

September 26, 2014

Honourable Jim Prentice
Office of the Premier
307 Legislature Building
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Re: Request for meeting to present information and perspectives about the TFWP

Dear Premier Prentice:

Over the past week, various media outlets have reported that your “top priority” when meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper in coming months will be to urge him to reconsider recent changes to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

In particular, you’ve been quoted as saying that Alberta employers have convinced you that the provincial economy will suffer if employers are denied the same kind of access to TFWs that they’ve become accustomed to over the past six or seven years.

I am writing today to urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to reconsider your position on this important issue. While I have no doubt that employers have been lobbying you aggressively for easier access to TFWs, I think it’s imperative that you step back and look at the facts related to the TFWP before you come to any firm policy conclusions.

And what do the facts tell us? They tell us that, outside of a few specific occupations in construction and energy, there is no real labour shortage in Alberta. They tell us that the TFWP has had the effect of suppressing wages, especially in the low-wage service sector. And they tell us that many employers have been using the TFWP as a first choice for recruitment, rather than a last resort.

I also want to draw your attention to a number of important documents obtained by the Alberta Federation of Labour through federal access to information and privacy requests.

These documents demonstrate that thousands of Alberta-based businesses have been disproportionately relying on Temporary Foreign Workers, many with workforces that are more than 50 per cent TFWs. They also show many Alberta businesses have been granted work permits that allow them to pay TFWs far below the rate offered to Canadians. This includes employers in oil-sands related construction, where some of the best jobs in our economy can be found.

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From our perspective, it's bad enough when employers in the fast food industry are allowed to use TFWs to suppress wages, but when you start seeing the same thing happening with welders, ironworkers and electricians it becomes clear that the situation has gotten completely out of hand. These are the kind of jobs that form the backbone of Alberta's middle class. Attacks on these jobs simply cannot be tolerated.

Instead of simply accepting arguments from employers who say they need more TFWs, we think you should be asking the federal government why they granted approvals to employers like Supreme International who admitted up front that they would pay their TFW welders nearly \$11/hour below the prevailing wage offered to Canadians and why big construction companies like Kiewit were granted approvals without providing any information at all about what they planned to pay their hundreds of TFWs. We also think you should be asking why the federal government is allowing companies like Sinopec and Samjin to fill more than 50 per cent of their jobs in Alberta with TFWs when there are tradespeople in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada who are ready, willing and able to do the work.

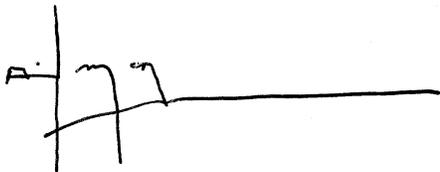
In conclusion, I'd like to make a final observation and a specific request.

The observation is that the TFWP has particularly troubling implications in the construction sector. If we make it too easy for construction employers to access TFWs, not only do we increase the likelihood that those workers will be used as pawns to displace Canadians and drive down wages, we also undermine the incentive among employers to train the next generation of skilled trades workers. If the owners of construction firms can simply grab a trained journeyman from abroad and discard him when work is complete, why would they take the time and effort to train Canadian apprentices?

That brings me to my request. As Alberta's newly-minted Premier, you have no doubt been inundated with requests from people wanting to meet with you. I've already asked for a meeting so we can get to know each other and discuss general labour relations issues. But given your recent statements about the TFWP, I'd like to suggest that we meet sooner, rather than later. My goal in that meeting would be to present you with information and perspectives about the TFWP that you may not have previously considered. We'd like to help you develop policy positions that support the interests of not only employers, but working Albertans, as well.

Thanks for taking the time to review our concerns. I look forward to meeting you in person.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gil McGowan', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Gil McGowan
President
Alberta Federation of Labour

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