

Canada: New police state measure targets foreign workers

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Taking advantage of the anti-immigrant chauvinism being fomented by the trade union bureaucracy and the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP), Canada's ruling Conservative Party has granted itself sweeping powers to surveil temporary foreign workers, setting the stage for a further expansion of police-state measures against workers nationwide.

Earlier this month, the Conservative government announced that through regulatory changes it is giving government inspectors the power to carry out warrantless searches of workplaces that employ workers under the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP). The Conservatives claim that this new power will help inspectors protect workers from employer abuses.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The warrantless searches will be used to conduct a witch-hunt against so-called "illegal" immigrants and further intimidate those legally in the country under the TFWP.

Stephen Harper's Conservative government, like its Liberal predecessors, has been expanding the coercive powers of the state. Earlier this year, the Conservatives rammed "anti-terrorist" legislation through parliament that tramples on fundamental democratic principles, expanding the time police can hold a terrorist suspect without charge and giving the state, in violation of the right of silence, the power to compel persons to give evidence. Under secret government directives, the Canadian equivalent and partner of the U.S. National Security Agency—the Communications Security Establishment Canada (CSEC)—has been spying on Canadians' telephone and computer communications since 2005 it was revealed last month.

The Conservatives' claims to be concerned about employer abuse of foreign workers are also belied by their record of attacks on immigrants and refugees and the very terms of the TFWP.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney has severely curtailed provisions that allow immigrants to reunite with their families. Adult children over the age of 18 are no longer eligible for sponsorship; waiting times to sponsor a parent or

grandparent are in excess of seven years; and due to increased income requirements, sponsoring a family member has become too expensive for low-income immigrants. In speeches and talk-show appearances, Kenney has painted elderly immigrant dependents as a burden on Canada's welfare and health systems and "an abuse of Canada's generosity." Last year, he eliminated health-care funding for refugee claimants.

Under the TFWP, workers from outside Canada are hired under short-term contracts of no more than two years to staff what are largely low-wage, back-breaking positions. TFWP workers are tied to a single employer under a work-permit regime reminiscent of the ancient Master and Servant laws. They are not allowed to change their employer, can be told where to live, are deprived of residency rights, and are subject to immediate expulsion if they lose their jobs.

Employers often use the threat of deportation to keep workers from reporting abuses. Only one stream of the TFWP, the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP), contains provisions whereby participants can eventually apply for citizenship, and even then, reports of employer abuse are rampant. All other TFWP workers, including thousands of seasonal agricultural and construction workers, are forced to return to their countries of origin at the end of their work-term prior to being even allowed to apply to immigrate to Canada.

The Conservatives have repeatedly illegalized strikes and recently granted themselves the power to directly intervene in the contract negotiations of Crown Corporations such as Canada Post, so as to slash pensions and other benefits. In last year's federal budget, they reduced jobless benefits for repeat users of Employment Insurance, who can now be forced to take low-wage positions, and raised the retirement age from 65 to 67.

The Conservatives have been able to press forward with this class war assault only because the unions and the social democrats of the NDP have systematically suppressed the class struggle for more than a quarter century. Whilst the unions have imposed concessions and job cuts, the NDP has

imposed capitalist austerity whenever it has held office. With the full support of the unions, the NDP is currently sustaining in office a Liberal minority government in Ontario that has cut billions from social spending and used anti-worker legislation, Bill 115, to enforce a two-year public sector wage freeze and impose concessionary contracts on the province's teachers.

These pro-capitalist organizations have frequently invoked the chauvinistic slogan "Canadian jobs for Canadians," laying the blame for job and wage cuts on workers in other countries. This serves a double-reactionary purpose: by fomenting nationalism, the unions and NDP seek to mask their own complicity in imposing concessions and plant closures and to block a united struggle of workers in Canada with their class brothers and sisters in the U.S., Mexico and around the world against the transnational corporations, which site production wherever labor and tax regimes are the most "competitive."

The Canadian Auto Workers, for example, has for decades competed with the U.S.-based UAW as to which union could offer the Detroit Three the most favorable contracts, resulting in the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and a never-ending race to the bottom.

In recent months, the unions' and NDP's "Canadian jobs for Canadians" campaign has taken the form of a rightwing, chauvinist opposition to the TWFP. The Conservatives have now taken advantage of the chauvinist backlash against foreign workers that the unions and NDP have promoted to expand the coercive powers of the state and lay the groundwork for increased harassment and victimization of immigrant workers.

Significantly, neither has made an issue of opposing the new powers given Immigration inspectors to conduct warrantless searches.

Last December, the British Columbia Federation of Labour and many of its affiliates demanded that Chinese workers who had come to Canada under the TWFP to work at a mine owned by H.D. Mining International be sent home. (See: Canadian unions' chauvinist campaign against "temporary foreign worker" expansion .) The unions' campaign against the program went into high gear this past April after a CBC exposure of how a Royal Bank of Canada subcontractor used the TWFP program to bring in workers from India who were to be trained to manage a back-office operation that was ultimately to be outsourced to India.

Responding to May's unemployment figures, Ken Georgetti, the president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the country's largest labour organization fulminated against foreign workers, claiming that they were taking jobs from Canadians. Georgetti said the CLC had "crunched" the numbers and found that "Roughly 75 percent of the new

jobs created in Canada in 2010 and 2011 were filled by temporary foreign workers despite the fact that 1.4 million Canadian residents were unemployed."

This spurious claim, which the CLC passes off as "research," was based on comparing the number of new jobs and the total number of participants in the TWFP, a program which expanded rapidly in the years preceding the 2008 global financial crisis.

In reality, the dismal employment figures in Canada, as in the U.S, Europe, and Japan, are a product of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression.

The unions' and NDP's scapegoating of immigrants is—as the extraordinary new police powers the Conservatives' have given Immigration inspectors underscores—aiding reaction. It is at one with their advocacy of protectionist measures, the logic of which is trade war and ultimately military conflict.

In recent months, the NDP and its union allies have raised a hue and a cry about Chinese investment in Canada, denouncing the "Communist" regime in China in crude Cold War terms. This maneuver has been aimed at demonstrating to Canadian big business that an NDP government would more vigorously defend their interests than the current Conservative one and at signaling to Washington that the NDP supports the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia", that is its preparations for war with Beijing.

The anti-immigrant nationalism peddled by the trade unions and the NDP must be vigorously opposed by Canadian workers. These marginalized workers are not the source of the crisis but its most tragic expression, as governments all over the world impose wave after wave of austerity to satiate the appetites of global finance capital.

The answer to mounting unemployment and falling living standards is not to restrict, ban, or discriminate against "foreign" workers, but rather the mobilization of the international working class against big business and the capitalist profit system, which are exploiting and oppressing workers the world over. As a crucial element in the fight to unite the working class against capitalism, workers must fight for full citizenship rights for people wherever they choose to live and oppose all restrictions on the free movement of people across the globe.



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