

Canada expelling tens of thousands of migrant workers

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Last month, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper shed crocodile tears over the country's use of low-wage temporary foreign workers, when he shared a podium with Benigno Aquino III, the visiting Philippine president.

"This country is not going to have a policy," Harper began, "where we will have a permanent underclass of... people who are so-called temporary, but here forever, with no rights of citizenship and no rights of mobility."

Hidden behind Harper's words were the reactionary implications of the "reforms" his Conservative government made to the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP), the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), and the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) in 2011. These programs are used by corporations, small businesses, and the affluent to import poverty-wage labourers on temporary work visas for menial, often degrading, jobs.

Workers registered in these programs are among the most vulnerable and victimized in the country. Each of these three programs legally binds its workers to one employer for the duration of their work-term, meaning the workers' residency in Canada is entirely dependent on their pleasing their employer. Fearing termination and deportation, temporary workers routinely do not report contract violations and outright abuse, including sexual and physical harassment.

April 1 marked the deadline for an estimated 70,000 temporary foreign workers (TFWs) to obtain permanent-residency or a temporary-waiver. Otherwise, according to the "four in four out" policy changes implemented by the Conservatives in 2011, they must "voluntarily" exit the country or be declared an illegal alien and subject to deportation.

Under this new rule, devised by Defence Minister Jason Kenney (when he held the Employment portfolio) and Immigration Minister Chris Alexander, incoming workers to the TFWP and SAWP became restricted to four-year work terms, after which they would be ineligible to reapply to the program again for another four years. The Conservative government, as part of its reactionary "putting Canadians first" agenda, is expected to further reduce the time a

"temporary worker" can stay in Canada to two years.

The LCP allows workers to apply for permanent residency after completing a two-year work term. Although the LCP remains officially unaffected by the "four in four out" rule, the Conservatives have set an annual cap of 5,500 on the number of caregivers awarded permanent residency—well below the estimated 8,000 who enter the program each year. Those who fail to obtain permanent residency are to be deported after their work visas expire.

To reward the TFWs for their backbreaking toil, which has kept many businesses afloat with cheap labour and allowed the rich to neglect their children and infirm dependents, Alexander and the current Employment Minister Pierre Poilievre have callously vowed to hunt down any workers who do not leave the country immediately.

"Let there be no mistake," the Conservative MPs said in a statement. "We will not tolerate people going 'underground.' Flouting our immigration laws is not an option, and we will deal with offenders swiftly."

Thus, Harper's comment that TFWs would not be "here forever" contains a grain of truth, however perverse. Rather than stringing migrant workers along for years without any guarantee of permanent residency and citizenship, the "four in four out" rule cements their status as completely disposable labour to which employers and the government have no obligation outside the most meagre of wages. It aligns the TFWP and its sister programs ever closer to the notorious *kafala* cheap-labour regimes that predominate in the despotic monarchies of the Middle East.

The "four in four out" rule and the April 1 deadline are merely the latest in a series of virulent attacks on migrant workers. Since the eruption of the 2008 global economic crisis every section of the political establishment, including the trade unions, has joined in denouncing the TFWs, whom they scapegoat for unemployment and depressed wages.

Last year, the Conservatives decreed that by July 2015, no more than 20 percent of a company's workforce could consist of TFWs, with that number dropping to 10 percent by 2016. A ban on hiring low-skilled TFWs in regions with

unemployment rates of 6 percent or higher was also put in place. In addition, registration and processing fees for employers utilizing the TFWP have been sharply increased.

In 2013, the Conservatives instituted a virtual witch hunt of TFWs by granting government inspectors unprecedented powers to conduct warrantless searches of workplaces that employ migrant labour. As well, Kenney severely curtailed a longstanding practice of allowing TFWs to sponsor their children and elderly parents for permanent residency, by making adult children ineligible and dramatically lengthening waiting times and hiking the relevant fees. Kenney has regularly smeared elderly dependents, in particular, as burdens on the country's health and welfare systems who "abuse" Canada's "generosity".

A host of big-business representatives from the restaurant, agriculture, hospitality, and other industries have predictably protested these changes, bemoaning the fact that they will restrict their access to a poorly-paid migrant labour pool.

In response to this backlash, Kenney granted a temporary stay this past February on deportations for hundreds of TFWs in Alberta, the province that employs, per capita, by far the highest number of migrant labourers. He also hinted that other provinces could soon receive similar exemptions.

The Conservative attacks on TFWs, and their subsequent concessions to big-business, make abundantly clear that the TFWP and its sister programs exist only to provide businesses and wealthy families with a source of ultra-cheap labour, in the process helping to drive down the wages of the Canadian working class.

If the Conservatives have been able to ludicrously posture as defenders of both TFWs and Canadian workers, it is only because the Liberals, the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the trade unions have whipped up a toxic climate of chauvinism and xenophobia, under the reactionary pretext of defending "Canadian jobs" and through the exposure of some of the most egregious abuses of the TFWP, whose ostensible purpose is to help employers fill temporary labor-shortages.

It was a Liberal government led by Jean Chrétien that in 2002 chose to expand the TFWP (which had been hitherto limited to high-skilled trade and professional jobs) to include a stream for low-skilled workers, rather than increase immigration. Subsequently, the Harper government rapidly enlarged this stream to the point that last year there were 340,000 TFWs. The number of workers entering the country on a temporary basis now far exceeds those entering with permanent resident visas.

The NDP has been among the most duplicitous in its treatment of the issue. Parroting the official Conservative line, federal NDP leader Thomas Mulcair recently announced that upon forming government, his party would

clamp down on the hiring of TFWS in the name of fighting for Canadian jobs.

As for the trade unions, their patently nationalistic political outlook has easily transitioned into a right-wing and chauvinistic campaign to keep "Canadian jobs for Canadians". In 2013, Ken Georgetti, the then president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), blamed TFWs for stealing jobs from Canadian workers. To justify his claims, he pointed to a hack piece of analysis that roughly equated the net number of new jobs created to the number of new TFWs.

In reality, the trade unions have for decades constituted the primary obstacle to fighting mass layoffs and declining wages. In collusion with big business, they have imposed wage and job cuts to ensure corporate "competitiveness," i.e. profitability, and when working-class resistance has erupted they have isolated and suppressed it. In collusion with their Liberal and NDP partners, the unions keep the working class subordinated to the parties of big-business and lashed to the capitalist system.

The right to live and work where one wishes is a fundamental social right for which the working class must fight and do so in opposition to the trade unions and the NDP who promote nationalism and pit Canadian workers against their class brothers and sisters from across the globe.

To realize this goal, and to create a world in which workers are not forced to leave their families behind to earn a pittance, requires breaking with these bourgeois organizations, and forming an independent political party of the working class to fight for socialism.



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