

THE DOCUMENTARY AND MIGRANT WORKERS IN CANADA

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I made my first documentary about migrant workers because of a wildcat strike; it was back in 2000. I was a filmmaker looking for a story; I ran into a friend of mine, Chris Ramsaroop, on the streets of Toronto. He was organizing a bus for journalists and media types like myself to drive to a small town I'd never heard of, Leamington, Ontario. Chris told me a group of migrant workers had gone on strike and needed support and he wanted to spread the word. Like most Canadians I always thought migrant workers were in the United States, and that it wasn't a Canadian reality. I joined the ride with other journalists and activists, unaware that I would be changing the direction of my life within the next four hours. Leamington, Ontario is the greenhouse capital of the U.S and Canada; it is the epicenter of the agribusiness industry. Greenhouses larger than football fields span across 2 600 acres, growing tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers, mostly headed for the U.S. market. The sector employs 13 000 workers and in 2015 totaled a farm gate value of \$800 million.

Our bus drove into a church parking lot in Leamington. There, I saw a few hundred Mexican migrant workers, all men. It was a Sunday afternoon and church services had just concluded. When we got off the bus, the Spanish-speaking members of our entourage—and there were about four people who spoke Spanish—were immediately surrounded. The workers had pressing questions about tax deductions, unpaid hours at work, pesticide exposure—workers were rolling up their sleeves and showing us angry red rashes—contract language—workers were holding forms and sheets of paperwork, all in English that they couldn't read or understand...it was overwhelmingly clear to me that this was a workforce that had no access to basic information

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related to their working lives. And it was remarkable to me, in an awful way, that workers would be so completely disenfranchised in Canada. We found out that the leaders of the wildcat strike had already been sent back home to Mexico. The growers had effectively shut down worker resistance by exercising the power of deportation that all employers wield in the migrant worker program. Like a sword of Damocles, it hovers over the worker for the duration of their contract. Speak out and risk being fired and sent home and never invited back.

This was my first encounter with the dysfunction of Canada's foreign labor program. Chris Ramsaroop went on to co-found a national volunteer-run advocacy group known as "Justicia for Migrant Workers"; they are activists who work in solidarity with workers to fight for migrant worker justice. I went on to make the documentary *El contrato*, released in 2003, which tells the story of a few Mexican migrant men working in a Leamington greenhouse.

Let me give you a brief overview of the contours of the migrant worker programs in Canada. Today over 500 000 migrant laborers are working with temporary status in Canada, they come from over 80 different source countries. Of that number 110 000 are low-wage, minimum-wage workers. Low-wage workers are tied to one job, one employer. Most of my film work is with low-wage migrant workers. Their very status as unfree is what makes them desirable workers.

Since the 1960s the federal government has run a range of migrant labor programs: the now-defunct Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP) for nannies; the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), which is industry-specific and tied to Mexico and Caribbean nations; and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), which applies to a broad-based cross-section of industries and is open to any sending country. Under the TFWP, migrant workers are employed in a wide range of industries: service, hospitality, construction, health care, childcare, and agribusiness. Many work in minimum-wage jobs; in Ontario, minimum wage is Can\$11 an hour. These labor programs construct workers as permanently temporary: the work is always available, but the workers are deemed temporary, and with that manufactured label, they are treated as transients. There are virtually no pathways to citizenship. Workers who have been coming to Canada for 25 years can never expect citizenship. The history of Canada's labor programs exposes a sobering fact: the labor shortage is chronic, but the job status as "temporary" is manufactured.