

BETTER TREATMENT IN CANADA

CANADA GIVES MIGRANT FARMERS LEGAL STATUS AND MEDICAL COVERAGE.

BY CELESTE MACKENZIE
Special to The Herald

Saint-Michel, Quebec — In Canada's French-speaking province of Quebec, for much of the year the language that dominates on the Perrier family farm is Spanish. Since the spring, several Guatemalans and Mexicans have been putting in up to 14-hour days planting, tending and harvesting vegetables.

Ricardo Búcaro, a Mayan from a small town in Guatemala's Pacific coastal hills, has a cornfield back home that someone else is looking after for him. Though he only earns the Canadian minimum wage of about \$6 an hour, his hourly take is more than he'd earn for a day's labor back home

While Central Americans have long worked the fields in the United States, Guatemalan labor is a relatively new development for Canada. Búcaro was one of just more than 200 Guatemalans who came to Canada last year — the first time Guatemala sent workers. This year about 300 Guatemalan farm laborers are toiling in Canadian fields, along with thousands of Mexican and Caribbean workers.

This is Búcaro's second season on the Perrier farm in the town of Saint-Michel, just north of the border with New York. He says the work is difficult and he misses his young family, but the pay makes it worthwhile.

"Coming here brings many benefits to our families financially. We have children who study. My daughter is in high school, and she needs all sorts of things. I thank God for the support he's given us because we can resolve many of our economic needs during the time we are in Canada," said Búcaro.

Michel Perrier, the farm owner, said having foreign workers available whenever he needs them is important to his farm's survival, especially in light of increased competition from abroad.

For most Canadians, the type of work Búcaro does is considered too poorly paid and too menial. And in Canada's increasingly depopulated rural areas, workers are just plain hard to find.

Even if Perrier could come up with enough Canadians to do the work, they would probably have family obligations and other commitments in their spare time. But the foreigners want to put in as many

hours as possible. "Foreign workers come here with one goal: to work. When they work, they don't get so bored," Perrier said.

Although Guatemalans are new to Canada, Mexicans have been coming since 1974 and now number around 10,000. Caribbean workers have reached about 8,000 since they began arriving in the 1960s.

MORE TIME AWAY

Many of these laborers spend more time in Canada than at home. Over time, unions, church groups, non-government organizations, and academics have documented extended work periods with no days off, poor housing conditions, lack of medical attention and other allegations of abuse.

Critics say that for the most part, workers put up with bad conditions because they want to come back the following season. When a problem arises between a farm owner and an employee, the worker can be sent home immediately.

But there are government regulations that give foreign workers a guaranteed minimum of hours and require that airfare and lodging are largely covered by employers. Workers have complete medical coverage, and embassies are responsible for receiving and following up on complaints.

Proponents of the Canadian system say the workers get good pay and are guaranteed safe travel. At the same time, host governments don't have to worry about illegal migrants.

For workers like Búcaro, it's a relief to have legal status. "Here, we feel secure. We can



PHOTOS BY CELESTE MACKENZIE/FOR THE HERALD

FAR FROM HOME: Under a Canadian program for foreign workers, Guatemalan Ricardo Búcaro, center, spends much of the year working on a vegetable farm in Québec.

go out and about with no problem," he said. "For an illegal, things would be difficult, no?"

Meanwhile, across the border in the United States, many undocumented migrant workers constantly worry about their status and the possibility of being deported.

A bill called the Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act (AgJOBS) has been introduced in the U.S. Congress but is not expected to be considered before the Nov. 2 elections. It calls for an amnesty for undocumented workers and would make it easier for more foreigners to come legally as guest workers.

About two million foreign laborers work on American farms, but less than eight percent work under the H2A program, which allows for legal contracting of temporary foreign agricultural workers.

David Griffith, an anthropologist at East Carolina University who specializes in labor and has studied both the Canadian and U.S. systems, says that although most Mexican farm workers would prefer to do farm labor in Canada than work illegally in the United States, the U.S. H2A program can also be attractive.

"If you compare working legally in Canada with working legally in the U.S., most of the Mexican workers prefer to go to the U.S. as H2A workers



BETTER PAY: Ricardo Búcaro, left, earns the Canadian minimum wage of about \$6 an hour. His hourly pay is more than he'd earn for a day's labor back in Guatemala.

because the season is longer and they earn more money," he said.

Still, Griffith said, some workers see the Canadian system as more benevolent: "[To them] it seems that there are [fewer] abuses."

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Policy makers in the United States might be able to learn something from the Canadian model, Griffith said. "If there is no government oversight, and there really isn't, these workers [in the U.S.] are more likely to be abused by their employers or by labor contractors, the growers associations that bring them in.

"My recommendation would be to actually look at that Canadian model — there

are problems with it too — but they are a little closer to what would be a better system than what is currently in place in the U.S.," he said.

While the AgJOBS bill would allow for more documented migrant workers in the United States, it wouldn't address the exploitation issue.

Back in Quebec, Ricardo Búcaro will be one of the last to head home; he's got another contract to trim Christmas trees once he finishes up on the farm. After that, he'll return home just in time for year-end holidays.

But he can imagine returning to Quebec year after year. "If I have the chance and I am healthy, I am ready to offer my services to the farmers here," said Búcaro wearily.