Treatment of foreign migrant workers – the Agriculture Union takes a stand against exploitation

The treatment of foreign migrant workers in Canada is a national disgrace.

This year alone, some 20,000 workers – overwhelmingly 'sourced' from Latin America and the Caribbean – will come to Canada. Seeking to improve the standard of living for their families in these lesser developed nations; too many discover that the line between opportunity and exploitation is a fine one indeed.
These men and women are largely hidden from public view.

Governments at both ends serve as the 'middlemen' in the migrant worker procurement process. Canadian employers request workers through a program operated by Human Resources and Social Development Canada. The migrant worker's home country selects and screen workers. Once 'placed' in Canada, the workers and their employer sign a contract that outlines their respective rights and obligations.

Their work is for the most part seasonal – a few weeks or, at most, months. There are no consistent employment standards. Canadian groups that advocate on behalf of migrant workers note a number of persistent issues:

- work days that extend to 12 or 15 hours with no overtime or holiday pay;
- housed in close quarters in often substandard accommodations;
- exposure to dangerous chemicals and /or pesticides without safety equipment, adequate protection or appropriate training;
- pay discrimination between migrant and non-migrant workers;
- deductions for EI and other services to which they have little or no access; and,
- no recourse to collective bargaining or unionization.

To make matters worse, there is a major, built-in incentive for migrant workers to keep their heads down and their mouths closed about any abuse or injustice. Workers are sent home as soon as their contracts expire. They must report back to their home countries with evaluation forms from their employers. A negative report can result in suspension from the program. Lack of an appeal process leads most migrant workers prefer to submit a neutral report to avoid delays in being processed to return to work in Canada.

At our 2008 Triennial National Convention, the Agriculture Union took a firm position that foreign migrant workers should be entitled to all rights and protections that Canadian workers receive, including Human Rights.

The Agriculture Union urges its members to push their elected representatives at the federal and provincial levels to bring about a new legislative and regulatory framework that will provide migrant workers with the full protections now enjoyed by Canadians.