BETTER TREATMENT IN CANADA

CANADA GIVES MIGRANT FARMERS LEGAL STATUS AND MEDICAL COVERAGE.

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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 Bucaro, 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. Bucaro 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 rolling in Canadian fields, along with thousands of Mexican and Caribbean workers.

This is Bucaro'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 high school, and she needs all sorts of things. I think 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 Bucaro.

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 Bucaro does is considered too poorly paid and too menial. And in Canada's increasingly depopulated rural areas, workers are just plain hard to come by.

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 foreign workers are there 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 all workers are listed and paid by employers. Workers have complete medical coverage, and employers are responsible for recording and reporting all complaints.

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

For workers like Bucaro, it's a relief to have legal status. "Here, we don't fortune. We can get a chance," he said.

Far from home: Under a Canadian program for foreign workers, Guatemalan Ricardo Bucaro, center, spends much of the year working on a vegetable farm in Quebec. He goes out and about with no problem," he said. "For an illegal things would be difficult, not the time. 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, Opportunities, Benefits and Security Act (AgiOBS) 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 foreigners to come legally as guest workers.

About two million foreign workers work on American farms, but less than eight percent of the work is done by agri workers. The program 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 U.S. 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 illegally in the United States, the U.S. H2A program can be attractive.

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, there really isn't the system. In the U.S. there are more likely to be abused by their workers by employers or by labor contractors, the growers associations that bring in."

"My recommendation would be to actually look at the 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 AgiOBS bill would allow for more documented migrant workers in the United States, it wouldn't address the exploitation issue.

Back in Quebec, Ricardo Bucaro will be one of the last to return 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 Bucaro.