

The increasing use of migrant labour in Canada

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by Salimah Valiani, National Representative, Canadian Labour Congress

The restructuring of labour markets internationally

While there is considerable discussion about the increasingly apparent effects of international trade and investment liberalization - for example, on the manufacturing sectors of various countries - much less is said about the restructuring of labour markets on a global scale. Trends in two sectors - the knowledge sector and health care - exemplify some key changes which are unfolding in a variety of sectors of various countries in terms of cross-border flows of 'work' and workers, national training policy, training delivery, and occupational categories.

The Knowledge Sector:

- Employers are increasingly looking for workers with a mixture of skills and attitudes which do not fall neatly into familiar occupational categories but can be combined and re-combined according to the changing needs of employers, for example: 'e-skills', digital literacy in standardized global software packages, entrepreneurship, and the 'qualities' of a 'good team player'.
- As high-capacity telecommunications infrastructure is being put in place - mainly by states and financed by taxpayers - pieces of work are being passed along from worker to worker, across borders, depending on the particular combinations of skills needed to complete specific projects.
- Within this process of "global sourcing", given the historic structure of inequality in the world economy, there is a growing hierarchy of knowledge workers based in different parts of the world. Knowledge workers in countries of the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe are now falling into the hierarchy under the already-established, off-shoring countries of India, the Philippines and Barbados (in the English-speaking category), Tunisia, Morocco and Martinique (in the French-speaking category), and the Dominican Republic and Colombia (in the Spanish-speaking category).

- Not only does this growing hierarchy of knowledge workers serve as a disciplinary force among knowledge workers, it puts downward pressure on wages internationally.

The Health Care Sector:

- Similar to the Knowledge Sector, there is a hierarchy of countries producing and providing health care workers globally, but in this case, it is workers rather than the 'work' which is moving across borders.
- In the Caribbean, for example, Guyanese nurses migrate to work in Jamaica, and Jamaican nurses migrate to work in the Virgin Islands, Western Europe and North America. In Europe, Polish doctors are increasingly migrating to England. And South African, Filipino and Indian health care workers migrate to Canada while Canadian workers migrate to the USA.
- In both sectors, education and training systems in countries (especially those interested in exporting labour) are being tailored by governments and through international development aid projects to produce the types of workers needed. In the Philippines, for example, doctors are now retraining as nurses to fill growing demand in Northern countries. As well, national qualifications systems and public education are being dismantled while multinational firms are increasingly establishing global skills standards, along with providing certification courses.

How are these changes figuring in Canada?

In addition to the 18,887 migrant workers who came to Canada in 2004 under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, there is a growing number of migrant workers - at varying skill levels - coming to work in Canada. A preliminary list of examples includes:

- Engineers from India are being employed on a temporary basis by Bombardier Aeronautics in Montreal at lower monthly salaries than those of Canadian engineers based in Canada, and being housed by Bombardier in discreet locations. These arrangements are complimented by ongoing flows of 'work' and workers between Bombardier Aeronautic's production facilities in the North (Montreal, Toronto, Belfast, Wichita) and the Bombardier India Engineering Centre in Bangalore, Karnataka, India.
- Several hundred Chinese welders and other skilled workers are now arriving in Alberta to work and live in camps in the oil sands, with Canadian Natural Resources Ltd. and other companies projecting a need for 10,000 more migrant workers.
- Entry-level, low skilled warehouse workers from Mexico recently employed in Calgary by Supply Chain Management Ltd., under the Provincial Nominee Program, a program intended to allow Alberta employers to attract and retain foreign workers in high needs occupations. Supply Chain Management Ltd. provides warehousing and distribution services to Walmart.
- Two Canadian provincial governments currently in discussion with the Ministry of Health in Barbados around Reciprocal Agreements to bring Barbadian health workers to Canada on a temporary basis.

Recent agreements and programs facilitating the importation of labour to Canada

- Low Skilled Worker Pilot Project
- Temporary Foreign Workers Program for Skilled Workers
- Provincial Nominee Program
- Reciprocal Agreements between sending and receiving countries
- Mode 4 of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, currently being negotiated at the World Trade Organization

- the “Foreign Labour Agreement” currently being negotiated by the federal government and the government of Ontario as a special annex to the Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement. According to an Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration bureaucrat, this agreement is intended to reduce the “red tape” of hiring international workers.
- similar agreements currently being negotiated by the federal government and governments of Alberta and British Columbia

Who are the key players promoting the increased use of migrant labour?

- Employers unwilling to invest in training and apprenticeship, and unwilling to offer socially accepted wage levels and working conditions.
- Provincial and federal governments unwilling to make significant investments in training and immigrant settlement (including mentoring and other programs to assist internationally trained workers already in Canada obtain Canadian experience). The Conservative government’s decision not to honour new federal funding for training under the Labour Market Partnership Agreements can be understood along these lines. For example, in an interview with *Canadian Issues* (Spring 2006 issue), Monte Solberg, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada stated his preference for increasing the use of temporary work permits rather than making changes to immigration law. Similarly, the signing of new bilateral trade agreements - to which the Conservative government has recently committed in the Seventh Annual Report on Canada’s State of Trade - may be used to increase the flow of temporary labour into Canada.
- Recruitment agencies, which actively search-out labour market needs and offer employers access to labourers at reduced wage levels. These agencies often arrange for the engagement of migrant labourers for employers, and there is little to no regulation of these agencies.

- Labour-rich countries interested in the international remittances which migrant workers send home. Current flows of international remittances stand at \$100 billion/year. India and China, in particular, are pushing under the GATS (Mode 4) negotiations for Indian and Chinese skilled workers to be temporarily hired at wage rates below the going rates in receiving countries.

Challenges for Canadian Labour

- To make the analytical link between labour migration issues and training issues, and monitor provincial and federal policies on immigration and labour migration.
- To track the activity of labour recruitment agencies and the use of migrant labour by sector and region.
- To develop relations with migrant workers and work collectively to assure wages, working and living conditions at Canadian standards. The work of the United Food and Commercial Workers with migrant agricultural workers serves as a model upon which to build.
- To work toward developing relations with workers and unions abroad, in sectors where the migration of workers and work is prevalent, in order to arrive at new forms of organizing across national frontiers. The PSI Migration and Women's Health Worker Project is a model which may be adapted to other sectors (see www.world.psi.org/migration). This project brought together health workers from sixteen major sending and receiving countries to study the flows, contractual arrangements, and working conditions of migrant health workers. Health sector unions from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Ecuador, Chile, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, USA, Canada, UK, Netherlands, Spain and Japan were involved.

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