

How clean are your carrots?

By: Jennifer deGroot

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Imagine a job that requires you to leave your family for up to eight months at a time. Picture yourself speaking a different language than your boss. Consider living where you work and never being able to leave or receive visitors without your boss's permission. Imagine knowing that should you raise any concerns you could lose your job and be sent home.

This is Diego's story. Diego (not his real name) and approximately 400 people like him come to Manitoba each summer through the Seasonal Workers Agricultural Program, a federal arrangement between Canada and Mexico (and various other countries) initiated in 1964.

The well-being of Manitoba's seasonal workers is almost entirely at the whim of their employer. Most earn minimum wage. Despite the long hours there is no overtime pay. Part of the cost of their travel to Canada is deducted from their pay cheques.

The workers pay Employment Insurance and taxes, but are denied access to EI benefits, health care and the other benefits their income taxes help support. Seasonal workers are not covered by Manitoba Health Insurance.

Although some workers have spent the majority of their working life contributing to the Canadian economy -- up to 25 years in some cases -- they are not allowed to become permanent residents or citizens. At any time they may be sent home, if they are injured, the employer determines there is not enough work, or if they talk to a union organizer. Nonetheless, two years ago a group of seasonal workers managed to join a union.

Recent media reports state that workers at Mayfair Farms in Portage La Prairie chose to decertify after the long struggle to unionize. What those reports don't talk about is the threats that workers received when they expressed interest in unionizing. At least one strong union supporter was denied return to Mayfair Farms this year.

The day before the decertification vote the Mexican consul -- which has a vested interest in keeping workers in Canada, as their remittances are a major source of national income -- held a closed-door meeting with workers at Mayfair Farms. Early this summer the Mexican consul visited all farms with seasonal agricultural workers in Manitoba letting workers know that should they unionize they would be blacklisted.

The lack of permanent status, the ever-present threat of being sent home, their isolation and their

inability to communicate in either official language leave them among the most exploited of Canadian workers. Yet, they keep coming back.

As Diego explains; "I know I'm exploited here. At least if I work here my children eat. At home I'm exploited and my children don't eat."

Workers are keen to get as many hours as they can while they are in Canada -- up to 110 hours/week. A major gain for unionized workers had been the equal distribution of overtime hours. Without a union, in periods of work shortage, only those workers closest to the boss, such as crew foremen, would work overtime. With a union, overtime hours were shared equally. The union contract also ensured that workers who became sick were taken care of, instead of being sent home.

Unfortunately, the important gains that the unionized workers achieved were offset by the employer's decision to undermine the union by reducing the work week to a maximum of 70 hours. This sudden and arbitrary reduction in the work week meant that workers lost up to 30 per cent of their income, a move Mayfair Farms knew would be devastating to workers trying to send as much money as possible to their impoverished families. Clearly this was a very effective strategy in reducing union support. Now that the union has been decertified, workers are only protected by provincial legislation.

To the credit of the current provincial government, agricultural workers are finally included under Employment Standards legislation. This grants them protections such as minimum wage, a day of rest and vacation pay. Workers compensation is also now compulsory for agricultural workers. The new Worker Recruitment Act, the first of its kind in Canada, ensures that anyone hiring migrant workers be registered with the Employment Standards Branch.

But there is much more to be done. Workers should have immediate access to Manitoba Health Insurance. Strengthened by the new Worker Recruitment Protection Act, the Manitoba government should exercise its duty to monitor conditions at farms. Immediate measures should be put in place to end blatant union-busting. Workers need the right to appeal a dismissal before being repatriated as well as full coverage under Manitoba Labour Standards, including the right to overtime and holiday pay, and the right to a working visa that would not bind them to a single employer. Finally, the Manitoba government should develop a strategy that would allow workers like Diego and their families to become Canadian citizens.

The next time you open your fridge and pull out a carrot or onion, take time to remember Diego and his friends. It is up to all of us to demand that those who grow our food are treated with justice and equity and not as second-class citizens.

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