

FOREIGN-WORKER CHANGES GOOD BUT MODEST STEP

Xavier Carmona hasn't seen his family in 17 years. That's because, for all that time, this migrant farmworker has worked in Canada picking fruit. Other than missing holidays and his children's milestones, what has he got to show for his labour? A hernia from the strawberry fields and carpal tunnel syndrome from pruning grape vines.

Carmona came to Canada from Mexico as a temporary foreign worker. Somehow, 17 years doesn't exactly sound temporary.

Canada's TFW program covers seasonal agriculture workers, most of whom are low-wage workers, many of them in southern Ontario. There is news now that some welcome changes may be in sight for the thousands of migrant workers cleaning our hotel rooms, washing mushrooms and working our apple orchards. The federal government, after a review of the TFW program's "primary agriculture" stream, is planning to allow TFWs to work for any Canadian business approved to hire migrants.

Previously, a TFW hired by Company A could work only for Company A, forcing many who were unhappy with the firm - whether because of withheld wages, undelivered promises, cramped living conditions or 14-hour days no natural-born Canadian would put up with - to abscond and live in Canada illegally or go out in search of even more precarious work.

The new ruling would allow workers to seek work within the sector they were hired in, making them less susceptible to abuse. Ottawa hasn't finalized the change. It is taking submissions until the end of July from interested parties.

It is a step in the right direction, but it is a baby step. For one, the job switch is limited to one sector.

What is required here is a top-to-bottom retooling of the foreign-workers program. Cleaning up the vermin-infested international recruitment process would be a big start. These recruiters take money from employers and career colleges to find bodies to pick beans or rear-ends to fill their chairs and illegally charge people in such countries as Mexico, Guatemala, India and the Philippines after filling them with promises to find them jobs or places in career colleges.

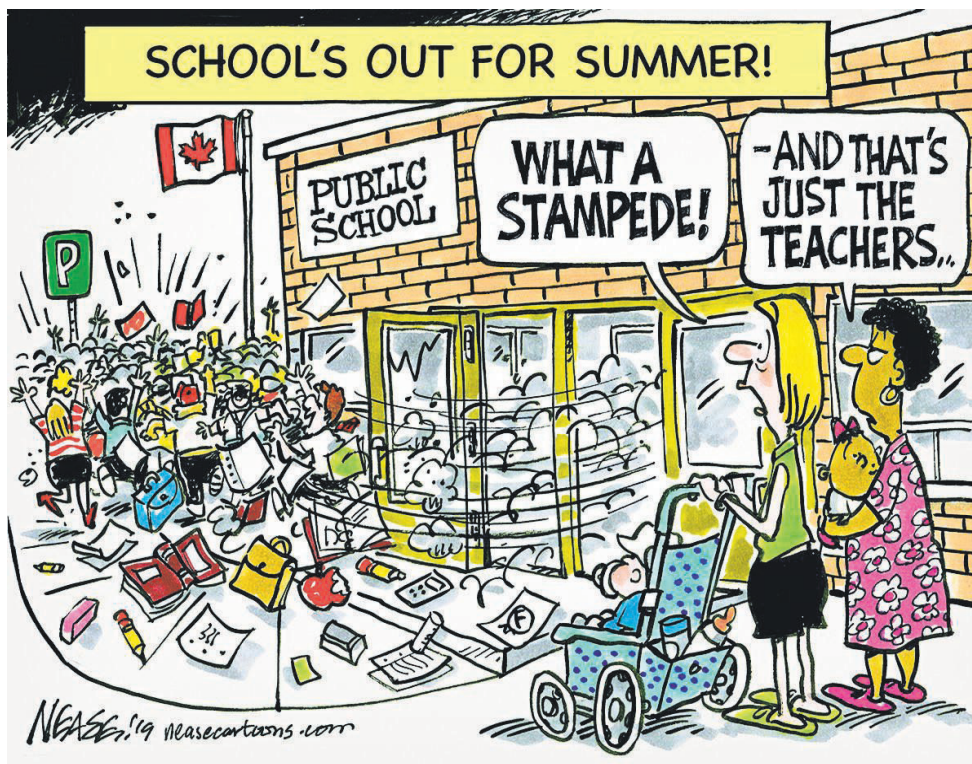
The system is ripe for abuse: There are 60,000 vacancies across Canada in the agriculture sector alone. That number will almost double by 2025, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture says.

The second step is to allow any foreign worker hired to work in Canada full permanent residence status and stop the pretense that these foreign workers are here temporarily. A lifetime is not temporary.

"We are human beings," said Carmona, the Mexican migrant worker who's been here 17 years. "We deserve decent work, services and permanent status."

His point is spot on: Migrants to Canada do not have access to health care, education or labour support because of their temporary status and even though they're paying taxes.

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MINIMUM WAGE, LIVING WAGE DISPARITY IN HALTON

GAP CONTINUES TO GROW, WRITES TYLER MOON



TYLER MOON
Column

While many Halton residents enjoy a high quality of life, there is an increasing number of residents working for low wages, resulting in debt, anxiety and health issues. Many Halton residents live on the minimum wage of \$14 per hour. As such, this minimum-wage rate falls below Halton's living wage to maintain a standard quality of life.

According to Community Development Halton, a living wage is a wage that provides a decent quality of life and allows workers to raise a family, be healthy

and enjoy recreation, entertainment and culture. Halton's living wage was determined to be \$17.95 per hour in 2016, which was calculated based on the needs of a family of four with two parents working full time. It accounts for expenses that families face on an annual basis, such as food, clothing, housing, child care, recreation and transportation.

With the average work week being at 37.5 hours, this results in a difference of \$7,700 per year between the minimum wage and living wage. Due to factors like unaffordable rental rates, expensive child-care costs, and inflation, the gap will continue to grow and strain Halton's social programs.

A living wage ensures that workers receive fair compensation and improves the quality of life and health of individuals. Living-wage employers ob-

serve reduced absenteeism, improved morale and productivity, and decreased turnover rates. The community benefits from increased civic participation and local spending, which stimulates the economy. To ensure a vibrant and healthy community in Halton, governments and local businesses must support workers with a wage that allows for the quality of life we all deserve.

Tyler Moon is the senior manager of community impact for United Way Halton & Hamilton, on behalf of the Halton Poverty Roundtable.

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