

Past Due: Addressing Exploitative Migrant Farm Labour in a Post Pandemic Ontario

Brendan Petrasek BA Combind Honours Enviroment, Sustainability and Society and International Development Studies
Supervised by Dr. Matthew Schnurr Department of International Development



Planting the Seeds

Covid-19 has heightened public attention to the plight of migrant farm laborers. Three Mexican workers, Bonifacio Eugenio Romero, Rogelio Muñoz Santos and, Juan López Chaparro, died on Ontario farms from complications of the novel Corona virus. This is far from the first time a foreign worker has died while being employed on an Ontario farm. The problem is not the pandemic. The structural and endemic complacency of the both the Canadian government and Ontario farmers to not address how we protect temporary farm workers in this country, laid the foundation for the avoidable deaths and illnesses experienced throughout Ontario farms this past summer.

Questions

- > What was the role of media is in shaping awareness and influencing policy on migrant farm work?
- > What does the advocacy literature have to say on these topics?
- > Can COVID-19 act as a shock of sorts to bring these recommendations into policy reality.

What will the Study Reap?

The objective of this study is to add to the prevailing literature on Ontario migrant farm workers rights. I hope to reorient our discourse away from Covid-19 toward more substantive change that can make the material conditions of workers better when the next crisis hits. I argue that the example set by COVID-19 has been largely reactionary and we need to move toward a preventative framework.

Quick Facts

- > In 2015, 40,497 temporary foreign workers filled 45,005 jobs for agricultural operations.
- > 21,975 TFW worked in Ontario
- > Despite the persistent need for farm labour and the long-term attachment of the workers, workers under the SAWP do not acquire any right to apply for permanent resident status
- > Dispraprotioantly affected by Covid-19 this summer
- > Food System would crumble without migrant workers



Literature Review

Labour History

Some groundwork for our current situation Harvey and Faraday essential here. Labour action has been hollowed out in Canada and globally. Global Reserve Army of Labour and primitive accumulation discussed in depth.

Migrant Farm work in Ontario

Detailed literature about the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program and how it works. Clearly shows power imbalance and how necessary these workers are. Labour trends investigated with advocates and industry literature alike showing need for migrant work

Migrant Farm Work and COVID-19

Lots of grey literature which is seen in my document analysis. Dominated the conversation on migrant labour, obfuscating other issues. Specific attention paid to housing and health and safety.

Key Takeaway

There are substantiative and real ways to change this system the data is out there; the advocacy is happening. Change blocked as capital accumulation necessitated on exploited labour

Qualatative Methods

“An interpretive, naturalistic approach to a subject matter giving priority to what the data contributes to important research questions or existing information”

> Critical Theory

“the goals of critical theory are derived from historical analysis and immanent in human work. Its end is the rational state of society forced by present (& not merely a means of relief of particular) distress.”

> Document Anaylsis

I compiled 50 documents from 2020/21 using a broad search relating to Ontario agriculture and migrant work using deductive coding. Looked at them critically through lens of advocate research

> Limitation

Lack of worker input Results

Own perosnal experience produces inherent bias

Results

1. The media covered migrant work under the backdrop of COVID-19
2. Not a lot of discussion on actual systems that engender exploitation
3. No path to permanent residency upholds a reserve army of labour

Two Central Themes

Health and Safety of TFW

> 61% of the documents reviewed in this study mention the health and safety of migrant farm workers

> Only 7% of house inspections failed in 2020

> Living on farm gives signifigant powert o employer over work space and life

> Reports from 2010, 2006 and 2002 all make reference of poor hosuing, Not new issue.

> COVID-19 not the problem but made it worse

Housing of TFW

> 32% of documents mentioned the housing of migrant Ontario farm workers

>Some of the worst COVID outbreaks on farms

> Many deaths span over the decades from lack of protection

> Simialr language from advocacy reports and documents related to COVID

> COVID-19 not the problem but brought attention
> Avoidable death



Discussion

- > “Modern capitalist agriculture—encompassing both rich, large-scale family farming and agribusiness corporations—is now engaged in a massive attack on third world peasant production”
- >“Treating labor as a disposable and/or easily replaceable part of the production process promotes capitalism’s central driving force—the never-ending drive to accumulate wealth.”
- Labour Arbitrage: “taking advantage of lower wages abroad, especially in poor countries”

Advocate Recommendations

1. Permanent Residnce Status on Arrival
2. Protect Health and Safety
3. Suspend work at Covid-19 Farms
4. Ensure Income for all
5. Make Quarantine Work for Workers
6. Create Dignified Living Conditions
7. Ensure Decent Work
8. Public Health Not Policing

