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Mexican migrant agricultural workers and accommodations on farms in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia

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MEXICAN MIGRANT AGRICULTURAL WORKERS AND ACCOMMODATIONS ON FARMS IN THE OKANAGAN VALLEY, BRITISH COLUMBIA¹

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INTRODUCTION

The mistreatment of foreign farm workers is unlikely to diminish as they have little recourse to get their grievances addressed, few organizations lobby on their behalf² (Butovsky and Smith 2007), and governments often ignore recommendations to improve the well-being of agricultural workers (CBC News 2010). Furthermore, they face an uncompromising neoliberal state promoting deregulation and peer pressure as a way to govern industry (Aguiar 2004). In fact, abuses may become even more common as farmers accelerate neoliberal agricultural practices (Piché 2008; Preibisch and Grez 2010). In the last few decades, as farms have sought a competitive advantage in the global market, many have consolidated into large enterprises, investing in new technology, drastically cutting wages, and increasing the recruitment of foreign migrant workers to cut costs—all of which has imperilled the family-owned farm (Binford 2004; Choudry et al. 2009; Preibisch 2007). In many parts of Canada the family farm is disappearing: “the portrait of the farmer who relies on his family and neighbours to help bring in the harvest no longer reflects reality for the vast majority of agriculture operations in Canada” (Choudry et al. 2009, 59). At the same time, farmers and agricultural business organizations vehemently resist social justice groups’ campaigns to organize farm workers into NGOs such as Justicia for Migrant Workers BC or trade unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers’ Union (UFCW) (Butvosky and Smith 2007; Wilson 2007).

² But see Tom Sandhorn, “Foreign Farm Workers Unionize: A First in BC.” *Columbia Journal*, September (2008), 1, and “Migrant Workers Fired from BC Greenhouse as Union Vote Nearing,” *Globe and Mail*, 16 September 2008, <http://theglobeandmail.com/news/national/migrant-workers-fired-from-bc-greenhouse-as-union-vote-nearing/article709408/>

In Canada, as in other parts of the world, neoliberalism has had detrimental effects on workers in general, but particularly on temporary migrant farm labourers. Research findings document a pattern of abuse, disregard, and neglect of farm workers with respect to their working conditions, salaries, accommodations, and labour mobility (Thomas 2010; Prebisch 2007). How widespread are these experiences? What is the evidence with regard to housing migrant farm workers in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, the focus of our study? Although a significant number of analyses of temporary foreign migrant farm workers in Canada have emerged over the last few years (Basok 2002; Preibisch 2007; Binford 2004; Preibisch and Grez 2010), little research on farming in the Okanagan Valley has been carried out (Lanthier and Wong 2002; Tomic, Trumper, and Aguiar 2010). This is the case even though the Okanagan represents the second most important farming region in British Columbia, after the Fraser Valley (*Canadian Encyclopaedia* 2010). Our task in this paper is to report our research findings on the provision (or lack of) and quality of housing for Mexican migrant agricultural workers who come to the valley under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP).

The first section of this paper offers a brief overview of the structural changes that have taken place in the Okanagan's agricultural sector over the last decade under the influence of globalization and neoliberalism. The second profiles the background to the SAWP and briefly describes the nature of the program. In the last section, we discuss the housing facilities of Mexican migrant agricultural workers in the Okanagan Valley. Our findings are based on an eighteen-month qualitative research project, which included interviews with officials from government and service organizations (5), farmers' organizations (6), farmers (20), community organizations (6), unionists (2), and Mexican migrant farm workers (20) in British Columbia. Fifty-nine interviews

were conducted between June 2008 and early 2009. These interviews took place in various locations from Vancouver to the Okanagan. In the Okanagan, we interviewed people from Coldstream in the north to Oliver in the south. Most of the interviews were taped and later transcribed by our research assistants. We used a snowball technique to contact and subsequently interview participants. Finally, the research team visited eleven farms in the valley at different times to observe the accommodation facilities available for migrant workers first-hand. These visits included on-site interviews with farmers and workers participating in this project.

From our analysis of farm workers' living and working conditions in the Okanagan Valley, we found that the workers endure a lack of social and industrial citizenship³ rights (Fairey et al. 2008; UFCW 2009, 13). We argue that under the SAWP, workers are de facto denied the right to choose their own accommodations, the right to leave their employers' premises after work, and the right to move freely within those premises (Tomic, Trumper, and Aguiar 2010). To put it bluntly, they are "unfree" wage workers who remain a captive labour force for employers seeking an immobile, dependable, and yet flexible workforce (Cohen 1987; Bauder 2006a; Mendis 2007). This captive and immobile labour force is restricted to work in the agricultural sector and provides just-in-time numerical flexibility (Atkinson 1985) to employers searching for a secure, reliable, and readily available workforce. In the words of a Kelowna Economic Development Commission official: "It's not really about cheap la-

3 By industrial citizenship we mean basic workplace rights that workers in general achieved through protest, struggle, and political organizing in the Fordism period of capitalism. Most of these rights have either been eliminated, rolled back, or are under permanent threat in the post-Fordism era of capitalism. For some examples of how even the basic rights that applied to workers in agriculture are being rolled back by the neoliberal government of BC, see Fairey et al. 2008. These authors show how the provincial government has introduced changes to BC's Employment Standards Act (ESA) that reduce workers' protections and increase their workdays.

bour[;] it's about reliable labour'" (Nieoczym 2007).⁴ The SAWP program also provides a "docile" and "obedient" workforce secured and reinforced by the Mexican government. Through different mechanisms, the Mexican government attempts to ensure that the program runs with minimal disruption. One of the contradictions of the SAWP is that, while the survival of agriculture in the Okanagan is said to depend on imported labour power, the desperate poverty of Mexican agricultural workers, which has forced millions to migrate north in search of work (Norris 2009), weakens their bargaining power and forces them to accept the conditions imposed by government-to-government agreements (Tomic, Trumper, and Aguiar, 2010; Wilson 2007). The restructuring of the provincial industrial relations regime, of which the SAWP is part, has led to a reduction of workers' rights in a post-industrial citizenship era of weak labour legislation and few social protections (Fairey et al. 2008; Aguiar 2006). And so long as the provincial and federal governments, in accordance with neoliberal principles, continue to de-regulate and roll back existing mechanisms to oversee the agricultural industry in British Columbia (Fairey et al. 2008), the abuse, exploitation, and neglect of farm workers will persist. One cannot rely on the neoliberal state's view that employers in the agricultural industry will do "the right thing" and respect workers' rights (Aguiar 2006). The lack of government regulation and oversight often leads to employers' non-compliance with legislation (such as it is) and even abuse and exploitation (Aguiar 2004, 2006). Therefore, a re-direction of state responsibility toward workers is necessary if workers are going to get better treatment. This would mean a state with a greater will and capacity to impose significant penalties on employers that abuse foreign migrant workers on their premises.

⁴ This is a comment from Keith Duhaime, in reference to Jamaican temporary workers coming to the Okanagan Valley. At the time of this research he was the agricultural support officer for the Central Okanagan Economic Development Commission (Nieoczym 2007).

A change in this direction would require undermining the present neoliberal agenda through consistent political work, resistance, and activism. Such open dissent, sad to say, is in short supply in the Okanagan Valley, where a combination of neoliberal ideology and religious conservatism is entrenched and rarely contested (Aguiar, Tomic, and Trumper 2005).⁵

NEOLIBERALISM AND CANADIAN AGRICULTURE

Neoliberalism as an ideology and a programmatic organizing concept of societies continues to produce vulnerabilities exacerbated and deepened by the recent financial crisis in the global north (Peck et al. 2009; Wacquant 2008; Watkins 2010). The impact of neoliberalism is no less evident in the world of agriculture where, according to McMichael (2007), new relations of production have converted agriculture into agribusiness, and relations of social reproduction have been upscaled from the local to global market processes, while resistance to such processes has been largely ignored or ineffective (Thomas 2010). In Canada, neoliberalism “drives down working conditions for jobs at the bottom of the labour market, while the immigration system creates a pool of precarious labour, desperate enough to fill those positions” (Choudry et al. 2009, 59). At the global scale, “Canada is an aggressive proponent of agricultural trade liberalization, a process that is displacing millions in the global South while attracting the newly displaced through guest worker programs like the TFWP [Temporary Foreign Worker Program], SAWP [Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program] and the Live-In Caregiver Program” (Choudry et al. 2009, 59). The idea that local workers are hard to find in farming regions is so prevalent that it has been accepted as truth (Binford 2004). Yet when we consider

⁵ For evidence of neglect, dismissal, and political conservatism see: “Farm Van Crash Findings Ignored: Advocate,” CBC News, 9 April 2010.

the evidence and the changes agriculture is undergoing, this truism begins to show cracks (Binford 2004). This is because neoliberalism has in effect re-structured local workers out of farming (Choudry et al. 2009). For instance, in the mid-2000s, the Kelowna economy lost its biggest manufacturing employer when Western Star Trucks closed shop and moved all business to Oregon. In doing so, approximately 800 workers lost their high-paying unionized jobs with this trucking company. But 3,000 more jobs were also jeopardized as the companies supplying Western Star in Kelowna were suddenly left without a major client. And shortly after this, the call centres Marusa Marketing and Sitel skipped town after only a couple of years in Kelowna, putting some 400 workers, mostly women, out on the street (Aguiar and Marten 2010).

Yet farming elites argue that the guest worker programs that bring in foreign migrant agricultural workers are a short-term and temporary solution to labour shortages.⁶ However, when we consider government statistics on employment in farming, a different reality emerges. First, the SAWP has had more than fifty years of existence in Canada. The first temporary migrant farm workers under SAWP arrived in Ontario from Jamaica (Basok 2002). By 2007, nine provinces were using this program, which had increased to approximately 20,000 labourers. At the beginning of the 21st century, migrant farm workers from the South were “plant[ing], tend[ing], harvest[ing] and/or pack[ing] grapes, strawberries, tomatoes, tobacco, ginseng, flowers and more at 1,600 farms, greenhouses and food-processing plants across the country” (Ferguson 2004) and seemingly will continue to do so for many more years. On Quebec farms alone, the number of migrant agricultural workers has increased by 30 percent in the last two years (Choudry et al. 2009, 63), and many now work year-round. In Ontario, the plan is to have foreign workers replace domestic

⁶ Interview A, farmer, in Lake Country, 12 June 2008.

labour forces: “the program has become a crucial, institutionalized component of the horticultural industry. In 2000, SAWP workers made up 53 percent of the workforce in Canada in the sectors where they were employed; their presence has increased by close to 50 percent since that time” (Choudry et al. 2009, 63).

The predominant discourse in the hinterlands of Canada, and in the Okanagan in particular, is that farming is hard work and an independent family enterprise that combines the selflessness of the farmer with an altruistic attitude in order to feed the nation. This discourse is accompanied by the view that vast landscapes were cleared for farming activities after the arrival of Europeans in the Okanagan Valley (Senese 2010; Arellano 2008). Rugged personalities were also mythologized as farming developed and First Nations peoples were pushed off the land into the “bush” or corralled onto reserves (Aguiar and Marten, forthcoming; Koroscil 2008). The romanticization of farming, however, does not hold up to contemporary realities and figures on farming in this country. Over the last two generations, farming has undergone “massive transformations” in Canada, with “sharp drops in the number of farms and increases in the size of farms” (Choudry et al. 2009, 59). This metamorphosis has intensified in the last two decades. According to Choudry (2009, 59), the number of very large farms has doubled during this period, while the size of commercial farms increased 26 percent in the 1990s. The transformation is not restricted to agriculture, but also extends to the food retail industry, which in significant ways influences farming and its yields (Choudry et al. 2009, 58). In fact, the farmers who survive neoliberal agribusiness are those who “have bigger fields to tend, [face] fierce global markets in which to compete, [practise] tighter production budgets and [have] a harder and harder time finding local people willing to work” (Choudry et al. 2009, 59).

This pattern of change in the farming industry is also present in British Columbia agriculture. For generations, farming in the province, and in the Okanagan Valley in particular, was performed in significant ways via a succession of new, mostly non-white immigrant groups coming into the country, often with permanent resident status in tow (Lanthier and Wong 2002; Trumper and Wong 2007). Today, the composition of the farming working class is once again changing in the province; Indo-Canadian and other Canadian workers are giving way to an increasing number of Mexican workers with only temporary migrant status. The shortage of farm hands in BC was largely created by the neoliberal state, which restricted the “admission of parents and grandparents in its family [reunification] program” (Fairey et al. 2008, 14). As a result, Indo-Canadian farms could not as readily rely on the Punjabi farm labourers who had previously immigrated into the country under the family class immigration category (Simmons 1999). Faced with this sudden shortage of labour power, BC farmers, instead of raising wages to attract, employ, and retain local workers, lobbied the provincial and federal governments to “gain the right to hire temporary migrant workers” (Fairey et al. 2008, 14).

By 2004, BC farmers were able to tap into the SAWP, which rested on an agreement between the Canadian and Mexican governments whereby Canada would provide temporary employment visas in agriculture for a workforce that would receive barely more than minimum wage (Fairey et al. 2008, 14). Initially, fifty Mexican migrant agricultural workers were admitted under SAWP in 2004, but this number quickly climbed to 2,200 in 2007 (Fairey et al. 2008, 5) and to 3,185 in 2008, of which 2,852 (89.5 percent) were from Mexico (BC Labour Market and Immigration Division, 2010). In 2007, BC also signed an agreement with the Commonwealth of Caribbean Islands for the importation of seasonal agricultural workers (Fairey et al. 2008, 17). As in other parts of

Canada, temporary workers in BC are posited as a structural necessity. In some parts of the province they have even become the core workforce, with Canadian permanent residents acting as the “supplements” in the industry (Preibisch and Grez 2010, 296). The number of Mexican farm workers in the Okanagan region has increased from a handful in 2004, to about 400 in 2005, to almost one thousand in 2007 (Brett 2005, A1).⁷ The program is expected to continue to grow exponentially to save the agricultural sector in British Columbia from collapsing.

Agriculture is today, as in the past, a central activity in the Okanagan. It is also an activity that has been characterized by a reliance on the work of the “other” (Lanthier and Wong 2002; Trumper and Wong 2007). The extent of the present use of foreign migrant agricultural workers means that the practice has been adopted strategically by the industry. Contract labour has grown with the expansion of agriculture in the global competitive marketplace, aided by neo-liberal restructuring (Binford 2004, 2). As elsewhere in the country, farmers in the Okanagan Valley and their representative spokespeople and organizations state unequivocally that contract labour under SAWP is essential to the survival of the industry (Interview A, farmer, in Lake Country, 12 June 2008; interview C, representative from Central Okanagan Economic Development Commission, 10 June 2008).

Workers under SAWP are vulnerable due to lack of protections by a state that rolls back rights for temporary migrant farm workers and rolls out plans to dismantle hard-won industrial citizenship gains achieved under Fordism, such as the provincial Employment Standards Act (ESA) (Fairey et al. 2008; Peck and Tickell 2002). In contrast with past workforces in agriculture in BC,

⁷ According to Sandra Martinez, from the UFCW-sponsored Workers Alliance Group, in a presentation to the Latin American and Iberian Studies Research Colloquium, at the University of British Columbia Okanagan, this number is now 1,500 in the Okanagan Valley.

the temporary migrant workers in SAWP are “unfree” (Bauder 2006b; Cohen 1987; Mendis 2007; Tomic, Trumper, and Aguiar 2010). Fairey et al. (2008, 16) describe this condition in detail:

They [temporary migrant workers under SAWP] are allowed to come to Canada only to work for a specific employer, live on their employer’s designated premises for a specific period of time, and then return to their home country. It is virtually impossible for a worker to quit the initial employer and find employment elsewhere. Bound to a single employer with temporary status, workers face the threat of repatriation.

Ironically, “seasonal workers from Mexico and the Caribbean are valuable contributors to the agricultural economy, but they are not seen as desirable members of the community” (Bauder 2006a, 175). They are “wanted as unwanted workers” (Brodie 2008). Castles (2006, 742), writing about the 1970s guest workers’ program in Germany and Western Europe, calls our attention to the same phenomenon, when the region was “trying to *import labour but not people*” (italics in original).

The SAWP has a strong appeal among most employers and their organizations, such as the Fruit Growers’ Association in Kelowna. And, as we summarized above, arguments are made regarding the necessity of foreign migrant farm workers for the sustenance and survivability of the agriculture industry in the valley and across the country (Basok 2002; Choudry et al. 2009). The SAWP in BC operates, in part, through the work of the Western Agricultural Labour Initiative (WALI), which is based in Abbotsford and serves all member-farmers in the province.⁸ WALI⁹ was officially unveiled in January 2007 and is organized within the Agricultural Research and Economic Development arm of the BC Agricultural Council, which manages funds and programs in the industry.

⁸ http://bcac.bc.ca/index.php?page_id=36

⁹ An industry-based, employer-representative organization, funded by several BC Commodity Groups, that facilitates the importation of temporary farm workers.

WALI's funds are raised by the industry and the Agriculture Labour Market and Skills Development Initiative, a government body that matches industry contributions dollar for dollar. In addition, WALI receives funds from farmers, who use its recruitment services to hire migrant agricultural workers.¹⁰ According to an official we interviewed: "What [WALI does] is [to] assist them [farmers] with their application, [. . .] coordinate the housing inspection, [and] we also act—we're a registered third party for the employer, or in other words, that means that we can act on behalf of the employer as it pertains to the SAWP program" (Interview D, spokesperson from WALI, 5 June 2008). However, not all farmers recruiting foreign workers go through WALI. In fact, 40 percent of farmers in the province choose to do the recruiting themselves. From our interviews we learned that this saves money and the farmer feels more involved in the process of recruiting workers for his or her farm (Interview A, farmer, 12 June 2008 and Interview E, farmer, 20 July 2008).

As we argue elsewhere, given the structural conditions of the SAWP, Mexican workers offer a more stable and predictable labour force than Canadians, but they are not necessarily cheaper. While in 2008 newspaper ads offered an hourly pay of \$9.50 for Canadian farm workers, the SAWP required minimum salaries of \$8.90 an hour, plus "adequate housing" for a maximum fee of \$550 and a return ticket to Mexico City. The average cost per hour for a SAWP worker, once the housing and transportation costs are factored in, fluctuates between \$12 and \$15 per hour.¹¹ Moreover, the mandate to provide adequate housing¹² may demand a significant investment for a farm operator, at least

10 According to our interviews with farmers, WALI charged a processing fee of \$50 per foreign worker. Twenty farmers were interviewed (see methodology section above).

11 Calculations provided by three operators interviewed.

12 Some farmers take advantage of the lack of citizenship of the foreign workers and offer them accommodations below the standards set by the SAWP housing guidelines. One farmer agreed to participate in this project because he was concerned about the disrepute of the program as a result of some farmers in the valley abusing their workers and thereby smearing the entire Okanagan farming community (Interview A, farmer from Lake Country, 12 June 2008).

at the initial stage (Squire 2008). For many employers, the cost of providing housing increases the cost of wage labour, as “a basic rule in a capitalist enterprise is to increase the worker’s productivity as much as possible to lower the impact of fixed costs in the total cost of the commodity. Then, the more hours the Mexican workers labour for Okanagan farmers, the lower is their hourly cost” (Tomic, Trumper, and Aguiar 2010, 79). This intensification of work decreases the cost of production and is supported by a reserve army of labour in Mexico ready to move temporarily to the Okanagan to work on the farms. This arrangement further enables farmers to keep wages down, as many are waiting and willing to come. It also provides the context for an obedient, acquiescent workforce. Workers are aware of their own precarious status and of the competitive conditions of the labour market at home.

Furthermore, the SAWP program places many restrictions on workers. For example, it requires that participants be married, preferably with children, and, once in Canada, prevents these workers from challenging their placements. Meanwhile, employers can request specific workers to return to their farms year after year. These are called “named workers.” The program further mandates a list of just-in-time Mexican farm workers ready to embark to Canada at a moment’s notice to increase the existing workforce or replace a repatriated farm worker. Clearly, the SAWP is an economic agreement that was signed at the global level between Canada and the sending countries with no participation from workers or workers’ organizations, although the Mexican Consulate claims to represent Mexican workers’ rights. For example, echoing the prevalent discourse that the program is a “win-win situation” for both the farmers and the migrants, the Mexican consul general, Hector Romero, stated at the onset of the British Columbia program that the SAWP “is mutually beneficial for both countries, and Mexico is pleased with the rights and protection

of its workers" (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2004).¹³ In fact, in British Columbia, Consular officials do participate in the annual review of the program:

There's a review meeting and what happens at the review meeting is that the employers and the source countries bring forward issues that happened during the year, so they can make suggestions or changes they would like to see happen during the year. The source countries or the labour supply countries will put something forward and employers will put something forward, so that will form the basis for what happens in the national meeting, where it will be decided what goes on, what will happen [the following year]. What the [following year's] contract will look like, so that's where you talk about wages, deductions, hours of work, housing, whatever it is. (Interview D, 5 June 2008)

However, one cannot assume that the Mexican government's agenda is to protect the migrants' rights. The interests of governments are not necessarily the same as those of workers. From our interviews, we learned that Mexican migrant workers complain that the consulate does not listen to them, nor take up their grievances. In many ways, workers on Okanagan farms feel abandoned, without official and prompt support (Wilson 2007). This criticism is heard elsewhere in the country, as research shows the consulate favours employers (Binford 2004, 3) in order to ensure the continuity of the program, because Mexico must increasingly compete with other source countries for labour contracts (Preibisch 2007; Preibisch and Grez 2010). Thus "it is no surprise that migrants mistrust and heavily criticize the Mexican government personnel in Canada whose role is to represent workers, given that their ability to do so is compromised by their simultaneous responsibility to increase their country's share of job placements on farms and to ensure the continued flow of remittances home" (Preibisch and Grez 2010, 306). As a result, it may be that

13 This point is further elaborated in Tomic, Trumper and Aguiar 2010.

“sending country officials recognize that ‘too much’ representation may result in the loss of the farm to a competing nation” (Preibisch 2007, 441). Some of the Mexican workers we interviewed did not have much confidence in the consulate personnel’s willingness to help them, because the latter did not return phone calls promptly or sometimes at all. And, as of 2008 (four years after the program was implemented), no one from the consulate had yet visited Okanagan farms employing Mexicans to see their living conditions first-hand, discuss their experiences, and address their issues and concerns.¹⁴

Dissenting Voices within the Farming Elite: Program and Housing

Farmers’ views and attitudes are not monolithic. During the process of our research, we were struck by some dissenting voices within the farming community with regard to the SAWP and the housing of foreign temporary farm workers. Our surprise was partly a result of the homogenous way in which farmers are portrayed in the literature (Bauder 2006a; Bauder 2006b). As we have argued and shown above, the farming elite in the valley made the argument that the SAWP program is essential for the survival of the agriculture industry in BC. This is particularly the case in the valley, as a manager of Bylands Nurseries in Kelowna pointed out in an interview with *Okanagan Life Magazine*:

If we didn’t invest in this [SAWP], we would have had to downsize the nursery. I don’t see how we would have maintained the business: we used to get French-Canadians and new immigrants here, but there’s nothing sexy about being an agricultural worker. Now people are working in construction and at some point we could pay enough to get them, but it would break the nursery. (Wilson 2007, 44)

14 In her presentation, at the University of British BC Okanagan, in November 2010, Sandra Martinez indicated that this has changed and that consular officials do visit the Okanagan Valley. And yet Martinez also pointed out examples of persistently inadequate accommodations for Mexican farm workers in the valley (Martinez 2010).

But in interviews, some farmers disputed this claim or at least wanted to point out that the “structural necessity” of foreign labour should be qualified. One farmer we interviewed expressed his concern for the human rights of farm workers, who, according to him, were being held captive under the SAWP because they were tied to one employer for the length of the contract. The inflexibility of this arrangement and potential for abuse, argued this farmer, were too great to accept the foreign worker program in the way it was designed. During an interview, this farmer explained his opposition:

At the time [of discussing the expansion of the SAWP into BC] I was a representative for the organic farming community in BC. And right from the initial discussions within the industry about the SAWP, I raised my concerns about the potential for abuse of workers in a system that tied workers to one employer only for the length of the contract. While my concerns were heard, they were also ignored by the industry. . . . I can still remember the abuses that “guest workers” suffered in various systems of temporary work across Europe. It struck me that the SAWP had similarities to the guest worker program in Europe. (Interview F, farmer, 31 July 2008)

Another prominent farmer objected to the program on two counts. First, he questioned the commonly held belief that farms suffer from a shortage of labourers in the valley, and second, he challenged the assumption that locals are uninterested in working on farms. He argued:

The problem is that farmers have a bad reputation in their treatment of their workers and, as a result, this is a factor in hiring and which farmers are having. I don't have a problem with farm workers' turnover as I have had pretty much the same workforce for years. There is no secret to keeping a workforce if you treat them with respect and pay them good liveable wages. Most farmers want to cut corners and so do not offer the wages they should. I think this is the reason they claim there is a lack of workers. (Interview G, farmer, 16 July 2008)

There is a debate in the literature between those who argue for the necessity of foreign workers and those who argue that this “necessity” stems from an increasingly neoliberal industry requiring cheap, reliable, and immobile workers to compete in the global market of agribusiness (Basok 2002; Binford 2004; Choudry et al. 2009). If one accepts the latter argument, Canadian workers are not necessarily unavailable but rather unwanted in a restructured industry interested in cutting wage rates to compete globally (Fairey et al. 2008; Choudry et al. 2009).¹⁵

Some of our interviewees recognized that the reliance on foreign farm labourers will only continue to grow in the valley (Interview G, farmer, 16 July 2008; see also Poulsen 2007). As one farmer explained, the SAWP is here to stay, and even if he wanted to, there is little he can do to stop its expansion in the industry. But if migrant workers are going to continue to come, he argued, then some aspects of the program have to change: “The program is now pretty secure and will remain for a long time in the valley. My point is that if they [Mexican workers] are good enough to come, then they should be good enough to stay! Needless to say, my opinion isn’t too popular with my farming colleagues” (Interview G, farmer, 16 July 2008). Just as we argued earlier that workers under the SAWP are “unfree” wage labourers, so this farmer believes that the temporary status of migrant workers is an open door to abuse so long as they are denied landed immigrant status. In his view, this provision could ensure them some measure of security and mobility in the local and regional labour markets, so that they would not be tied exclusively to agricultural work and could thus bargain for better wages by threatening to move beyond farming work. However, as we have argued, it is precisely the temporary status of the

¹⁵ See also the quote on page 14 in which the Bylands manager says that the wages of Canadian workers would break his nursery.

just-in-time farm workers that is so appealing to farmers—workers are always available as they are on-site (usually), and they are under contract to show up for work. If workers do not fulfill these conditions, they face the possibility of immediate deportation or of being forbidden to return to Canada in the next farming season. Our interviewee's claim that workers should have the right to obtain immigrant status is supported by official statistics, which prove that what is termed "temporary" is not, in fact, that at all, as many farms are using migrant workers year-round (Binford 2004; Choudry et al. 2009). However, it should be noted that the views of this farmer are not representative of those of the majority of farmers in the valley.

The terms of the SAWP were also questioned by a second interviewee, a representative of one of the BC agricultural associations, on different grounds. This interviewee was not opposed to the program per se, but wondered why Mexican migrant workers get some "privileged" services, like, in his view, accommodations, while the French-Canadians who come to work on the farms are given, at best, a place to set up their tents. He explains:

We don't have a program for Canadians. The ones that didn't treat the Quebecois very well turn to the Mexican program. We do need the Mexican program. There is a shortage of people who will go out and work; regardless of how well we treat Quebecois, not enough of them come here. We do need, there is a reason, there is justification for the foreign worker program; I'm not saying there isn't. However, I guess where I'm coming from, if everybody adopted a respectful treat..., with respect, policy. And along with that would come accommodations, or at least some good camp facilities, we wouldn't be as reliant on a foreign worker program as we are turning to today. (Interviewee H, farmer, 8 May 2008)

This interviewee adds that there is a farm culture that does not always respect workers by treating them justly. This point came out in the interview in response to the following comment by the interviewer:

INTERVIEWER: But yet, one of the reasons why we've initiated this . . . study is because there is a discrepancy in the provision of accommodations for Mexicans. Some people provide some [quality accommodations] and some people don't.

INTERVIEWEE: I understand what you're saying. When I think of, I guess, I'm trying to say this, so, they [association members] understand what I'm saying; so it's not seen as unkind to other people. Let's put it this way, for us, in our business, I'm an orchardist, I know I have to spray for pests, I know I have to spray for—I know I have to prune the trees, manage, do my husbandry on my orchard to be successful. We consider looking after our employees just another one of the essential things to do. It's no different; it's as important as any other task we do. It has to be part of our farm culture; unfortunately, many, or most, a lot of farmers don't recognize looking after their labour as [an] essential task. It's a mystery to me. [...]The farmer can't pick all of his cherries. It's [workers] a key element; it's like water, sun and soil, you got to be good; to me it's very simple. Unfortunately, in the farm culture, and some of the cultures within the farm culture, people are not considered an important commodity. (Interview H, farmer, 8 May 2008)

These farmers, we repeat, express a minority view on the employment of Mexican temporary agricultural workers in the Okanagan. Some hold prominent positions in the industry but remain unable to persuade their colleagues to resist deteriorating farmers' reputations by employing foreign workers and providing them with poor living conditions and low pay.

HOUSING

Housing was the primary concern of our study, but this research has not been without its opponents. From very early on in the research process, some government officials, employers, farmer organizations, and members of the press challenged us for investigating the migrant workers' housing crisis in the Okanagan Valley and other issues related to the SAWP. These organizations

went so far as to try and sabotage our investigation.¹⁶ Yet a number of farmers interviewed or quoted in the local media have expressed concern about the quality of housing, arguing that the lack of adequate housing could jeopardize the program, especially if the industry fails to properly address this issue and receives poor press reports. BC agriculture already has a poor media profile. Consider that an updated survey on British Columbians' views on farming, commissioned by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC, found that 77 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "I am concerned that some farm workers are exploited in BC." This concern about the treatment of farm workers on BC farms was 9 points higher than it was in the last survey taken in 2004 (77 percent versus 68 percent) (Ipsos Reid Public Affairs 2008, 12). Some of this mistreatment is related to the housing and safety of workers on BC farms (CBC News 2010). Industry people are well aware of these problems, especially with respect to housing, and they say the SAWP program needs to address the issue quickly. We argue that it is the government and farmers who need to take more responsibility for rectifying poor housing conditions. John Cruikshank, from Bylands Nursery in Kelowna, remarked: "'A lot of smaller operations are finding rental accommodations where they can or housing them where they can. The majority of Mexicans are not being housed as well as they can be housed'" (Wilson 2007, 44). This was the same view expressed during interviews with a farming manager from a winery in Oliver (Interview I, June 2008, and interview A, farmer, 12 June 2008). He put it this way: "I think farm workers need a voice, since they have none. We have WALI, but this is not the organization for them."¹⁷

16 See, for example, "Migrant fruit pickers being 'exploited,'" *Kelowna Capital News*, 14 March 2008, 1; "Workers Protected," letter to the editor, *Kelowna Capital News*, 19 March 2008, 28; "Immigrant Workers Do the Jobs Locals Won't Touch," letter to the editor, *Kelowna Capital News*, 19 March 2008, 28.

17 However, when asked if a union could be that voice for farm workers, he responded: "That's asking for a lot more trouble" (Interview A, farmer, 12 June 2008).

Historically, temporary migrant agricultural workers have been housed precariously in the Okanagan. Supposedly, the SAWP offers an advantage to workers, as it considers housing among the responsibilities to be fulfilled by employers, which has not been the case for other temporary migrant farm workers. However, our analysis raised some important concerns about housing under the SAWP. Within the SAWP, housing conditions are ambiguously regulated. First, the bilateral agreements between Canada and sending countries state that each new season employers must apply to Service Canada for temporary foreign workers. Along with their Labour Market Opinion application (LMO), employers must submit a Seasonal Housing Accommodation Inspection report or a contract with a commercial accommodation supplier. Housing workers within the work premises is preferred to housing them in commercial accommodations. Houses are expected to be inspected only once during the season, before the workers arrive. This is an important visit for the employer, because without approval, the application to bring migrant workers cannot go forward. The government does not include any further inspection, nor does it oversee inspectors, unless there is a formal complaint. Each province defines the terms of housing inspections. In British Columbia, private companies have the responsibility to inspect the large majority of the accommodations. The exceptions are the municipality of Abbotsford and the District of Pitt Meadows, which conduct their own inspections. Only one private company is in charge of the Okanagan. In 2008, only one inspector, working part-time, covered all the farms in this area, although they were spread out over almost two hundred kilometers, and most workers were lodged on the farms. From our interviews we learned that inspectors sometimes drive as long as three hours to conduct one inspection. Sometimes, during the most pressing period, five or six farms are inspected in one trip. Inspections are often hurried; about half an hour

at the most is spent going through buildings during their first inspection, less in those that have already been inspected in an earlier season (Interview M, 4 June 2008). Inspections cost the farmer eighty-five dollars, which is paid directly to the inspector onsite upon completion of the inspection (BCSAWP 2005). It is disconcerting that the government is not in charge of these tasks or at least of imposing a system to oversee private inspections of farms. In accordance with the neoliberal philosophy, more and more governments take a hands-off attitude with regard to the private sector. In this case, it is the private sector that selects the inspecting companies; it is the farmers who pay the private inspector directly for the inspections. In our view, there is potential for a conflict of interests in this process.

And given that most workers are housed within the work premises, inspections are critically important in ensuring that they are housed appropriately. One of our concerns is that inspections are conducted according to general guidelines, not government regulations. These guidelines are sufficiently vague to allow for a variety of housing types to be acceptable. On the one hand, the guidelines specify that "buildings to be used as housing for migrant workers should be located on well drained land, be waterproof, one hundred feet from barns or poultry cages and detached from buildings that store inflammable material and provided with adequate lighting and ventilation" (Tomic, Trumper and Aguiar, 2010, 80). On the other hand, structures as varied as mobile homes, industrial camp trailers, refurbished farm structures, bunkhouses, and family houses qualify as "suitable accommodation" under the guidelines, as long as there is one bed for each worker, one sink for seven people, one toilet and shower for ten, and a constant supply of hot and cold potable water (BCSAWP 2005). The guiding standards in terms of furniture and other facilities require only the most basic conditions to be met. For ex-

ample, it is not considered essential to offer a room for workers to relax in and recover from their very long and harsh days at work, even when these workers sometimes work seven days a week, particularly during the harvest periods. These are also people who must sometimes remain idle for days, even weeks, because of bad weather or lack of work, and have little else to do. Under the SAWP, a room where workers can watch TV, play games, read, or call home in privacy; a room where they can enjoy the company of others; a “family room”—so popular a concept in Canada—is not viewed as an absolute necessity. One must bear in mind that these workers have very few opportunities to leave the farm; they seldom enjoy any activity other than work; most of them know nobody outside the close circle of the farm and the other Mexican transients; and they may spend as long as eight months in Canada every year (Tomic, Trumper, and Aguiar 2010, 80).

Based on our observations during visits to eleven different farms between Lake Country and Oliver and interviews with farmers and agricultural workers, we can say that, in general, the accommodations for Mexican workers in the Okanagan lack any space specifically designed for relaxation. We visited camp trailers, structures built specially to accommodate workers, old farm buildings that had been converted into housing facilities, and big barracks sleeping from ten to forty. These accommodations basically consisted of a kitchen, one or more bedrooms, and one or more bathrooms. Kitchens consisted of a fridge, a stove, sink, a table and enough chairs for the workers, utensils, sometimes a microwave, and a TV set placed on top of the fridge (if there was only one shared bedroom, the TV was located there). Most of the bedrooms we saw were shared and were furnished with beds or bunk beds and night tables to be shared by two or more workers; plastic boxes and hangers on the walls beside each bed often served as closets. Only in a couple of situations did we see

air conditioners. Although the guidelines indicate that floors should be tight fitting, with smooth surfaces that could be easily cleaned, the floors of the facilities we visited varied. Cement surfaces were common, as were linoleum and wood.

We visited facilities housing from two to forty workers. Privacy was not something to expect in any of these accommodations. Access to phones was limited: sometimes workers had to use one in their employer's home; other times they would share a landline or cellular phone with all the workers in the house. We did not see any accommodation with email or Skype access, although these workers may be away from their families for long periods of time, and long-distance calls consume a major part of their budgets. Many workers have no other resource but calling home from a public phone, which is much more expensive than using Skype or a landline phone. It is common to see lines of Mexican workers waiting for public phones outside stores, such as the Great Canadian Super Store in Kelowna, on the days when they are taken into town by their employers to do their shopping. Facilities were generally better in the couple of "normal" houses we visited. In both, the living and dining rooms were separate from the kitchen. They contained nicely painted walls and wood floors, barbecues—one even had a gorgeous view to the Okanagan Lake and a Jacuzzi. The second house was less luxurious, but it still kept the logic of a home, including some space for relaxation, fun, and privacy.¹⁸

Given the geography of the Okanagan and the conditions under which foreign farm workers are brought to Canada every year, decent accommodations become essential to their well-being and a fundamental human right. The significance of the home for temporary farm workers must be under-

¹⁸ For a more detailed analysis of housing facilities observed by us see Tomic, Trumper and Aguiar, 2010, 81–82.

stood in the context of the very unique and specific conditions of the SAWP. First, we must consider the isolation and segregation of these workers from the “host” community, particularly when they are housed on farms far away from cities. Secondly, we must take into account that many workers live in accommodations built close to their employer’s home, on the farm where they work, and that they are under the constant surveillance (real or latent) of that employer (Foucault 1995). They are also relatively immobile, as they have no independent means of transportation, nor do they have any disposable income for outings, due to their low wages, precarious labour conditions, and family responsibilities back home. Furthermore, they lack a community and a family network with whom to socialize, while their lack of language skills prevents them from functioning in the wider community with ease. All these considerations make the home the centre of a migrant worker’s life in Canada. Paradoxically, the bilateral agreements that created the SAWP do not seem to recognize housing as a human right, as the program provides no real government enforcement of housing regulations. In fact, the government’s housing guidelines, which are supposed to standardize and regulate housing conditions for SAWP workers, leave it to the conscience and resources of employers to determine those conditions. It is they who decide the quality of the accommodations and, consequently, the quality of life that their “guest” workers will encounter in Canada.

We would insist that embedded in the bilateral agreements on agricultural labour that Canada signs with countries in the South is the principle of differential citizenship rights. People who have lived and worked in Canada for as many as eight months a year, sometimes from the late 1960s or early 1970s to the present, do not share the rights granted to other workers in Canada. The program’s unique capacity to establish differential rights is self-evident.

Workers are not allowed to negotiate salaries nor switch employers at will; they are not allowed to stay in Canada once their contracts are terminated; they must apply for new contracts every year from the sending country; they are expected to have a family but are not allowed to bring their families along; in most cases they are provided with accommodation on the premises of their employers which subjects them to constant surveillance; they are usually forced to share a bedroom; although they pay rent, they have no say in the quality of their dwellings; and in most cases their accommodations do not even include a space to relax, recover from long hours of work, socialize, or find some privacy. Only a bed and a chair are provided for them.

CONCLUSION

We have argued in this paper that the Canadian farming industry is undergoing significant changes as a result of globalization and the increasing competitiveness of an open farming market extending beyond the nation's border. Further, we have shown that neoliberalism is also impacting farming culture and business practices significantly, driving many of the current changes in agriculture, including the practice of bringing in more disciplined and productive workers as part of the global division of labour. It is in this context that we argued that the need for foreign migrant workers is a result of neoliberal views on what constitutes "best practices" for making a profit in the contemporary farming industry in this country. Thus any attempt to secure a Canadian workforce with good wages, labour rights, and social protections is ignored. The migrant workers simply labour under different conditions. They are granted fewer rights; they are geographically and occupationally captive. Central to the control over the migrants is their immobility, which is associated with being housed, most of the time, on the property of their employer.

We have discussed how, for farmers, bringing in a reliable, dependent workforce (i.e. bound only to the farmer) is extremely beneficial. Workers are not given the right to object to anything regarding wages, their representation, or the quality of their accommodations. They do not even have the right to decide with whom they'll share their bedrooms, sometimes for periods of eight months a year. Food is another area over which some migrant workers have no say, as the employer may decide to feed them for a fee. One of the most striking findings of our research is the neoliberal philosophy adopted by the Canadian government with regard to housing temporary workers. Housing guidelines have been developed to inform employers of the minimum standards they should meet if they are housing temporary workers within their premises. It is also a requirement to have the accommodations inspected once during the season and before the workers arrive. We found that, in the Okanagan Valley, only one private company conducts all inspections. Given the extent of the area to be covered and the increasing number of premises to inspect, we argue that the resources devoted to housing inspections are too limited. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that accommodations for temporary workers vary widely in terms of quality.

We also found that a minority of employers objects to the SAWP, particularly because the program has become institutionalized as a permanent feature of Canadian agriculture. There are a few who object to the trend of using unprotected and vulnerable foreign farm workers, to their "captivity" to one farmer and, sometimes, to their poor housing conditions. Unfortunately, the number of dissenting farmers is small, and while they hold positions of influence within the governing bodies of the Okanagan agricultural industry, they cannot dislodge the now entrenched SAWP from the valley. For their part, farm workers are too vulnerable to risk openly criticizing the program.

Moreover, farm workers have no political voice vis-à-vis their employers, and the Mexican government seems less interested in the working and housing conditions of workers than in the continuation of the SAWP because of the remittances the workers send home and the pressure foreign job opportunities relieve from the Mexican labour market. Neither government is interested in ensuring that Mexican farm workers receive the same treatment as Canadian agricultural workers and that they gain a voice to express their views and demands without negative consequences when they do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Mexican government needs to step up and respond better to their compatriots on Okanagan farms. This is especially important as we often heard organizations deflect responsibility for key issues endured by the workers. Someone needs to take leadership in addressing—rather than deflecting—the central concerns of the farm workers.
2. The Mexican government needs to undertake regular visits to farms to meet and discuss issues raised by the farm workers. This is important since farm workers are prohibited from leaving the farms to visit the consulate in Vancouver. Even if they were permitted to go, the trip would be costly, and there is no viable means of transportation that would enable them to get to Vancouver and back in minimal time so as not to lose wages and infuriate the employer with lost work time.
3. There must be a strong push to allow migrant workers the opportunity to quickly become landed immigrants should they wish. Having this process in place would go a long way to minimizing the abuse and sense

of entrapment many workers feel by being tied to one employer and one labour market.

4. Greater attention by the provincial government to ensure uniformity of housing accommodations for farm workers is absolutely necessary. As it is, there is too much flexibility in the practice, and what constitutes appropriate accommodations is largely left up to the employer. Many employers assume, erroneously, that any accommodations they offer in the valley are surely better than what Mexicans have in their home country.
5. There is an immediate need for an increase in the number of inspectors conducting evaluations of housing facilities on farms. As we have described in this study, one inspector for the entire Okanagan is insufficient and even more so if this inspector's territory extends beyond the valley into the area around Grand Forks. Given the size and number of the farms this inspector is charged with evaluating, one has to wonder whether the job is being properly done.
6. More importantly, we are extremely concerned about the way the farmer invites the inspector to come to the farm and then pays him directly upon completion of the inspection. While we have no proof of corruption or wrongdoing in this regard, it seems to us that the farmers and inspector are not dealing at arm's length. The potential for abuse of this system is too great and calls for immediate changes with regard to transparency, accountability, and proper business transactions.

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