

A vulnerable, exploitable labour force



Migrant workers are vital to our economic well-being and deserve amnesty,

says *Harald Bauder*

Ottawa has recently announced that it rules out amnesty for undocumented workers. Apparently, the federal government has an interest in maintaining a labour force of up to 200,000 foreign workers without status in Canada.

While Immigration Minister Monte Solberg acknowledged the vulnerability of no-status migrants, he also said that Canada's immigration policy must be "resolved to meet the demands of the labour market." By continuing to provide vulnerable no-status labour to Canadian employers, the denial of amnesty may just constitute such a reorientation.

Although this viewpoint may seem cynical, evidence supports it.

No-status migrants have become an important input factor for the Canadian economy. Imagine a simple hypothetical example: If all no-status migrants were on the same day deported to their places of origin, Ontario's construction industry would lose its most diligent labourers, office towers would be without cleaning crews, restaurants without cooks, and hotels without room maids. Vital sectors of the economy would come to an immediate standstill, with the rest of Canada's economy not far behind.

No-status migrant workers assume an important economic function as vulnerable and exploitable labour. They do the work Canadians don't want, they work for relatively low wages and under conditions few Canadian citizens are willing to accept, and they can easily be fired when they are no longer needed. In their role as a cheap, flexible and disciplined labour force, no-status migrants regulate the Canadian economy from the bottom up.

Despite their importance to Canada's economic well-being, no-status migrants are denied the dream of upward mobility and social recognition that has motivated North American immigrants for centuries. Instead, these migrants realize that the romanticized image of the immigrant dishwasher who ends up becoming a millionaire does

not apply to them, as long as they do not have status in Canada. The best they can hope for is to continue to escape the authorities and remain in the lower ranks of the labour market.

Even this dismal scenario beats the alternative — being deported. Migrants come to Canada and accept their position as vulnerable labour because wages and labour standards are even lower in their countries of origin. The Canadian economy exploits these international differences.

This differentiation between Canadian workers and no-status migrants reflects a wider international double standard that is generally applied to workers in the "First" and "Third" Worlds. In this case, however, this double standard is not applied to workers who live and work in different countries, but to workers with different legal status within Canada.

This differential treatment of migrant and Canadian workers can be described as citizenship exploitation. Offering migrant workers legal status in Canada with the prospect of citizenship after a few years would resolve this type of exploitation.

Canada, of course, is not the only country that benefits from this type of labour exploitation. No-status migrants perform the role of subordinate labour throughout the industrialized world. In the United States, armies of workers from Mexico and other Latin American countries are performing the jobs average Americans don't want. In France, the so-called *sans papiers* provide a disposable labour force and in Italy immigrants from Northern Africa perform the worst agricultural jobs. Governments rarely acknowledge the economic contribution no-status migrant workers make to their national economies, or the exploitation and humiliation they experience.

The outgoing Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan urged countries to acknowledge the economic contribution of migrants. In his address to the High-Level Dialogue of the General Assembly on International Migrations and Development in New York in mid-September, Annan said, "the evidence on migration's potential benefits is mounting." However, by recognizing that "governments are now beginning to see international migration through the prism of opportunity," he did not mean that these governments have a right to exploit a cheap and vulnerable labour force of no-status migrants. Rather, the opportunities which migration creates derive from the sacrifices migrants are willing to make for our own economic well-being.

Offering legal status to migrants and integrating



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them into the social and political fabric of our society is not only a moral obligation but would also protect our own economic interests.

No-status migrant and Canadian workers sit in the same boat. Labour competition between migrants who are denied their rights and Canadian citizens who can claim these rights can lead to the erosion of wages and labour standards for all. Blaming international no-status migrants for chipping away at our labour standards, however, would not only be grossly unfair, but also divisive and counterproductive to efforts of maintaining our high living standards and working conditions.

Canadian labour unions are therefore recognizing the need for unity among workers. They are

increasingly including no-status migrants in their membership, seeking strength in solidarity. To maintain a labour force of no-status migrants that is unable to claim fundamental economic and social rights, and to pit this labour force against Canadian workers who possess a range of civil and citizenship rights that protect them from expulsion and exploitation amounts to a divide-and-conquer strategy on the side of our current government.

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