

# Farm Workers Call for National Standards To Protect 'Guest Workers' in Canada

"I want to be treated like a human being and not like an animal."

—Farm worker, Leamington, Ontario

by Chris Ramsaroop

Over the last four months the United Farm Workers have been investigating the working and living conditions of migrant farm workers in southern Ontario.

The project was started after a call for help from farm workers in the Leamington area, southeast of Detroit. In early April over 20 workers were sent home after they complained about working conditions in the area's greenhouse industry.

The UFW sent an investigation team and heard workers describe sub-human working conditions rife with exploitation and discrimination. These included overtime work without overtime pay; spraying pesticides without protection, training, or access to information in languages other than English; lack of proper access to Canada's health care system; paying into unemployment insurance and pension plans without ever receiving any benefits; poor housing conditions with leaking sewage and without proper bathroom facilities; pay discrimination; isolation and depression; and verbal abuse from management.

## SEASONAL WORKER PROGRAM

The Canadian government through its Seasonal Agricultural Worker (SAW) program brings in about 20,000 workers each year to work in Canadian fields. The workers are mostly from Mexico but there are large numbers of Caribbean workers from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent.

The program is concentrated in Ontario but migrant farm workers can also be found in Quebec, Alberta, and Manitoba.

The SAW program was established in 1966 to bring migrant farm workers into Canada for 12 weeks to eight months. Paycheck deductions for housing, airfare, and various taxes dwindle a worker's earnings from \$450 (Cdn) a week to \$200-\$250. Workers are left with little to send home to their families.

**'We come up here and they treat us like slaves.'**

Workers' rights are supposed to be protected through memorandums of understanding between the home country and Canada. The agreement with Mexico states that the migrant workers while in Canada must be treated like "Canadian citizens."

However, in Canada agriculture falls under provincial legislation, which leaves a patchwork system from province to province.

Ontario, which takes in the most migrant farm workers, has the poorest laws. Farm workers are excluded from virtually all legislation used by workers in other industries to protect themselves. The right to organize and bargain collectively and to refuse dangerous working conditions, the right to overtime pay, and inclusion under health and safety legislation are denied to farm workers.

## EXPANDING THE PROGRAM

Recently, Canada signed a letter of intent with Mexico to expand the SAW program across Canada and into other

industries, such as tourism. Human Resources minister Jane Stewart stressed that the agreement was important in "linking economic and social policy in a globalized world." She said that programs such as SAW were "beneficial to both countries in developing more integrated approaches to improve the well-being of citizens."

The migrant workers we spoke to disagree with the federal minister. Marcus (a pseudonym), a field worker from the Caribbean in the Chatham area, says, "It is good for the economy but what about the guys? What do they get? They have no holidays, no double time. You work long hours and you make little pay. We come up here and they treat us like slaves."

In response to the expansion of the SAW program the UFW, along with its coalition partners, has called for national standards to protect workers.

Stan Raper, Canadian Coordinator for the UFW, argues that national standards would "set the tone for the provinces to stop wage competition amongst the provinces."

In late May, the Canadian Labour Congress and Federal Parliamentarian Joe Comartin jointly led a delegation to the Mexican consulate to raise their concerns over the mistreatment of Mexican migrants and to rally support for the national standards initiative.

In the fall the UFW will release a report on their findings about working conditions in Ontario's fields, with recommendations.

While the UFW and the CLC continue their national work for legislative change, other efforts will provide ground support for migrant workers.

## GRASSROOTS SUPPORT

A farm worker support committee has been established in Toronto, composed of various social justice, student, faith, and labor activists from all over the province. The committee has provided bike repair workshops and leaflets on pesticides and other chemicals.

Evelyn Encalada, a student at York University, believes the committee's work can help break down the workers' isolation from the greater community. "The workers tell us they are treated like cattle and that Canadians do not care about them," Encalada reports. "We want to show that there are Canadians who do care and that there is a sustainable campaign to support them."

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## S30: Mobilization for Global Justice

From teach-ins to marches to direct action, the last week of September in Washington, D.C. will see a range of ways to protest corporate policies and globalization. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank are holding their annual joint meetings, but lots more is going on.

Activists will oppose the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and Fast-Track (see page 1). Women will lobby against privatization of Social Security. Immigrants' rights groups will demand amnesty. Unionists will support local workers' right to organize.

The IMF and World Bank have already scaled back their planned week-long meetings to only two days because of the mobilization.

For more information check <www.afficio.org> or <www.50yrs.org> or call the Alliance for Global Justice at 202/644-9355.

- Women's Equality Summit, Congressional Action Day, Sept. 24-25
- March and Congressional lobbying day in defense of the rights of immigrants, Wednesday, Sept. 25
- Teach-in on the World Bank, IMF and the Global Economy, Thursday evening, Sept. 27 through Saturday, Sept. 29
- Actions with UNITE, protesting sweatshop conditions, and HERE parking lot attendants, morning and evening rush hours, Friday, Sept. 28
- Interfaith Service for debt cancellation and global justice, Saturday, Sept. 29
- Direct action Sunday, Sept. 30
- Massive rally and march Sunday, Sept. 30, demanding:
  - IMF/World Bank debt cancellation for poor countries
  - No Fast Track/PTAA
  - Priority treatment for combating HIV/AIDS