

[Eighty Jailed and Sent Home](#)

Mexicans seeking work tricked, detained, deported.

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A desperate journey in search of work and a better future in Canada turned into an expensive, dead end nightmare for 80 Mexican citizens.

The situation threw into sharp focus the need to reform Canadian immigration policies, according to labour and immigrant advocates.

The Mexican farmworkers and their families arrived at Vancouver International Airport on Friday, June 20. They were denied entry and were returned to Mexico on Monday the 24th after spending the weekend in jail.

The group was reportedly lured to Canada by unscrupulous labour brokers in their home country who had promised them lucrative work in B.C. agriculture. The brokers exacted fees of over \$4,500.00 a head to make work and travel arrangements. The Mexicans were denied entry into Canada, held in detention over the weekend and returned to Mexico on Monday morning.

Apparently, none of the detainees possessed visas or other documents required of temporary workers entering Canada.

Jailed and returned

Sources close to the situation told The Tyee that the detentions created overcrowding in at least one Lower Mainland facility, with male detainees sleeping on a gym floor. Women and children were held in another facility.

"I can confirm that 80 Mexican nationals arrived at VIA on Friday and were denied entry to Canada," Faith St. John, a spokeswoman for Canadian Border Services Agency told The Tyee. "They were detained over the weekend in various facilities around the Lower Mainland and sent back on Monday morning."

St. John said that travelers wanting to enter Canada are responsible for satisfying the CBSA that they meet entry requirements. While declining, for privacy reasons, to comment on any specific case, St. John told The Tyee that

many factors can be involved in determining traveller admissibility, including criminal activity, human rights violations, organized crime involvement, health, security and financial status.

"In calendar 2007, 16,345 individuals were denied entry into Canada at the 43 land, air and marine ports in the Pacific region," she said. "From April 1, 2006, to March 31, 2007, CBSA denied entry to 84,834 applicants at entry ports across Canada."

'No government watchdog'

"This is a horrible story on a number of counts," Angela Schira, secretary treasurer of the B.C. Federation of Labour, told The Tyee. "These people have lost so much. They came with their families, hoping to start a new life. Then the families were divided over the weekend of detention. Now their names are on a list of people who tried to enter Canada illegally, which will make it very difficult if they ever try to come here again."

"Our government has essentially privatized our immigration policy, making abuses like this possible. There is simply no government watchdog on this matter, and stories like this are bad for Canada's reputation. "

Schira said that the B.C. Fed doesn't agree with the temporary guest worker programs conducted by the federal government, whether they are for agricultural, service or other sectors.

"We support expanded immigration, with recruitment happening in Canadian embassies and consulates, not through private sector agencies," she said. "But as long as the foreign worker programs are in place, the province should at least provide some official services and support for the workers, as Alberta and Manitoba do."

'Wild West situation'

"My heart breaks for these people," Lucy Luna told The Tyee. Luna is the B.C. co-coordinator of the [Agricultural Workers Alliance Support Centre](#), a non-profit organization funded by the United Food and Commercial Workers union.

"These people were lied to. They were told they were coming to Canada legally. There is nowhere near enough regulation and supervision of labour contractors. It is a Wild West situation out there."

The Tyee made repeated calls to the Mexican consulate in Vancouver to seek comment for this story. The calls were not returned.

Approximately 3000 Mexican workers are expected to enter B.C. legally as temporary agricultural workers this year under federally sponsored programs, Luna said. This is roughly the same number who entered last year. Rainy weather and a slow season so far have left many Mexican workers who have qualified under the federal program still waiting in Mexico for the call to come work the B.C. fields.

Mexico's vulnerable unemployed

Some activists who work with agricultural workers say that the [programs](#) set up by the federal government to legally bring temporary farm workers to Canada from Third World countries are unfair.

Adriana Paz, a member of Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers BC, argued in a recently posted [Internet essay](#):

"SAWP and other temporary worker programs take advantage of the huge surplus of cheap labour in Mexico that NAFTA helped to create. Through temporary worker programs, governments of both Mexico and Canada aim to manage the flow of migrants to the North for the benefit of local business elites, while stripping workers of rights and liberties.

"The result is to create in this country an underclass of workers, an underclass of human beings stamped with the labels of 'foreign,' 'undocumented,' 'unskilled,' and 'temporary.' Meanwhile it relieves the Mexican government of responsibility to ensure healthy rural and urban development throughout the country."

Harsha Walia, who speaks for the Vancouver group [No One Is Illegal](#) agrees.

"It is easy here to focus on the role of the labour contractor in Mexico, but the larger problem is the way the government of Canada functions as a glorified temporary work agency for employers. We call for the abolition of all guest worker and temporary worker programs. They cannot be reformed. Exploitation is inherent. From a human rights and labour rights perspective, the solution is to abolish border and travel controls altogether," she told The Tyee.

'Indentured servitude'

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives think tank recently published a study entitled "[Cultivating Farmworker Rights](#)" that is highly critical of conditions faced by agricultural workers in Canada, and of the federal program that brings guest workers into the country. It argues, in part:

"The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), a federal-provincial program B.C. joined in 2004, brings a growing number of primarily Mexican migrant workers to Canada under conditions that amount to indentured servitude. Migrant workers are often housed in substandard conditions, are not allowed to choose who they will work for, and cannot stand up for their basic rights without fear of being sent home."

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Tom Sandborn is a Tyee contributing editor with a focus on labour and health policy issues.

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