

## **Justicia For Migrant Workers**

### **Statement of solidarity with the victims (and their families) of the March 7, 2007 accident in Abbotsford, B.C.**

**March 20, 2007 (Vancouver)** - As members of Justicia for Migrant Workers, we would like to take this opportunity to express our condolences to the family members of those who were injured and/or died as a result of the tragic accident that occurred on March 10, 2007. In this their time of need we want to respect their privacy as they mourn for their loved lost ones. However, we would like to express some of the overarching concerns that we have pertaining to how this issue has been portrayed by the media and the authorities.

Firstly Justicia for Migrant workers believes it is imperative to point out the historical role that the Indo-Canadian community has played with respect to this province's agricultural industry. For generations, South Asians have toiled in the fields of British Columbia sacrificing their lives through unsafe and exploitative conditions. Their suffering highlights the unequal power balances that have historically existed between employers and workers in agriculture which has not only fed Canadians but also provided the low cost labour that allows for massive profits for agrobusiness. Sporadic media coverage fails to portray the ongoing injustice that permeates this sector, paying very little attention to the gross violations of human rights that are responsible for the conditions that lead to this tragic accident.

Secondly, reports have individualized the causes that lead to the deaths of Sarbjit Kaur Sidhu, Amarjit Kaur Bal, Sukhvinder Kaur Punia. To simply focus, as members of the RCMP have, on the role of seatbelt safety fails to address the larger systemic issues relating to workplace conditions, transportation and the blatant lack of safety that exists for farm workers across the province. To blame the victims, as has been done in this case, trivializes the issues and sidesteps the critical role that the Provincial Government has played in creating the conditions that lead to these tragic results. These conditions include: failing to provide safe vehicles for transport, lax enforcement of safety standards for farm workers, non existent legislation pertaining to the safe transport of agricultural labourers and the overcrowding of farm vehicles.

Thirdly we want to point out that both these labourers, as well as the contract workers employed under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, work under precarious conditions. These are not only due to workplace exploitation but also to an immigration system whereby both guest workers and recent immigrants are forced to survive by undertaking dangerous and life threatening work. As reported, many agricultural labourers are recent immigrants who due to their employment under the contractor system are forced to work and live in indentured conditions, something which workers in other industries do not have to endure. This type of exploitation must be addressed not by band aid solutions but by a long term commitment to eradicating the workplace abuses and unfair labour practices that have come to represent the agricultural industrial economy.

Finally Justicia for Migrant workers want to express our continued solidarity with Indo-Canadian farm labourers, whose conditions mirror those faced by Mexican, Caribbean and Guatemalan workers in Canada. Irrespective of the divides that come to signify labour divisions in the agricultural system, we believe that is imperative that together with other advocates for immigrant and migrant workers we realize that it is in our shared interests to continue to forge relationships based on solidarity and respect amongst our communities. Regardless of divisions on immigration status, racialized workers continue to toil in our fields and face severe repression if they stand up to speak about their experiences. As such we believe that we need to attack systemic and institutional practices and not workers for tragedies such as the events of March 10, 2007. However to address these concerns we must move beyond blaming the workers and confronting the system that continues to employ immigrant and migrant labour under precarious conditions.

Justicia For Migrant Workers

<http://www.justicia4migrantworkers.org>

**For more information on the accident:**

<http://thetyee.ca/News/2007/03/16/Farmworkers/>

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2007/03/11/farm-meeting.html>

<http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/westcoastnews/story.html?id=c2e78e4d-5990-4fdb-aa37-73aa5f3ff9cb>