

For Immediate Release
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Statement

Statement from Alberta Federation of Labour President Gil McGowan on the federal government's April 1 TFW deadline

Edmonton - On the eve of the federal government's April 1 deadline for Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs), Canadians should feel sympathy for the thousands of people facing the prospect of being sent home ... and they should feel anger and disgust towards the federal government for the ham-handed way they've handled this file.

It's appropriate to sympathize with individual Temporary Foreign workers, because – quite simply – they've done nothing wrong.

They came to Canada in good faith. They worked hard. They dreamed about better lives for themselves and their families. They don't deserve the lies, broken promises and outright exploitation that they've suffered at the hands of the Harper government and many unscrupulous employers and fly-by-night labour brokers.

However, while it is appropriate for us to feel sympathy for these workers, we cannot lose sight of what needs to be done. And what the federal government needs to do is shut down the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) – or, at the very least, scale it back to what it was before they made the decision to expand it a decade ago.

We take this position because Canada doesn't need an exploitative guest worker program. What we need is real immigration. We also need better training – both in our schools and from employers – so that Canadians can benefit from the opportunities offered in our national and regional labour markets.

The Harper government's dramatically expanded Temporary Foreign Worker Program was never a good fit for our country. It was never a good fit because Canada is a country built by immigration – and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is not immigration; it's exploitation.

The Temporary Foreign Worker program flies in the face of Canadian values: values like fairness, tolerance and inclusion. It also represents a dramatic break from our traditional approach to bringing people into our country from abroad.

For generations, we embraced an immigration model that welcomed newcomers as citizens. It's a model that served us well. But now, as a result of the Harper government's approach – an approach which, I might add, was never brought to Parliament for approval – we're now bringing more people into the country each year as precarious guest workers than as permanent residents and citizens.

The reality for the vast majority of the 350,000 temporary foreign workers in Canada – and the 85,000 TFWs here in Alberta – is that, despite the promises made by politicians and many employment brokers, they will never become citizens. Instead, they're status is more akin to the indentured servants or the so-called "coolies" of the 19th century.

The defining characteristic of TFWs in Canada today is their lack of full mobility rights. For most of them, they can only work for the employer that brought them. Even if they're being cheated, mistreated or underpaid, in most cases they can't do what Canadian workers can do – they can't quit and apply for a job across the street.

This is exactly what many employers love about the Temporary Foreign Worker program. It has allowed them to ignore market signals about wages and impose working conditions that would never be tolerated by Canadians.

This is why so many employers love the program, but it is also why we at the Alberta Federation of Labour have so strongly opposed it.

We simply cannot tolerate the continued existence of a federal program that has facilitated the creation of a two-tiered labour market in which unscrupulous employers are allowed to use a vulnerable underclass of precarious workers to drive down wages, displace Canadians and avoid their responsibilities related to training.

That's our bottom line: Canada needs to say "no" to a two-tiered labour market based on the exploitation of vulnerable guest workers.

In other parts of the world, guest worker programs have turned whole economic sectors into low-wage ghettos. It starts with jobs that are already low-status and low-pay, like child care and farm labour. But, if guest worker programs are allowed to flourish, the ghettoization creeps up the wage scale to areas like food service, retail sales, construction and even sectors like IT and health care.

When this happens, wages and job opportunities are suppressed and tensions between citizens and newcomers become enflamed.

This has already been happening here in Alberta. A wide range of experts – from the Parliamentary Budget Officer to the former governor of the Bank of Canada to former Employment Minister Jason Kenney himself – now agree that the Temporary Foreign Worker Program was being used to suppress wages. Instead of being used as a last resort, the program was a first choice for many employers – especially in the low wage service sector.

This distorted the labour market and was clearly uncalled for in Alberta when oil was trading above \$100 a barrel. It's completely unacceptable now that the price of oil has collapsed and unemployment is on the rise.

However – and this is a big "however" – while we think the TFW program should be scrapped in its current form, we feel strongly that something needs to be done to help the thousands and thousands of TFWs who are already in the country. They are just as much victims of bad public policy as the Canadians who have been displaced by the program whose wages have been suppressed.

With this in mind, this morning I have made a formal proposal to the federal ministers of Employment and Immigration. We're urging them to close off most TFW streams going forward and impose new limits and restriction on the so-called International Mobility Program which is allowing a growing number of foreign workers into the country without even the minimal oversight afforded to the mainline TFW program.

But we're also asking them to let the TFWs who are already in Canada stay. Most importantly, we believe these workers should be granted permanent residency and eventually citizenship.

As permanent residents or citizens, these workers will have full mobility rights within the Canadian labour market, meaning it will be much more difficult for employers to use them as pawns to drive down wages and conditions on individual worksites or across sectors of the economy.

Closing off most streams of the TFW program and granting permanent residency to the TFWs already in Canada will accomplish three important things:

1. It will put all participants in the Canadian labour market on equal footing. It is most certainly NOT in the broad interest of the Canadian public to have a labour market divided into two segments: one with full rights, including the right to mobility, and another with constrained rights, including limits on mobility. Closing off the TFW program and granting permanent residency to the workers already here, will re-establish balance and fairness in the Canadian labour market.
2. It will go a long way towards correcting what is, essentially, an historic injustice. For generations, Canada has been a beacon for immigrants seeking to create a better life for themselves and their families. But, as I've said, the TFW program is not immigration, it is exploitation. By closing off the program and granting permanent residency to TFWs already in the country, we could re-establish our reputation as a nation that welcomes, instead of exploits, newcomers.
3. It will encourage businesses and governments to focus on the REAL solutions to meeting the needs of the Canadian labour market: training, flexibility on compensation and conditions and REAL immigration. Instead of relying on cheap, vulnerable and exploitable workers, governments and businesses will have to do what they should have been doing all along, which is to nurture, develop and support our domestic labour force – which is a labour force that has always included new immigrants with full citizenship rights.

Will Pierre Poilievre and Chris Alexander do the right thing when their predecessors would not? Will they hear our plea that Canada should be a country of citizens, not serfs? Honestly, I don't know. And based on the track record of this government, I'm not hopeful. But we need to ask and we need to lobby. If the Harper Conservatives continue to mishandle this file, then the only choice for Canadians will be to view the next federal election as an opportunity to put an end to this sorry chapter in Canadian history at the ballot box.