

Untangling the Temporary Foreign Worker Knot

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Tuesday, September 10, 2013

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Banks as predators? Surely, no!

Temporary foreign workers have become a lightning-rod topic in Canadian labour in recent months with the high-profile news of the Royal Bank of Canada replacing staff with TFWs. But the issue is not about RBC, which is merely the latest flashpoint. The temporary foreign worker issue is wrapped up in a number of intersecting topics, including minimum and living wages, the role of the market in setting wages, immigration and job training.

Despite some of the spin we are seeing, the TFW controversy is not an issue of jobs for Canadians versus foreigners, and it is not hard to see all that is going on and what labour in Canada should be doing about it.

Firstly, critics of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program are sometimes accused of being xenophobic, wanting to keep foreigners out so Canadians can have jobs. The huge irony in all of this is that the federal Conservative government's increasingly restrictive immigration and refugee policies are what are designed to keep foreigners out. The TFW program lets some of them in, but just to work, because the Conservative Party of Canada doesn't want them actually immigrating.

Immigration is a cornerstone of Canadian development and progress. It always has been. But the federal government now is increasingly interested in establishing a two-tier working-class system in this country. There are now over 330,000 temporary foreign workers in Canada, almost as big as the working population of New Brunswick!

Secondly, when there are labour shortages in a particular profession, the labour market ought to respond with higher wages because of the shortage of supply. And provincial education ministries ought to respond by increasing training opportunities in that field. Neither of these processes can work well when the TFW program injects foreign workers, earlier paid at up to 15 per cent below prevailing wages. So, the TFW program warps the free market that the Conservative government usually champions.

Thirdly, in April, the CBC's Amanda Lang wrote a justification of the TFW program, saying: it "[is not about outsourcing jobs but about importing labour or expertise not available in Canada](#)." If that were the case, then we would not see so many fast food restaurants applying for temporary foreign workers and we would not see the federal government so quick to approve them when there are plenty of people available to work in those jobs, including workers on EI in those same regions.

The CBC [recently posted on its website](#) a list of over 50,000 companies in Canada that applied for temporary foreign workers. Many included franchise owners of Subway, Dairy Queen, Tim Hortons, and other restaurants. Retail and service employers who require workers with little or no training generally have a vast pool of unemployed workers in their regions, making employers' claims of labour shortages simply illusions. Employers and the federal government encouraging the use of temporary foreign workers in these areas ends up being an attack on entry-level and service jobs all across the country.

Fourthly, even though employers of temporary foreign workers must respect employment standards legislation and union contracts, where they exist, TFWs are vulnerable since their mere existence in Canada requires staying on the good side of employers, leading to workers not always feeling free to stand up for their rights. And since most aren't unionized, it's up to themselves as individuals to be their own best advocate.

Fifthly, there are broad socio-economic problems with this program. Like our grandparents and great grandparents before us, many temporary foreign workers send a significant portion of their wages back to their home country, which erodes our local economies just like tax cuts for the rich. Isn't this the kind of thing the Conservative Party of Canada wants to avoid: things that erode our economic success in the world?

Also, while in the 1980s we worried about a Canadian brain drain of talent to the United States, now, we are becoming a brain-drain destination for people overseas, eroding their home countries' ability to prosper. Further, we don't want Canada to become a country with a non-citizen underclass. In 2004, an

entertaining movie called “A Day Without a Mexican,” which imagined a California the day after that state’s permanent domestic underclass of Mexicans mysteriously disappeared. The world ground to a halt. We need to stop the government from creating a labour underclass of our own.

Finally, we have a number of solutions we can explore.



RBC CEO and 1%-er, Gord Nixon, looks sad. He's apologizing for getting caught replacing staff with TFWs. But Corporate media portrays him as apologetic, so banks aren't evil after all. Still, switch to a credit union anyway.

Boycott RBC and join a credit union. Their stock price took a small dip this past spring, but it quickly recovered to its 2013 high of \$64/share, which is \$10 higher than last year. So, the stock market has “forgiven” RBC for getting caught for replacing its staff with temporary foreign workers. In fact, if you are dealing with any bank, you should switch to a credit union.

Also, we can push the federal and provincial governments to improve their processes for recognizing foreign professional credentials. We have job shortages in many skilled areas, but we also have many new Canadians with training. Yet, we maintain barriers to their ability to work in their fields. Sure, there are complications in recognizing foreign credentials, but the biggest one might be our racism. We should get over that.

The [BC Employment Standards Coalition](#) has drafted Migrant Worker Recruitment and Protection model legislation. Other provinces can draw from this attempt to protect the precarious temporary foreign workers. And we can lobby for a citizenship track for the TFWs already here.

Finally, as labour and human rights activists, we should demand more from our governments when it comes to restoring Canada as a welcoming place for immigrants and refugees. We all know that immigrants and their descendants – like us! – helped build our vibrant workplaces and communities. We are falling behind our own record and reputation. But we don’t have to sit in silence.

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