breaking work of cultivating vegetable and berry crops on Manitoba's farms.

These workers are part of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) which came into effect in 1964. The program is based on an agreement between our federal government and the governments of Mexico and several Caribbean countries. Their lives here are controlled by two levels of government: the federal government, responsible for immigration policy, sets the terms of their work visas (with some collaboration with the provinces) and negotiates the terms of the SAWP with the partner countries. Provincial governments have jurisdiction over the migrants' working conditions, healthcare coverage and whether or not they can unionize.

Migrant workers are rapidly becoming a regular feature of Canada's workforce. Although there was some labour migration from Canada to the US early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the phenomenon of thousands of migrant workers coming from the global south to the US and Canada has exploded since the era of NAFTA and it has a decidedly

more permanent feel to it. NAFTA exacerbated Mexico's crushing poverty, providing a steady stream of desperate workers willing to migrate to the US and Canada for work. Some workers have been coming to Manitoba for over 25 years to work on farms.

Conditions for the workers have been improving, but too slowly. To the government's credit, workers are now included in Employment Standards legislation, but inspections are few and enforcement is weak. Workers are isolated from urban centres, do not speak English and may not even know what their rights are. They are at the mercy of the *patrón* (farm owner) and, although treatment varies from farm to farm, are often mistreated and overworked. Those who dare complain about unfair treatment or talk about unionizing are not rehired the following year.

Unlike Manitoban workers, the taxes and EI deductions the migrant workers pay do not entitle them to EI benefits or public healthcare. In spite of contributing to the Canadian economy and paying taxes for 4 to 5 months for up to 25 years, these workers are marginalized from the healthcare coverage their taxes should entitle them to while they are here. They have to pay for their own private healthcare insurance because they do not qualify for provincial coverage.



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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In order to qualify for health insurance one must be recognized as a resident of Manitoba. According to the *Manitoba Health Insurance Act*, “resident” means “a person who is legally entitled to be in Canada, makes his or her home in Manitoba, and is physically present in Manitoba for at least six months in a calendar year. Manitoba’s shorter growing season means that most workers are here from July through to October only, so they do not satisfy the six-month criterion to qualify. However, Saskatchewan has the same growing season, brings in the same workers and found a way to allow them access to provincial healthcare.

These workers need access to public healthcare for the same reasons Canadians do: it is more efficient and humane than private insurance. The following example illustrates why.

Pablo injured himself last year when he was working in British Columbia. His team had to clean a field and when moving a particularly heavy rock, he felt pain in his abdomen. The pain remained for the rest of the season, but Pablo decided not to complain because the supervisors rarely listened to the workers. When he came to Manitoba this year, heavy lifting at his farm aggravated his condition to a point that he was taken to hospital for treatment. He was diagnosed with a hernia and presented with a \$500 bill. When he tried to claim the \$500 from his private insurer, he was told that he would not be covered as the hernia was pre-existing. Any treatment for his condition will need to be done in his native country where costs are lower.

If workers get very sick they are repatriated; in some cases the private insurance covers up to \$3,500 in medical care in their native country. One of the conditions of the insurance is that as soon as they are able to travel, they need to be repatriated in order to finish treatment there.

If Pablo had been covered by Manitoba Health, he would have received treatment regardless of when and how his condition arose and he wouldn’t

have run the risk of being repatriated. The taxes he pays should entitle him to this basic right. Instead, Pablo had to spend \$500 of his hard-earned money; money that he should have been able to send to his family in Mexico.

Some wonder why Pablo doesn’t just immigrate to Canada. Seasonal agricultural workers fall into the category of “unskilled” workers and have far greater difficulty immigrating or getting work visas than do skilled workers. Neither the Canadian nor provincial governments value these workers who do the work Canadians refuse to do – the so called 3-D jobs: dirty, difficult and dangerous. Many migrant workers would gladly take up Canadian citizenship and locate their families here permanently, but Canada does not want these people in spite of their track record as hard-working, reliable, family-oriented and law-abiding.

Ultimately we need extensive reform to our immigration policy so that those workers who wish to immigrate to Canada can do so. Meanwhile, by extending healthcare coverage to migrant workers, this government will improve the lives of this vulnerable group who play such an important role in our economy, and who deserve the same rights as Canadians, past and present.

At the recent Manitoba NDP convention, the party unanimously passed a resolution to extend provincial healthcare coverage to all SAWP workers. There was an expressed intent to do so by the time workers arrive this spring. This resolution is long overdue, especially given that Saskatchewan, with almost identical conditions provides coverage to its seasonal workers.

We’re anxiously waiting to see if this NDP government, which claims to be the champion of working men and women, delivers on the party’s resolution.

*Lynne Fernandez is a political economist for the CCPA-MB and a member of the Migrant Workers Solidarity Network.*



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