

## Farmworkers suffer lack of protection, Valley study finds

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B.C. farmworkers face system-wide violations of employment standards and health and safety regulations, poor working conditions, and low enforcement by government agencies, according to a study released Wednesday by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Among other things, the study's authors suggest policy changes are needed to ensure farmworkers -- mostly immigrants or temporary migrants -- are properly protected.

"We have excellent health and safety regulations, but they're not being enforced," Mark Thompson, a co-author of the report and professor emeritus with UBC's Sauder School of Business who headed a commission on employment standards in the 1990s, said in an interview. "It's deplorable working conditions. And there's no way for the people to gain redress."

B.C. Labour Minister Olga Ilich said in an interview that her ministry is doing a lot to help the sector, although she questions the report's accuracy.

"This is a study by the [CCPA], a left-wing think-tank that does a lot of work for the NDP."

Ilich said her ministry finds violations involving farmworkers troubling and is dealing with them through more inspections of farms and vans carrying farmworkers. "Last year, our inspectors did 100 site visits and we talked to 3,054 farmworkers and 79 contractors. We also have six dedicated inspectors [for farms]."

Thompson, who said the study focused only on the Fraser Valley where there are between 5,000 and 8,000 farmworkers, said that hygiene challenges and lack of sanitation are big complaints among farmworkers. "The ladies don't have a washroom or a place to eat lunch. And they complained about pesticides, despite regulations in place since 1994. That shows a lack of will by the employer and WorkSafeBC."

The study, part of the Economic Security Project, a joint initiative of the CCPA and Simon Fraser University, drew from numerous sources including interviews with government and farm industry officials, 53 Indo-Canadian immigrant and Mexican migrant farmworkers, a survey of 87 Mexican migrant farmworkers, and a review of practices in other jurisdictions.

Co-publishers of the report are Justicia for Migrant Workers; B.C. Federation of Labour; and Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society. Among the study's key findings:

- Farmworkers are routinely exposed to pesticides, gases used for ripening in greenhouses and other chemicals without appropriate protective gear or training.
- Immigrant farmworkers are regularly transported by farm labour contractors in vans that violate safety regulations.

- Health and safety standards are routinely violated.

- From 2001 to 2006, inspection reports by WorkSafe BC in the agricultural sector plummeted by 62 per cent and prevention orders dropped by 73 per cent. Not a single participant recalled seeing a visit by WorkSafe BC.

- Farmworkers' average earnings are just over \$8 per hour with no overtime pay. Participants reported working 10 to 12 hours per day, six to seven days a week.

WorkSafeBC vice-president Roberta Ellis said in an interview that, while she praises the report, it didn't take into account WorkSafeBC's 2007 inspection numbers, which she said show that inspection reports of farms and corrective orders are up considerably. Ellis said there were 442 inspection reports and 439 enforcement orders by WorkSafeBC in 2001, compared to 803 inspection orders and 1,394 corrective orders in 2007.

She said more officers were assigned to investigate forestry, following a number of logging deaths, and the booming construction sectors in 2005 and 2006.

Ellis agreed it's critical that workers understand their rights. "We've been trying to address that by getting more educational materials into other languages and conducting safety seminars for workers."

The study also concluded that the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), a federal-provincial program, brings mainly Mexican migrant workers to Canada under conditions that amount to indentured servitude, with workers often housed in substandard conditions, not allowed to choose who they will work for, and unable to stand up for their basic rights for fear they'll be sent home.

Adriana Paz, an organizer with Justicia for Migrant Workers, said in an interview that farmworkers labour for long hours and contribute to CPP and employment insurance, but can't take advantage of the benefits because they aren't permanent residents of Canada. "They don't speak English, so they don't know their rights."

Jim Sinclair, president of the B.C. Federation of Labour, said in a statement that the province should start by restoring basic employment standards for farmworkers, which were rolled back in 2002 and 2003.

In March 2007, three Fraser Valley farmworkers were killed and 14 injured when a van carrying 16 passengers crashed in Abbotsford.

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