

Borrowed Men on Borrowed Time: Globalization, Labour Migration and Local Economies in Alberta

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NAFTA is part of the evolving entrenchment in globalization and the consolidation of the post-Fordist/postmodern era. Globalization is not a new phenomenon, but its intensification since the 70s in the form of industrial restructuring and trade liberalization has created a new set of economic and social conditions that have far reaching impacts for countries around the world. Moody (1995) suggests that the deindustrialization in the Canada-US rust belt gave rise to the “shanty industrialization” in Mexico; formerly well-paid, often unionized workers in the north are replaced or displaced by a growing body of “contingent workers” both at home and in partner countries. A central feature of globalization in the current era is the increased mobility of capital aided by both formal and informal free trade agreements (NAFTA, APEC, EU; ASEAN) and policies of modernization/development. This increased mobility of capital is driven by and in turn supports a drive towards increased flexibility of production systems (Drache and Gertler 1991) and flexible workforce deployment (Moody 1995) within and across territorial boundaries.

In the discussion of the increasing flexibilization of labour in Canada, the primary focus is on the changing work conditions and employment patterns for Canadian workers. NAFTA is said to be the cause of the permanent loss of “hundreds of thousands well-paying, skilled” jobs in Canada as the jobs crossed the line “in droves into low-wage southern states or to the maquiladoras in Mexico” (Darcy 1992:x). Canadian workers come under the pressure to accept lower wages and inferior social programmes, while the Mexican workers will remain exploited by multinational capital (Darcy 1992). Many workers, especially women, become an “on-call, part-time labour force” (Bourque 1992:160) like the supermarket cashiers in Deborah Barndt’s study (1998). Bourque (1992) suggests

that the existing polarization and segmentation of the Canadian workforce will become even more so in the form of

“a small number of core workers, largely white....[and] a large contingent of peripheral workers. Most of these part-time workers will be women, the majority, immigrant and visible minority women. The core workers will be multi-skilled, technologically trained workers; the majority of these will be men.”

Similar to Barndt's findings, a recent paper by Preston and Giles (1997) also supports the above suggestion of immigrant women being an important component of the polarized labour force in Canadian economy. Overall, the outcome of globalization is seen as a strategic transformation that boosts the power of multinational corporations (Sinclair 1992, Brecher et al. 1993). It is less favourable for the workers who are faced with increasing job insecurity, wage polarization and demand on flexibility in skill and working conditions (Dreche and Gertler 1991, Levine 1995, Smith et al. 1997, Smith 1997).

Labour Flexibility and Temporary Workers from Abroad

Within the Canadian economy, we clearly see a rise in part-time work and self-employment since 1976 (see tables 1, 2 and 3). At the same time, the flexibilization of labour is expressed in the form of temporary and seasonal employment that involves a rising number of foreign nationals. There are an estimated 80 million non-nationals abroad in 1990 (Mehmet 1997), a significant proportion of whom are engaged in contractually limited employment ranging from professionals to domestics (Myrah 1997, Grandea 1997). This global mobility of labour is largely driven by economic reasons. Labour tends to move from the poor countries to the rich countries. The majority of temporary workers take on 'the socially least regarded jobs, which were often the worst paid or least secure, that could not be filled with nationals'. (Bohning 1984:6) While the temporary workers are actively recruited and welcome, rarely are they supposed to stay or bring their families -- Satzewich (1990) calls them "unfree migrant labour". Canada issues around 200,000 employment/labour authorizations a year for temporary workers/migrants that include foreign students (13,000) and graduate assistants (5,000) and refugee claimants (Ruddick 1997). In this paper, I will examine a particular group of temporary workers -- the seasonal agricultural workers from Mexico -- as a case study of the processes and local impact of labour flexibility in the Alberta regional economy. It should be noted that the use of temporary Caribbean and Mexican agricultural workers in Canada started as early as 1967 (Satzewich 1988) and 1971 (Colby 1997) respectively. The steady increase in the number of Caribbean and Mexican agricultural workers employed in Quebec, Ontario and Alberta is indicative of the strategic use of **TABLE 1 Women Employed in Canada, by Occupation (000s)**

Occupation(% employed part-time)	1976	1986	1996
Total	3610.2 (23.7)	5161.7 (27.7)	6197.3 (28.9)
Managerial and other professional occupations	845.2 (19.1)	1550.0 (25.9)	2303.1 (21.2)
Clerical	1298.3 (18.4)	1605.6 (24.3)	1552.0 (28.5)
Sales	371.8 (39.8)	500.7 (42.6)	634.1 (40.2)
Service	589.2 (37.6)	911.1 (42.0)	1084.5 (43.0)
Primary Occupation	116.2 (30.1)	129.2 (43.0)	133.4 (39.1)
Processing, machining, and fabrication	290.5 (5.3)	323.0 (7.5)	315.4 (10.1)
Construction	5.5 (21.8)	11.6 (22.4)	17.5 (32.5)
Transport, equipment operating	15.4 (53.2)	31.3 (48.6)	48.3 (49.5)
Material Handling	69.1 (11.9)	99.3 (15.3)	108.4 (22.0)

Source: *Labour Force Survey, Census Canada.*

TABLE 2 Men Employed in Canada, by Occupation (000s)

Occupation (% employed part-time)	1976	1986	1996
Total	6166.0 (6)	6312.4 (9.8)	6678.2 (12)
Managerial and other professional occupations	1305.1 (4.0)	1889.5 (5.1)	2179.4 (7.1)
Clerical	428.6 (6.7)	411.9 (11.5)	396.1 (16.4)
Sales	683.6 (9.4)	668.4 (15.0)	740.2 (16.8)
Service	585.0 (14.8)	724.3 (23.2)	812.4 (25.2)
Primary Occupation	517.9 (8.4)	503.5 (12.2)	485.6 (12.5)

Processing, machining, and fabrication	1263.5 (1.7)	1277.8 (2.8)	1299.8 (3.6)
Construction	684.4 (2.5)	650.3 (4.6)	667.4 (6.2)
Transport, equipment operating	384.5 (4.8)	419.4 (7.4)	468.1 (8.2)
Material Handling	313.4 (9.7)	351.6 (14.1)	382.7 (16.8)

Source: *Labour Force Survey, Census Canada.*

TABLE 3 Self Employment in Canada, 1976-1996

000s (percent of total workers of same sex)	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996
Women	208.3 (5.8)	328.5 (7.1)	422.0 (8.2)	539.7 (9.3)	733.3 (11.8)
Men	861.1 (14.0)	1056.2 (15.5)	1162.2 (16.8)	1315.9 (16.8)	1475.5 (19.7)
Total	1069.9 (10.9)	1384.8 (12.1)	1584.1 (13.1)	1855.5 (14.4)	2208.9 (16.2)

Source: *Labour Force Survey, Census Canada.*

global human resources by Canadian businesses (not all of them are multinationals), and this utilization has gained momentum in the context of rising global competition and the persisting economic inequality between countries.

Agriculture and Labour Mobility in Alberta

Agriculture is a multibillion dollar industry in Alberta that generated \$4.2 billion in income for farmers and \$2.5 billion in export (about one-fifth of all Canadian agricultural export) in 1991 (Alberta Agriculture 1993). The 57,000 farms in operation today throughout the province are involved in a more or less equal mixture of livestock and crop production that marks Alberta as 'one of the most balanced agricultural economies in Canada' in terms of income from each segment (ibid:2). The major livestock are beef cattle, dairy cattle, hogs, sheep and

poultry. The major crops are wheat, barley, oats, rye, flax canola, and numerous varieties of forage¹ and vegetable crops (ibid:2).² There are about 300 commercial greenhouses in operation around Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge with a work force of 1,200 full-time workers and a much larger number of seasonal workers. These operations produce bedding and potted plants, seedlings, cut flowers and garden vegetables. With a total area of 21 million hectares (51 million acres) identified as agricultural land, it is not surprising that mechanization is widely used in agricultural production in Alberta. However, mechanization cannot completely replace human labour input in some aspects of livestock and agricultural production. In vegetable and greenhouse agriculture, the demand of seasonal labour is particularly important. About 90% of the agricultural labour in Alberta is carried out by locals, the remaining 10% involves alien temporary workers whose labour participation is short term (10-14 weeks during the summer), highly intensive (10-14 hours/day, sometimes 7 days a week) and crucial to the local economy.

There are less than 150 temporary Mexican agricultural workers sponsored by the Caribbean Commonwealth and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program in Alberta.³ They are dispersed among several communities in southern Alberta - Bassano, Medicine Hat/Redcliff, Taber and Lethbridge. In the community where fieldwork was conducted in the fall of 1997, only one farm was known to use Mexican seasonal workers.⁴ Eighteen Mexican workers were hired in 1997, nine arrived in July and departed in mid-October, followed by nine more in mid-August who departed at the end of October. In addition, this farm used a

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1. Alfalfa, clover, wheat grass, wild rye, and legumes (Alberta Agriculture 1993).
 2. Potatoes, mushrooms, carrots, cucumbers, hothouse tomatoes, cabbages, onions, rutabaga, broccoli, cauliflower, Chinese vegetables, pumpkin/squash, sweet corn, beets, peas snap beans and a variety of berries (strawberries, raspberries, saskatoons) (Alberta Agriculture 1993).
 3. Data provided by Senor Gabirel Rosalio-Vega, Consul General de Mexico en Van-couver, personal communication, August 1st, 1997.
 4. The author was aided in this fieldwork (August - October, 1997) by Dr. Martha Rees of Agnes Scott College (Dacatur, Georgia), Ms. J'Val Steward of Calgary (MA graduate in Anthropology from the University of Calgary) and Ms. Keri Gardner (MA student in Anthropology at the University of Calgary). The author wishes to thank them for their invaluable contribution to the data collection process in this research. The data contained in this paper is part of a larger data base for a tri-national project that looks at the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexico, Canada and the US.

larger number of Mexican Mennonites as seasonal workers. It is estimated that there are over 900 Mexican Mennonites in Alberta who are Canadian citizens or landed immigrants. They move back and forth between Alberta and Mexico in family groups (including children).

Mexican agricultural workers in southern Alberta are responsible for the labour intensive crop harvesting in greenhouse agricultural or market vegetable agriculture. As one farm owner points out, “without Mexican labour, we couldn’t do it”. It is impossible for him to support the production of sugar peas without the use of reliable temporary workers. The peas must be picked every twenty-four hours throughout the season. Anything that deviates from this schedule may render the production unprofitable. Even for crops like sweet corn and carrot which are harvested by machines, the sorting and bagging still involves human labour.

The Caribbean Commonwealth and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme

Jamaica and Barbados began pressuring the Canadian state as early as 1947 ‘to allow farmers in Canada to make use of migrant workers from their countries’ (Satzewich 1988:288). It was not until 1957 that the Southwestern Ontario Field Crops Association and the Canada and Dominion Sugar Company took action on this labour import option. Despite the high levels of unemployment in the post-WWII period, Ontario farmers still faced difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitable quantities of labour. Based on their assessment of Florida sugar cane grower’s experiences with the use of Caribbean labour, the Ontario farmers were attracted to the workers’ reputation as “reliable” and free of “social problems” (ibid). It took almost a decade before the first program contract between Jamaica and Canada was signed in 1966, Mexico joined in 1971. (Colby 1997) Ontario has the largest number of foreign seasonal agricultural workers in Canada. In 1994, Ontario alone hired a total of 10,839 workers in its tobacco and fruit industries- 671 from Barbados, 411 from East Caribbean, 4698 from Jamaica, 893 from Trinidad Tobago, 6673 from other Caribbean, 4166 from Mexico. The programme is administered by FARM (Foreign Agricultural Research Management Services).

The number of Caribbean & Mexican seasonal workers in Canada increased from 264 in 1966 to 4,173 in 1985 (Satzewich 1990), 6,000 in 1989 (Cecil and Ebanks 1991) and well over 10,000 by the 1990s. The overall number of seasonal workers under the Caribbean and Mexican programme is rather small in proportion to the total number of temporary workers in Canada at 8% in 1979 & 1980, 7% in 1981 & 1982, 5% in 1983 and 4% in 1984 (Boyd et al. 1985, Table 4).

The programme provides a comprehensive guideline regarding the qualification requirements, terms of employment and employer’s obligations to

the seasonal workers during their tenure in Canada (for details, see Colby 1997). The administration of the programme is handled by a central agency in Mexico City, making it a time-consuming and often expensive undertaking for applicants who live outside Mexico City to make the multiple trips necessary to complete the process. In addition, there is widespread complaints among Mexican workers about 'unjust hiring practices and corruption' in the Mexico City office (Colby1977:11).

Borrowed Men on Borrowed Time: Mexican Farm Workers in Southern Alberta

The data for this paper is based on four field trips to southern Alberta conducted in August, September and October, 1997. In total, we interviewed 10 Mexican seasonal workers (all worked for the same employer), 1 farm operator and his wife, 4 members of a Mexican family who are now permanent residents of Canada employed by the same farm operator, and 2 workers from El Salvador who at one time worked for the same employer and who are permanent residents of Canada. The interviews with the Mexican and El Salvadorean workers were done mostly in Spanish by Dr. Martha Rees (Agnes Scott College), Ms. J'Val Steward (MA graduate from the University of Calgary) and Ms. Keri Gardner (graduate student at the University of Calgary). Interviews done in English were conducted by Martha Rees and Josephine Smart. Most interviews were conducted on a Sunday which was the usual day-off for the workers. We had the opportu-

TABLE 4 Profile of Mexican Seasonal Workers in S. Alberta (N=10)

Name	Age	No. of children	No. of trips to Canada for work	Occupation in Mexico
Ron	49	5 (aged 19-7)	6	farmer
Jess	30	2 (aged 6, 3)	2	<i>campesino</i> , corn field
Andy	30+	1	3	<i>en el campo</i>

Tony	30+	3 (school age)	4	farmer
Troy	52	6 (aged 22-11)	4	construction
Max	36	4 (aged 15, 5)	10	small businessman
Vic	31	2 (aged 8, 6)	2	<i>campesino</i>
Frank	30+	4 (school age)	8	maintenance worker
Randy	30+	4 (school age)	8	<i>campesino</i>
Alfred	40+	2 (high school)	13	farm work

nity to observe the Mexican seasonal workers' living quarters on three occasions (interviews with the Mexican workers were conducted mostly at their living quarters) but we did not have the chance to visit them in the fields during their working hours. J'val and Josephine saw one group off at the Calgary International airport in mid-October. It is intentional not to mention the name of the community where this research was conducted; given the small number of farm operators involved in the employment of Mexican seasonal workers in southern Alberta, we feel that this is the best way. All interviewees are given fictitious names to protect their identity.

Strangers in a Strange Land

All the workers were flown into Calgary from Mexico City, many of them had to make a long bus journey to get there from their *pueblo*. Female participation in the seasonal worker programme is very low for social and cultural reasons. Officially both men and women are welcome in the program for as long as they are at least eighteen and

married, or 24 if not married. In 1995, only 28 women from Barbados, 2 from Caribbean and 53 from Mexico were among over 10,000 seasonal workers in Ontario (Colby 1997). In our study, we did not encounter any women among the workers. In accordance with the programme requirement, all the men are married with children, most of them are in their prime productive age in the 30s.

The workers were met at the airport by two farm employees (father and son) who immigrated to Canada in 1996 from Mexico as a family unit under the sponsorship of the farm owner. The father in this family (Senor Ramirez) had worked at the same farm in Southern Alberta for several years, his employer was so pleased with his work that he sponsored his immigration to Canada so that he can work full-time at the farm. His wife and 21-year-old daughter also work at the same farm since their relocation to Southern Alberta. Ramirez served as the primarily conduit of communication between the seasonal workers and the employer (who speaks Spanish as a result of his 2-year Mormon mission in Guatemala and the fact that his wife is from Honduras).

The seasonal workers were organized by the same schedule under the direction of Ramirez. Their contact with non-Spanish co-workers at the farm was limited. By contract agreement, the employer provided housing for the seasonal workers. One group of nine workers was housed in a run-down older detached house in a nearby community about 10 minutes from the farm which can only be reached by car since there is no regular public transport service. One of the workers in the group has a driver's licence from his previous seasonal work employment in Ontario. He drove a company van to transport his group to and from work. He also drove his co-workers/house-mates every Sunday to the super market to stock up on groceries. The other group of nine workers was housed in a semi-detached unit only a few minutes away from the farm by car. The workers could walk to work but they were usually picked up in a company van driven by Ramirez or his son because they usually have to travel some distance to the field where they worked for the day, and the location could change within the same day.

Even though the employment contract stipulates that the employer must provide adequate housing, neither premises we visited could be

described as “adequate” housing condition by Canadian standards. Broken windows in the front room at one residence were never fixed during the entire period of occupation. Several make-shift bunk beds were set up in the basement in the same room where a substandard shower stall was placed to increase the bathing facilities to meet the need of nine workers in the house. The floor was rough and damp. The furniture were in poor shape and the kitchen facilities could hardly accommodate the cooking needs of nine people who all cooked their own meals. At the other residence, the bathroom did not work for some time when the workers first moved in. The washer and dryer did not work and they were never fixed despite repeated request. The workers had to do their laundries by hand. There was no plumbing under the sink in the kitchen, two large buckets were used to catch the water which were dumped in the backyard “just like it is done in Mexico” as commented by one of the workers. There was no telephone connection at either house. If a worker wanted to make a long distance call to Mexico, he had to do it at Ramirez’s house. Without a telephone, the workers could not maintain any communication with their fellow Mexican workers or any other people in the same community without a face-to-face meeting.

The workers were entirely responsible for their meals and upkeep. On their day off (Sunday), they went shopping, did laundry, slept in and cooked. Without their wives, the men had to take on much of the “women’s work” in order to support a basic existence in Canada: they cooked their own tortillas and all other food, they did their own laundry by hand or by machine (when it was working), they shopped for groceries and they cleaned house. Without the daily labour input from their wives, mothers, or sisters who are normally in charge of meal planning and preparation, the Mexican workers tend to have a high consumption of frozen food and other convenience food alien to their customs in Mexico.

The weekly shopping trip to the supermarket was probably the workers’ single most significant social contact with English speaking local residents. Between the long working hours and the time for rest and basic upkeep, the Mexican seasonal workers had very little time to engage in social activities either among themselves or with local Canadians. The language barrier further discourages the Mexican

workers from actively seeking out opportunities of social interaction outside their workplace. When we met the Mexicans in a supermarket during our first visit to the community, our interest in them was received with a great deal of suspicion and fear. One Mexican worker commented that he and others had encountered accusation of theft by English speaking store employees in Ontario in the past, and they thought we might be store detectives picking on them just because they looked “different” (such as they are not white).

The presence of the Mexican seasonal workers in the community was known but not felt. The local RCMP official did not know where the Mexican workers lived and the Mexicans had never got themselves into any kind of trouble in the community. The local liquor store clerk did not have much to offer because she knew some of her clients did not speak English, but she was not sure they were Mexicans. Some of them bought beer from the store, usually the cheaper US brands. She also knew some of them used the pharmacy at the drug store next door. But she did not know any of them personally. The supermarket clerks we talked to were equally uninformed about the Mexicans because they had never spoken to them even though they shopped at the store every Sunday. The Mexicans did not speak English and the grocery clerks did not speak Spanish. This is not surprising given that only 0.58 percent of the entire population of Canada were identified as Spanish speaking in the 1991 Census and most of them are residents of major urban centres. In the province of Alberta, 0.55 percent of the population (13,935 individuals) were Spanish speaking and these were more or less equally distributed between the two major cities of Edmonton and Calgary (Statistics Canada 1991 Census data).

The Mexicans we talked to expressed a desire to learn more English. Most seasonal agricultural workers have little or no English. This linguistic deficiency creates problems of communication with non-Spanish speaking co-workers and community, and this intensifies the tendency among the Mexican workers to avoid interacting with the general public in the community where they live and work. Furthermore, this linguistic deficiency puts the workers at a disadvantage in situations of conflict with English speaking agents in

the host society (for example bank tellers, shopping mall security personnel, shop clerks). The Mexican workers we interviewed in Southern Alberta lived in social isolation apart from the host community. Their lack of integration with the community at large is both an outcome by design and by choice.

Work is Work... *un poco bruscas*

The workers reported extremely long working hours from 7 or 8 in the morning until 1 or 2 the next morning (14-16 hours with one or two hours for meal breaks) for 3 weeks in August, 1997. Their “usual” working hours were from 7 or 8 in the morning until 9 or 10 in the evening (14 hours with a one to two hour break). Inadequate washroom facilities at the field sites, short meal breaks (30 minutes) and coffee breaks (15 minutes in theory twice a day, but in practice often withheld), and extremely long working hours for weeks on end are the main ingredients in the creation of the Mexican workers’ self identity within the Canadian economy - a work machine. This sentiment can be extracted from the following comments by the workers:

- I don’t want to live in Canada because it is *puro trababjo* (only work)..
- I come to Canada to work, and work is work.
- (the working condition in Canada) is not so good. They are kind of *un poco bruscas* (harsh). The work is hard, and we always have to work long hours.

Money, money, money

While the workers were critical about their long working hours, they were also happy about the earning potential within. In fact, most workers reported that they were “happy” with the working conditions

because they could earn a lot of money. One worker went as far as saying, “las condiciones son muy perfectas”. They were paid \$6 an hour, their daily over time work were paid at the regular rate without extra compensation. Even so, an average worker on a 14-week contract can look forward to a total earning of \$6000 - \$8000 for the season. One worker pointed out that his one-day wage in Canada was about the same as what he might earn in a month in Mexico. Another worker reported an earning of 30 pesos/day as a farmer in Mexico, his wage for a 12-hour work day in Canada was almost half his monthly income back home.⁵ The economic significance of their earning in Canada is very real for the Mexican seasonal agricultural workers, and it is the economic incentive that keeps them coming back to Canada year after year to go through yet another cycle of long working hours, less than adequate living conditions, home sickness, and social isolation. This economic gain from seasonal employment in Canada is intended to benefit the workers’ family material well beings and the children’s future through education. The following is a collection of quotes from the workers in their discourse on how they intended to spend their earnings in Canada.

- The first year I used the money to buy a little piece of land. The second year I used the money to build a house on it and the third year I used the money to buy things for the house. This year I will use the money to continue adding on and building my house.
- I first bought a new house and then I bought another one so that I could rent out the first one...I have also bought a car...My kids will all be able to continue in their education...I plan to buy an even bigger house this year.
- (we) have more money now, so that (we) can afford nicer houses and more things for the children.

At the Calgary International airport to bid the happy but exhausted Mexican workers bon voyage in late October, we witnessed a myriad

4. At a 5.5 exchange rate, 30 pesos is worth about Cdn \$5.50.

of “material and technology transfers” from Canada to Mexico in the form of gifts that the workers had prepared:

- earrings and watches for wife and daughter
- a brand new AM/FM/cassette/CD player
- a portable manual typewriter bought at a garage sale for \$5 for a daughter,
- an old electric portable sewing machine in its original case for a wife, cost \$70
- a bicycle for a relative

In Colby’s study of Mixtec households near Oaxaca, she finds that 90 percent of the women prefer that their men go to Canada for seasonal work instead of the more common destination of USA (1997). This strong preference for Canada is supported by several factors: Mexican workers in Canada send large and regular remittances, their dates of departure and return are fixed and known, and workers in Canada rarely have the opportunity to start a second family (ibid). As one woman comments, “In Canada he (her husband) doesn’t have girlfriends or babies” (ibid:27). The earnings from seasonal work in Canada are used to support the household farming economy (purchase of land, fertilizer, farm equipment and seeds), finance family business ventures (for example the growth of non-conventional crops of cabbage, cucumbers and strawberries), improve and expand the family house(s), pay for children’s education, support local religious activities and enable a higher level of consumption (cars, trucks, household appliances) (ibid). In short, the seasonal employment in Canada contributes to the betterment of the individual household as well as the community due to its relatively high pay and good job security. While young single men often prefer the US for the greater freedom and Hispanic network support and social activities, ‘migration to Canada is the most desirable type of migration during the middle and family years of the life cycle...the large salaries and job security of contract labour in Canada appeals to family-oriented men interested in continuing life in the home town’ (Colby 1997:22-23)

Next time, Ontario or anywhere but Alberta

All workers express a desire to return for seasonal employment next year, but most of them would go to Ontario if they had a choice. With the exception of one worker reporting a wage of less than \$6 in Quebec during one of his previous employments in Canada, most workers who had worked in Ontario and Quebec reported a higher hourly rate in these provinces than their current hourly wage in Alberta. Given that the living and working conditions are similar in every province, they would like to maximize their earning power by going to the province which offers the highest pay. Moreover, the southern Ontario communities where they had worked and lived before are described as more densely populated, more lively and having more Mexicans than the southern Alberta communities. In the final analysis, all the workers have their hearts in Mexico where their family is surrounded by kin and friends and their strong identification with the land through history, culture and property ownership. Mexico is everything that Canada is not.

- There are more things to do in Mexico. Here (southern Alberta) there is nobody.
- There are too many rules here (Canada)...I like my life more in Mexico - there is more going on there...People...talk to each other more than here.
- I don't want to live in Canada because it is *puro trabajo* (pure work).
- It is hard to meet people in Canada.

Mexican Workers in Canada - A Comparison with Ontario

In a study of Mexican workers in Southern Ontario by Catherine Colby based on 78 interviews with workers in Canada and 61 Mixtec households in Oaxaca (Mexico), there are striking parallels between her account of the dehumanizing but economically attractive working situations for Mexican workers in Ontario and that in Southern Alberta. The voices of the Mexican workers and Canadian employers

Colby documented add to our grounded account of “flexibility” wherein the seasonal workers are deployed to accommodate the employers’ production needs and “efficiency” by subjecting themselves to extreme and often dehumanizing working conditions in return for wages that seem attractive from the Mexican perspective, but rarely so from the Canadian perspective.

- “.. *patrones* use you, then forget you because they can always get more Mexicans...” a comment by a Mexican worker (Colby 1997:14).
- “Many *patrones* here aren’t interested in us. Just do the work. Don’t talk to me. They don’t like to explain things to us or hear out ideas.” Comment by a Mexican worker (Colby 1997:19).
- “You can’t find workers here who will stick out the job. Maybe they’ll stay for a week or two. Then they say it’s too hard on their backs, or they think that they are better than this kind of work. I’ve had Mexican workers for the last five years. Hard workers. Even when the temperature in summer in the greenhouses nears one hundred, they still keep working and won’t complain. Honest people. I owe this greenhouse business to them”. Comment by a greenhouse manager (Colby 1997:6).

Conclusion

The seasonal employment in Canada has, to a limited extent, met the objectives identified by the Mexican Consulate: alleviate household poverty in Mexico, facilitate (agricultural) technology transfer from Canada to Mexico, and put Mexican labour migration under regulation and control.(Colby 1997) From the Canadian national and local perspective, the Mexican seasonal workers, like other temporary workers, have made a valuable contribution to the Canadian economy by tailoring their labour participation according to the needs of the Canadian employers and the dictates of global and national competitiveness. Within this formulation of labour mobility at the macro and structural level, it is easy to forget that the workers are human and flesh, and that their personhood and well being should

be given the same respect and protection that we accord ourselves. On this account, there is a lot of room for improvement at the level of policy implementation in the Caribbean Commonwealth and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme. Cecil & Ebanks put it well:

“the men are prepared to travel to Ontario for economic gain.....Long working hours, coupled with the tasks associated with looking after all their own personal needs, confine them to the farms for most of their time in Ontario ... The human condition is not bad, but the workers’ total humanity is not expressed in Ontario....”(Cecil and Ebanks 1991:401).

The empirical data on Mexican farm workers in Alberta and Ontario supports the general observation of “flexible workforce deployment” as a strategy in global competition. The Canadian farmers rely on the numerical flexibility made possible by the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme to support and enhance their agro-businesses. Clearly the employers gain from this “flexible workforce deployment”. Yet, the data raises questions about the general impression of the flexibilization of labour as being a form of hyper-exploitation and corporate conspiracy aimed at the complete subordination of the working class. The omission of the workers’ perspective on this matter is something that needs to be addressed in future research. In this study, the Mexican workers articulate very clearly the economic benefits they gain from their seasonal employment in Canada which are fed into the many real and anticipated improvements in personal and community well-being in the localities from where they originate. The Mexican seasonal workers are motivated to continue their participation in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programmes despite the harsh working conditions in Canada and the often extreme exploitation of their labour power at the farms. Their motivation is driven by the degree of upward mobility made possible by their Canadian wages. They use their foreign earnings to lift themselves above the marginality and poverty of their fellow countrymen by investing in their children’s

education, improving their housing situations, investing in their agricultural activities and financing investment and business ventures.

Given the existing and continuing inequality between nations in their standard of living and earning levels, the flow of “temporary” workers from the poor countries to the rich nations will continue to grow. The export of labour has become an important source of national income for countries like the Philippines and Mexico. In our examination of the nature and impact of globalization and flexible workforce deployment, we must move beyond the focus on the multinationals to include the small and medium employers, and in particular the national policies regarding the export and import of temporary workers in both sending and receiving countries. While Canada is a receiving country for many of the “temporary” workers from Mexico and Southeast Asia, at the same time it is an exporter of “temporary” workers for the USA and other countries around the world for employment in well-paid and high-skilled jobs. The flow of “temporary” workers around the world involves tens of millions of people from just about every country in the world, some supply more labour for global circulation than others. Labour export is not an exclusive national agenda of the poor nations.

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