



BC PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT IS VIOLATING CANADA HEALTH ACT

For Immediate Release

March 22, 2006

(Vancouver)-Migrant farm worker advocates are accusing the BC Liberals of violating Canada's Health care act by denying migrant farm workers access to health care in BC. Justicia for Migrant Workers, an advocacy group fighting for the rights of migrant farm workers in BC is demanding that migrant farm workers from Mexico be immediately included under the province's MSP health insurance scheme, so that they can be given basic health coverage. Mexican workers have already started to come back to BC for the third year in a row, and up to a couple thousand workers are expected this year throughout BC.

Workers employed under the Federal Government's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) are provided with universal health care coverage in every other province with the exception of British Columbia. To highlight the inequalities between provinces J4MW provides this background information from each province that employs migrant agricultural workers to show the differences in coverage for migrant farm workers between every other jurisdiction and BC.

"It is absolutely ludicrous that farm workers who are brought to Canada under a Federal government program can not receive basic health care in BC. How ironic is it that workers brought to rectify an alleged labour shortage are denied the right to health care which is given to Canadian residents," says Erika Del Carmen Fuchs of Justicia for Migrant Workers (BC).

As agricultural work is one of the most dangerous forms of employment in Canada, it is imperative that migrant farm workers are given immediate health care coverage in BC. To highlight the plight of migrant labourers, J4MW highlights the case of migrant labourer Javier Alonzo de Leon of Coahuila, Mexico. Javier, a worker under the auspices of SAWP program was employed by Purewal Blueberries in Pitt Meadows, BC from June 2005 to December 2005.

Before his departure from Canada, Javier suffered a series of strokes while at work making him incapable of returning home to Mexico. Mr Alonzo de Leon was forced to stay in Canada without receiving immediate support from either Mexican Government officials or representatives from Services Canada (formerly HRSDC Canada) who are supposed to assist workers in situations like this. Furthermore, Mr Alonzo de Leon was informed that because he was not covered under the provincial MSP system that he may have to pay thousands of dollars in hospital bills. Fortunately for Javier Alonzo de Leon advocates from J4MW and sympathetic medical staff intervened to assist him in ensuring he received the necessary and immediate medical support he needed and deserved. Javier has now returned to Coahuila, Mexico where he is not receiving any financial or medical support from either Canadian or Mexican governments; his health is extremely precarious.

Javier Alonzo's case is just one of the many cases of Mexican migrant workers who put their health and life at risk. Workers often postpone their visit to the doctor due to lack of basic medical coverage. Workers have returned home due to health problems, and the Mexican Consulate and employer's response has often been to ignore the situation or not take financial responsibility for the workers' medical costs.

Maria de la Luz Alonzo de Leon, Javier's sister, believes it is important for workers that come to work in Canada have a complete medical coverage, because "it is the most basic right (along with a just salary) that any worker in any part of the world should have." For their family, the consequences of not having this coverage meant that when her brother "had this work accident and was left disabled physically and mentally" that they "lacked the resources needed for his rehabilitation and support."

Justicia for Migrant Workers is demanding that health care coverage not be left to the discretion of medical staff but instead be included under the province's Universal Healthcare MSP system like all residents of BC. If Mexican and other migrant farm workers are brought to Canada to work legally, they should be treated like Canadian workers, just as their contract stipulates. The 3-month waiting period should be waived, as coverage needs to be there from the time they start to work in Canada. Justicia for Migrant Workers is a collective with volunteers across Canada. J4MW has most recently been successful in BC through their advocacy (exposing the deplorable living conditions that migrant farm workers are forced to endure). Their advocacy lead to mandatory inspections and the implementation of guidelines to cover housing provided for migrant farm workers.

For more information please contact J4MW www.justicia4migrantworkers.org;
justiciaformigrantworkersbc@yahoo.ca

Erika Del Carmen Fuchs (BC) 604-688-9993

Adriana Paz (BC-Alternate) 604-715-4097

Chris Ramsaroop (Ontario) 416-832-4932, 416-978-7594